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I tested the possibility of attending graduate school on the four people closest to me. I informed them separately. On four separate occasions, I heard four different reasons why I shouldn't.

"The University of Kansas?" my sister hollered in disbelief when I told her about the first school that had contacted me. We were sitting in her TV room, waiting to watch a movie I'd rented. My brother-in-law was in the kitchen, pouring a couple of beers and tending to the popcorn they always made for me when I came over. "What are you going to do way out there?" my sister wanted to know. From the kitchen, my brother-in-law twisted the famous line from *The Wizard of Oz* into how I *would* be in Kansas, forevermore.

"It has one of the best graduate programs in English in the country, especially in American Literature," I explained, saying it loud enough so both of them could hear me.

"Who cares?" she said. "It's in the middle of nowhere. Oh, Dave, please don't tell me you're thinking of moving to Kansas."

To my father it didn't matter if the school was located in our back yard. "Don't you think you've been in school long enough?" It was the classic rhetorical question. Perhaps he'd been taking lessons from my mom. He was sitting on the porch in a wicker chair doing the *Daily News*'s crossword puzzle. I had sat down next to him in the other wicker chair, divided by the matching wicker end-table, when I interrupted him with the news. "Don't you think it's about time you get a job?" he added, returning to scratching letters in the tiny boxes with his pencil.

Get a job? Was he serious? I'd been working thirty to forty hours a week in a warehouse and then a supermarket to pay for my schooling. While I had strung together a number of Pell Grants and taken out a couple of extremely low-interest student loans to cover my tuition at Boston University, I still needed to pay for books, food, clothing, and the occasional night out with Madeleine, which seemed to cost nearly a week's wages. I didn't have a car. I didn't own a TV. I couldn't even afford a telephone. When I called my parents I did so from a pay phone in a laundromat across the street from my dingy studio apartment. We had it worked out that I'd call collect for "David," they'd refuse the call, we'd hang up, and then they would call me back. My father did send me $100 every month to cover my rent. As an older transfer student I didn't have to live on campus, which was what I wanted. My freshman year I lived in a rat- and roach-infested apartment building in Boston and then moved to Franklin, a town close to where Madeleine lived with her parents. After experiencing Johnson & Wales's dorm life, I wanted to avoid any distractions from my studies. I preferred the real roaches to the ones piled up in ashtrays in most dorm rooms.

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When I was accepted to Boston University my parents didn't offer to pay my tuition, and aside from the rent check I received in the mail every month, they didn't provide any financial support. I didn't care. I was attending a top-notch university, I knew where every used-book store in Boston and Cambridge was, and I was in love with someone I had met the year before at Johnson & Wales. (Okay, there were *two* terrific things that came out of my time at Johnson & Wales: Adler's *How to Read a Book* and my relationship with Madeleine.) I was a hundred times happier than I'd been at Johnson & Wales, and that had been paid for.

I still went home whenever I could and remained close to family and friends. I often was made fun of for acquiring a "Boston accent," although that's not what happened. I was loosing my working-class accent. I began shedding it shortly after kids at BU mistakenly made fun of my "New York accent." There were lots of kids from New York at BU and they weren't accused of having "New York accents." People who live on the Upper East Side of Manhattan or in Park Slope, Brooklyn, don't have a "New York accent." What the BU kids heard was a *working-class* Staten Island accent, the same kind that Melanie Griffith's character in *Working Girl* wanted to shed. What my family and friends heard after a year of my being at BU was the inevitable erosion of it.[1] To family and friends, it sounded unfamiliar. When I went away this time, unlike when I was at Johnson & Wales, I came back a different person. Tellingly, none of my friends ever visited me

the entire time I was at BU or Johnson & Wales, or the fifteen years I lived in New England for that matter. Other than the trip my family made for my BU graduation, they never did either. Madeleine's parents once asked her if my family didn't like me. They liked me well enough, although it remains a mystery to me why, in the fifteen years I lived in New England my family never came up just to see me, other than once when only my father visited me when I was at the University of Massachusetts. Staten Island was a rather provincial place back then. People rarely left the Island, other than to go to New Jersey malls (no sales tax) or to its beaches (cleaner water). Some never bothered taking the ferry ride to Manhattan (too cosmopolitan). My parents didn't like the idea that I was attending Boston University in the first place, and they sure as hell weren't thrilled that I was studying English and history either; that must have been an additional reason for them not to visit me. At least I wasn't wasting their money, which is why my father had no business confronting me about getting a job instead of going to graduate school. For once, I would have welcomed his silence.

"What's this?" my mother asked as I handed her the letter from the University of Kansas. It was a two-page letter, not only inviting me into the program and offering me a scholarship but also praising the work I'd done as an undergraduate. Based on the highly laudatory recommendation—etc., etc.—of Professor X (I wish I could remember for sure, but I think it was Distinguished Professor Millicent Bell), I was an ideal candidate for graduate studies. Kansas was confident I'd succeed there as much as I had at Boston University, practically congratulating me in advance for becoming a successful scholar some day—in the tradition of the professor who recommended me, of course.

"Read it," I said. I had walked into my mother's bedroom one morning when I was home from school, a long weekend that seemed to last longer as my entire family, one by one, criticized the idea of my attending graduate school. She was folding her clothes, placing them delicately in an open bureau drawer. I delivered the news to her first, figuring I might as well get her reaction to it over with as quickly as possible. I expected she'd be unimpressed. Encouragement seemed out of character. Congratulations were completely out of the question. But I hadn't anticipated how vehemently dismissive she'd be. She was facing the bureau as she read it while I stood behind her. She practically threw it onto the floor once she finished reading it, thrusting the letter at me without turning around.

"Yeah, so?" she said testily.

"So, so what do you think?"

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"What do *I* think? I think you're nuts. Graduate school? Graduate school? Now it's graduate school." To her, going to Boston University and not becoming a court reporter demonstrated that I couldn't make up my mind about what I wanted to do with my life. "Oh, please," she said, stretching the word "please" out as far as it could reach. "You aren't really thinking of going to graduate school, are you?"

"Well, why not?" I said, already uncertain. "I didn't contact them. One of my professors did. I don't know, it's quite an honor," I added with greater conviction.

No response. She was thinking. It *was* an honor, all right; there was no escaping that. There had to be a way, in her mind, to sidestep that while destroying the idea of it altogether before it got too far off the ground, just as she had done six years earlier when I wanted to attend a four-year college.

"First of all, Kansas seems a little far, don't you think?" she said with calmer firmness. "Second of all, do you know how long it takes to get a graduate degree?"

"Sure. Quite a while, I bet."

Not the level-headed answer she might have been hoping for. I wasn't romanticizing it. She was thinking it through.

"Andrew didn't finish, and he's pretty smart. What makes you think you can?" She stopped abruptly. Maybe that was too harsh. She didn't wait for a reply. "If you want to go to graduate school, why not get a job first and get it while you're working, like John."

John, the cousin-in-law mentioned previously, was her role model, a practical academic who'd obtained his Ed.D. for professional, social, and financial advancement. He also had been her ally when it came to my (her) career choice a few years earlier. I hadn't picked up the court reporting machine since leaving Johnson & Wales. I know that irritated her no end. For some reason, she believed I too looked up to John just as she did. "After all he's done for you," she'd often say. There was no doubt that John's advancement through the educational system was impressive, from gym teacher to school superintendent, while never missing a paycheck. Unlike him, as I considered graduate school, I had no real job. Furthermore, she knew I'd be taking my studies in English or history, working, in her opinion, toward an advanced degree in futility. I would have become a fake doctor sooner than I did. Still, I must say, she was more disapproving than I'd imagined she would be.

As I'd done six years earlier, I backed down. It never occurred to me to tell her what I wanted, how much I wanted to be a scholar or at least

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to complete formally the intellectual journey I'd seen before me in the ER. My silence and lack of resilience followed a pattern. I often remained silent on smaller issues as well, such as not telling her she was crazy to think that while I was enrolled in BU a couple of computer science courses would prepare me to become a computer scientist. Instead, I signed up for the damn things and hated them, just as I had signed up for court reporting and hated it. For all my academic successes at BU I still lacked the self-assurance and the resolve to make decisions about my life, let alone express them. And there was still the "accident" looming over almost every important conversation, the guilt of having permanently and prominently put a scarlet letter above our house's doorframe. Or maybe it was simply hanging around my neck, an albatross for sure.

"Let's say you get a degree in English. What will you do with it?" she asked.

"I don't know." (And I didn't.) "Maybe I could become a professor."

It was the answer she was looking for. After the few years she spent working at a bank, she became a secretary at a local community college and often came home with stories about the haughty, absent-minded professors she had to assist all the time. To her, they didn't know anything, at least not anything that was practical or useful. They lacked common sense. Without her, they couldn't operate the photocopier or make an outside phone call. Some of them lived "alternative lifestyles," commuting back and forth into Manhattan or Brooklyn Heights, living with "partners" or "significant others." For all their egg-headedness, she considered herself smarter than they were, and morally superior as well.

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"A professor?" she said, blowing out a mocking stream of air through her lips. "Being a professor isn't a real job. I work with them all day. They don't really do anything, and what they do isn't real work."

She wasn't alone in her thinking. That's why I didn't exactly view her snap judgment as an insult, or take it personally. As one of the more famous lines in *The Godfather* informs us, even when it comes to whacking a friend or a family member, sometimes "it's not personal; it's business." This wasn't personal either. Among most members of the working class, certainly those within my extended family and community at that time, working with your head rather than with your hands wasn't real work, certainly not for a real man. My mother's working-class roots were showing when she scoffed at my chance to attend graduate school on a scholarship. It wasn't personal; it was business. It's why years later her sister would claim I wasn't a real doctor when I finally had my doctorate in

hand. At least the real doctors work with their hands. What did I do with mine—flip the pages of books?

I never informed my family about the other two schools that contacted me. I didn't see the point. The second invitation showed up in the mail as unpredictably as the first. It was from a school in the vast Ohio state system, the University of Akron or Cincinnati, I think. It was from the History Department. Where the third came from I can't recall, other than that it was from an English graduate program. By the time it arrived I'd decided not to go to graduate school. I glanced at the letter and quickly chucked it into the garbage. While I showed my family only the first letter, I decided to show Madeleine the second, hoping to convince her of my "destiny" after she had dismissed the first one. She wasn't exactly thrilled about seeing me head off to Kansas. Akron or Cincinnati didn't alter her opinion. They seemed just as far from Bellingham, Massachusetts, as Kansas. It wasn't "Where?" It was more like "Why"?

"Don't expect me to be waiting here for you when you get back," she said. She was standing by the stove in her parents' kitchen, heating up soup. Like me, she was a late bloomer. When we met at Johnson & Wales she was pursuing an Associate's Degree in finance. She was working at a cosmetics counter at a local department store. She was planning on remaining in the beauty industry, perhaps some day advancing within the field. She likely could have done that without an Associate's Degree. She was quite a beauty herself. Many people commented on her striking resemblance to the young Natalie Wood. Her father was a rather prominent local lawyer. He had run for Congress in 1956 as a Democrat and was resoundingly whooped when Republicans across the country rode the coattails of President Eisenhower's popularity when he ran for and won a second term. Despite the loss, Madeleine's father remained a well-known figure in the community. To his credit, the family lived modestly. His liberal, French-Canadian demeanor created a more ascetic than materialistic atmosphere in their home. I often stayed there on the weekends, even after leaving Boston and living only a few miles away in the next town. Madeleine's older sister, Constance, was a French Literature professor and Madeleine admired her for her accomplishments. She would have traded her looks for her sister's smarts in a heartbeat. Madeleine had less confidence in her intellectual abilities than I did in mine. A year after I enrolled in Boston University, she enrolled in Northeastern University, majoring in history. We had a lot in common, which is why I was so surprised when she reacted to the letters of invitation no differently from the way my

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family had. But considering what I'd put her through a year earlier, when we'd agreed to get married, it shouldn't have been surprising.

"What if you moved out there with me?" I asked. She didn't like that idea at all. And why would she? She wouldn't be going to Lawrence, Kansas, or Akron, Ohio, to become a "Scholarship Girl." She'd be tagging along, and I'd be taking her far away from her family. She also had another year to finish her undergraduate degree. She'd be giving up a lot. A year earlier she had agreed to give up even more, to attend school part-time and work full-time after we married and I enrolled in law school. In addition to her own reluctance to move away, now as the Scholarship Boy's companion she had every right to be suspicious of *my* plans, which she knew first-hand weren't always firmly in my grasp.

In the spring term of my junior year at Boston University I started working at BU's Center for Law & Health Sciences through a work-study program. I had no plans on attending law school when I took the job. Of all the jobs listed in the program it seemed the most interesting. I half-hoped to find myself duplicating the arduous law paper I'd written at Johnson & Wales. It wasn't like that—I wasn't doing legal research. It mostly involved filing and typing. But when a junior lawyer asked me to find some information on nosocomial infections (hospital-borne illnesses) and their legal ramifications, I pulled another Perry Mason. I went to the law library of the state capitol and even went so far as to visit a hospital on the outskirts of Boston where a patient's lawsuit had reached the District Court. I showed up unannounced. The public relations officer was kind enough to grant me a quick interview, which I included in my report. A couple of days after I handed it to the junior lawyer, I was called into the director's office. At first, I thought I was in trouble, that I'd done something wrong or, worse, failed to do something entirely. He had my report on his desk.

"What are your plans after graduating?" he asked.

I didn't really have any. I was toying with journalism, after some of my articles in the college newspaper had received a fair amount of attention, but that was it. "You," he said, pointing his finger at me and nodding his head, "should think of law school." He kept nodding, as if that would convince me. "This is a very impressive piece of work," he added, tapping the folder that contained the report. "You clearly have a head for it, and an interest in it, in doing legal research." I didn't argue with him. He was right on both counts.

"I hadn't really thought of it," I said, "but I will."

"You should, seriously should." Behind him a couple of shelves con-

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tained a number of mementos and a bunch of photographs of him shaking hands with JFK, Martin Luther King Jr., and President Carter. Others had captured him with U.S. Senators Ted Kennedy and Edward Brooke at a luncheon or convention. A number of prints showed him standing alone on the steps of the U.S. Supreme Court. I later learned he'd argued a couple of cases before it. "I'd be more than happy to write you a letter of recommendation," he finally said. "Just ask."

Madeleine told her father about the encounter, and one evening during dinner he brought it up. He knew who the director of the Center was, apparently a bigger legal bigshot than I was aware of, someone who was well known not only in the state but also nationally, especially within the Democratic Party. "What kind of law would you practice?" her father asked. I hadn't really thought about that. The whole thing was new to me, so I mostly talked about how much I enjoyed doing the research, as I did when I looked into the *Bakke* affirmative action case at Johnson & Wales. I didn't really imagine myself "practicing" law, not in the sense of how I naïvely envisioned it, the way it appears in the movies and on TV. "It sounds to me like you're interested in being a legal scholar," he said. Why, sure, I said. I liked the sound of that, particularly the "scholar" part. "I could write you a letter of recommendation, too," he said. "Of course, if you want one from someone as lowly as me," he added, smiling.

So there it was. I was going to apply to law school. What's more, Madeleine and I would get married. We'd struggle financially, but we didn't care. We had part-time jobs and when she graduated from Northeastern, she'd work full-time. She was even willing to attend school part-time and work full-time to support me. She knew her parents would help us out. They had practically adopted me already, so it would make matters more official. We informed her brothers and sisters and they couldn't have been happier. It wasn't just her parents who had adopted me; it was her entire family. In fact, largely through their influence my dream of "formally" educating myself had rematerialized. They certainly played a major role in my decision to acquire a classic liberal arts education when I enrolled in Boston University. I probably even did it to impress them.

My real family, on the other hand, was appalled on both counts. Getting married before I graduated was a mistake, and enrolling in law school was possibly a bigger one.

"Do you know what we call lawyers?" my father, a New York City cop for thirty years, asked. "Cockroaches. They make a mess of things and they're everywhere."

My mother agreed. "A lawyer, you want to be a lawyer? Are you kid-

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ding? You dropped being a court reporter in a flash, so what makes you think that'll work out? Besides," she continued, "lawyers are a dime a dozen. Any idiot can be a lawyer."

Initially, my sister was more influenced by my decision to get married than by my decision to attend law school. She thought I was too young, even though by the time of the anticipated marriage I would have been a year or two older than she was when she'd gotten married. In time, though, she too joined my parents' chorus of denouncing law school.

For weeks, my mother and sister kept hammering away at the sheer lunacy of my plans to wed before I went off to law school. It would be the first and last thing they'd bring up whenever we spoke on the phone, often repeating, verbatim, what the other had said days before. It was a tag team. My father spoke out against it, but he'd had his say and didn't harp on it as they did. Sure enough, I was worn down. I didn't apply to a single law school, and by the time I started my last year at Boston University I told Madeleine it would be best if we waited to get married after *both* of us had finished college.

It's no wonder Madeleine didn't encourage me to become a late-blooming Scholarship Boy when I showed her the invitations to attend graduate school. I already had left her high and dry. She couldn't be faulted for having such feelings and for not encouraging me to go to the University of Kansas, or to some other far-off place. Back then, though, that didn't stop me from penalizing her anyway—and her alone—for not supporting me. I punished her by breaking up with her.

But what strikes me now, after all these years, is that no one suggested I look into *local* graduate programs, including me. It also never occurred to anyone (again including me) I could get in touch with the professors who'd contacted those distant schools and ask if they could help me secure scholarships at local institutions. Ultimately, everyone's response to the letters seemed less about location and more about the very concept of graduate school. Perhaps that's why nobody brought it up, and why I didn't think of it either. It wasn't so much that the University of Kansas was so far away; it was more that enrolling in graduate school seemed like such a far-fetched idea in the first place. To my family it was as silly as my wanting to become a doctor or a lawyer. We'd been down this road before, so perhaps their rhetoric had become an art form. It didn't take long for their words to get inside my head, to convince me of what a bad idea attending graduate school was, whether it was a three-hour plane trip or a half-hour car ride. Attending graduate school—scholarship be damned!—was a stupid idea in the first place. So I told myself, after being told.

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Despite my being turned away from the idea of attending graduate school, it was what I wanted. I knew it, viscerally, and maybe I always reminded myself of what I had wanted to become after I almost became nothing. Apparently, I hadn't driven a stake into the heart of my dream. I guess you could even say I didn't entirely give up on myself, not entirely. Years later that undying dream of attending graduate school was resurrected. In time, I obtained my doctorate, enrolling in a program ten years later. I flitted around professionally during those ten years, working for four years as a staff writer/editor in John Hancock's Group Marketing Insurance division. I hated that job almost as much as I hated being at Johnson & Wales. When I quit John Hancock and entered a post-baccalaureate teacher certification program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, my parents went batshit. They couldn't believe I'd left such a promising job, expecting me to retire from there after rising up the corporate ladder and earning a hefty salary. The problem with rising up the corporate ladder is that it requires someone who actually wants to do that and to reap the rewards of the big bucks. Most people aren't terribly passionate about sitting in a cubicle all day doing whatever it is they do. I sure wasn't, not writing copy for dental brochures. There were clear paths toward promotions and furthering my career, as I watched some of my colleagues glide into executive positions. But I didn't like the work and I wasn't interested in gaining promotions and therefore making more money. It was pointless to stay.

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But instead of going all-out and enrolling in a doctoral program, I copped out by not even enrolling in a Master's program. I thought by becoming a teacher I'd get that much closer to obtaining my Ph.D. I might have let it enter my head that I *could* be just like my cousin-in-law John. Whatever the reason, I'm glad I did become a teacher. I discovered how much I loved teaching and how predisposed to it I was. I was even good at substitute teaching, which is hard to imagine. The students took to me almost immediately. After a couple of days of my subbing at a school, the secretaries were calling me almost every day. I was often asked to fill in weeks at a time for teachers who were injured in accidents or were sick. I worked practically five days a week the entire time I was in the certification program. And I was having a blast. It was as if everything about my life that had come before had prepared me for teaching, especially being giftless in my youth. Even being shot produced beneficial results for what the profession required. I don't mean that sarcastically or ironically. ("It's a war zone in there, kid. You might as well be armed!" some of the more jaded teachers would warn me along the way.) I spent four

years as a public school teacher honing those skills before enrolling in a doctoral program. By the time I did, I was too old—not just in years, but also temperamentally—to be a Scholarship Boy. Instead, I was on course to become something else—a Teaching Man.

Not being a true-blue Scholarship Boy likely explains why I didn't feel disconnected from my working-class family and friends, or why visiting Aunt Mary and Aunt Do-Do wasn't uncomfortable. If anything, coming home was actually rather special. I wasn't embarrassed or unnerved by that scene sitting around my aunt's dining room table, or the times I would go to bars and clubs with my friend Jimmy and we'd run into guys I'd known growing up in Oakwood Heights. ("Ya gotta be fuckin' kiddin' me! You're a college professor? No shit. *You* became a professor. That's fuckin' unbelievable. That's great.") Yes, I guess it was pretty great. I enjoyed coming home, pleased with just how unbelievably fuckin' far I'd come. I liked the feeling. But I didn't think, *Hey, look at me, I got out and you didn't. I became a professor and you're still an asshole, stuck in this shit-hole*. No, that was never it. I never felt superior to anyone. I got "out" because I got shot. Really, who's the bigger asshole? Ending up as I did after nearly ending up dead didn't seem to warrant bragging rights, no matter how far I'd come compared with others who'd stayed close to home. Besides, whenever I did come home, I wasn't remembered as the gifted bookworm, different because of my astonishing youthful academic talents. I was remembered mostly as that stupid kid who was shot during an attempted robbery.

It became official doctrine. I'll always be remembered for it, no matter if I have as many degrees as a thermometer. While teaching as an adjunct professor at the College of Staten Island I ran into a high school classmate whom I hadn't seen in twenty years. The shooting was the first thing she mentioned when she remembered me. I was walking out of a cubicle where the photocopier was located (I made sure I knew how to operate it *and* how to make outside phone calls), when we bumped into each other. In high school, she was a slight, pretty girl with stringy, dirty-blond hair who sat next to me in homeroom my freshman year. She hadn't changed much, except for the lines on her face. For months she was the only girl I spoke to. I often thought of asking her on a date. But she turned out to be quite a tough girl. She was in a number of fights with other students, some of them quite vicious. In one that I witnessed, she grabbed a girl's hair, after distracting her with a swift kick to her shin, dragged her to the ground caveman-style, and started punching her in the face with her free hand. By then I had decided she wasn't my type. When I saw her at the College of Staten Island she still looked a bit rough around the edges,

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now more beaten-up by life itself. CSI was part of the City University of New York's vast collegiate system and she was among the hundreds, if not thousands, of adult students who attended CSI hoping to get their lives back on track or were returning to school after raising a family (most of them were female). She stood near the cubicle as I walked out, apparently waiting to use the machine next. I recognized her immediately. I could tell she thought I looked familiar but couldn't quite place the face.

"Well, hello," I said. "You probably don't remember me but we went to Tottenville High School together. We sat next to each other in homeroom." She looked at me more carefully. "Oh, yeah, right," she said. Without missing a beat, she added, "You're the one who got shot." I wasn't shocked or troubled by the association. "Yes, that would be me," I said, smiling at her slightly. "So," she said, "what are you doing here, taking classes?" "No. I teach here. I'm finishing up my doctorate." She was visibly stunned, moving her head and torso back as if I'd taken a swipe at her, revealing just how jarring the news was. "Wow, you've come a long way," she exclaimed. Yes, I had. But my having done so hadn't altered her recollection of me, no matter how far I'd come. I was "special," all right, just like other working-class academics, although for different reasons.

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What made me "special" weren't my books or the accolades I'd received in grammar school or the scholarships I'd been offered in high school. Unlike other working-class academics who spotlight their scholarships and boast about the classics they read as children, I *haven't* been able to share my "special" past. After all, what made me "special" while growing up can't be slipped easily into conversations with colleagues or brought up during staff meetings: "I propose we seek to reduce the cap in all of our composition courses, and did I ever tell you all about the time a cop nearly blew my head off during a stickup? Funny story. . . ." Yet it's *the* story, the single most important experience in my life, the one that propelled me out of Oakwood Heights and eventually into the academy. Not the books or the scholarships. In fact, when I inform colleagues, and even students, that I was a juvenile delinquent (that's as far as I go) and didn't become a reader until I was a junior in high school, they scratch their heads, bewildered: "Really? Wow. So what changed you?" What am I supposed to say: "Oh, being gunned down by a cop and being administered the last rites. You know, the usual"? Learning that I was a giftless, nonbookish child seems shocking enough to most of them. Keeping the shooting a secret has likely kept me distant from colleagues, including those who are from the working class, whereas the opposite is true "back home." In the end (but there is no real "end") there was never much dis-

tance between friends and family while I was home because I'll always be "the one who got shot." Try escaping that.

Those sentiments aren't shared by other working-class academics. Their pasts *are* marked by special academic excellence and achievements, and home becomes an uncomfortable place. The discomfort increases as they climb the academic ladder. After one year at Stanford, Richard Rodriguez had little to say to his parents and they had little to say to him—"One was almost grateful for a family crisis about which there was much to discuss."[2] And once John Edgar Wideman left his "poverty" and "blackness" behind in Pittsburgh by becoming a Scholarship Boy at the University of Pennsylvania, he built a "wall" between himself and his family, especially between himself and his younger delinquent brother Robbie.[3] I never felt that way, and I still don't. I'm certain it's because I emerged late and lame out of the academic starting gate and also was a bookish latecomer. I never viewed myself, or was viewed by others, as "gifted," as other Scholarship Boys and Girls are.

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For my part, not only did I not become a Scholarship Boy but I didn't divine escaping from my family by becoming hyper-educated. It's true, if I had had a bit more sense and self-confidence I might have realized I needed to peel myself away from them in order to take a faster track to my Ph.D. But I didn't. And just like being shot, I have to live with such decisions (or nondecisions in this case). Not traveling in the fast lane has had its advantages all the same. For my family's part, because I had taken such a slow, circuitous route to becoming a fake doctor, they always saw me as "one of them" rather than as an overly educated stereotype, the arrogant, pretentious brainiacs who are a staple of our popular culture, like Diane Chambers on *Cheers*, Charles Emerson Winchester on *M*A*S*H*, and the *real* Dr. Gregory House on *House*. The uneasy feelings are mutual. If parents, siblings, and friends had access to the same rhetorical platform as working-class academics, they'd be spinning narratives filled with as much unease, rancor, and remorse. As it stands, in our one-sided versions, we learn from many working-class academics that practically from the time they became bookish in their youth they couldn't wait to get the hell away from their oafish families and intellectually vapid communities.

For me to fit into the tradition of working-class academic narratives, I'm supposed to recount how once I returned home with my doctorate in hand and was called a fake doctor the umbilical cord to my working-class past was severed forever. According to the editors of *Strangers in Paradise*, at this stage of family dissonance a "strain of disconnection from the past" occurs, especially from "parents and siblings." It's "a theme that resounds

clearly in a majority of the narratives."[4] For example, Jane Ellen Wilson, the daughter of Pennsylvania farmers, acknowledges in *Strangers* that she kept "betting on education" because she "had rejected [her] family's way of life."[5] Narratives by a more ethnically diverse group of academics, compiled in the anthology *This Fine Place So Far from Home,* contain even more "disconnecting" confessions. In "A Carpenter's Daughter," Renny Christopher admits she "never really felt like [she] belonged" to her working-class surroundings in the first place. It's no wonder that after joining the academy she felt "ill at ease" whenever she went "back home."[6] For Irvin Peckman the "disconnection" became so complete that he "infrequently [goes] home," describing "the break" with his "family, parents and siblings" as an essential "erasure" for "incorrect" working-class professionals like him who must survive among the more "correct"-minded people in the academy.[7] In a separate account, Linda Brodkey reveals in "Writing on the Bias" that she "had to write off [her] father who read newspapers, automobile repair manuals, and union materials."[8] Unlike his young daughter, he did not read "literature," which constituted the "right books" in Brodkey's mind.[9] Richard Rodriguez concludes "a scholarship boy" like himself "cannot afford to admire his parents."[10] Eventually, "bewildering silence" confronts both parent and child.[11] Bookish, gifted children may no longer feel at home with their own families. In some respects, I had every reason to experience that as well.

All things considered, my mom's lobbying me to become a real garbageman to avoid becoming a fake doctor certainly gave me some license to feel apart from my own family. If, like the others, I felt the "strain of disconnection from my past," I might then see myself in those traditional working-class narratives; now I could connect with other like-minded academics, however abstractly. But there was one sizeable snag. I *didn't* feel that way. I wasn't a Scholarship Boy and I came late to the academic circle. When I did arrive I may have been older (not necessarily wiser) than the average Scholarship Boy or Girl and a bit less prickly about my past. Many of them admit to being overly sensitive about their working-class history once inside the Ivory Tower, only to have many of their academic trappings come crashing back down on them whenever they uncomfortably and sometimes agonizingly returned "home." Home was the living, breathing reminder of where those embarrassing traits came from that "legitimate" colleagues might detect. I didn't feel that way at home or in the academy. As such, I didn't feel detached, and a lingering comfort and connection with working-class life kept me in my family orbit, however linked it was to my own rather misguided conception of remaining the

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dutiful son. Therefore, much of that "connection" had to do with my family's preventing me from leaving when I wanted to, along with my complicity in that prevention. Nevertheless, not being a Scholarship Boy created a different kind of working-class academic and it has kept me tied to the working class. Perhaps that's why I wasn't angry with my mother for suggesting that I see sanitation duties as a career goal, nor was I bothered by Aunt Mary's remark. (I still think it's pretty damn funny.) I fully understood why either becoming a garbageman or becoming a "real" doctor (or marrying one, for that matter) is in working-class households considered the equivalent of winning the Lotto. Such work makes more sense to working-class people than studying a Shakespeare sonnet. Hell, sometimes it makes more sense to me too, and I do it for a living!

When it comes to the appeal of becoming a doctor or a sanitation worker, for folks like my mom and aunt it's largely because both use their hands, which is what working*men* largely do among families on that island. (They're not called Scholarship *Boys* for nothing.) Women, according to my family, generally shouldn't become real doctors. Staten Island women are vigorously socialized into "maternal-helping" jobs such as nurses, beauticians, secretaries or . . . teachers! And while "sanitation worker" replaced "garbageman," no sane woman, in the minds of the Staten Island working class I grew up around, would willingly become a "garbageperson"—or a police*man* or a fire*man*. So that career path was closed off in the division of labor. No wonder, then, that my aunt categorized the surgeon as the real doctor because *he* works with his hands, like an auto mechanic, except the doctor fixes bodies rather than cars. Moreover, a doctor attends school to acquire a very tangible skill, to learn a trade, so to speak (like court reporting), not unlike becoming a welder or learning to splice cable for a telecommunications company. All that education is ultimately manifested in the concrete performance of the work involved. There's nothing abstract about it. It also helps that in our hypercapitalist health care system real doctors earn a whole lot more money than nurses or garbagemen—or professors of English. In addition, my aunt, like anyone from the working class (or any class), comes into direct contact with doctors. Medical men are part of her social fabric. How often did my aunt go for her annual liberal arts checkup? ("Read two Byrons and call me in the morning.") In contrast, my own position as a doctor of letters is too steeped in the abstraction of book learning, revealing why my aunt considered it somewhat unreal, maybe even surreal. I suppose she saw me as an ultra-educated figment of my own imagination.

My mother obviously felt the same way. It was okay to send my sister

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to college, but that was different. She was a girl (and she had been a good, obedient student). For me, a college education seemed highly unrealistic, other than to gain "hands-on" experience. My becoming a real doctor would have supplied that kind of training, except it was a "trade" that also required top-notch academic experience, which I was in short supply of at the time. My eventually becoming a fake doctor was possibly even more ridiculous because it was more indefinable compared with becoming a "real doctor" or a court reporter or a sanitation worker, for that matter. Actually, the most uncomfortable person sitting around my aunt's dining room table that wintry afternoon was my mother. Aunt Mary was mocking me about something my mother had considered bogus herself. While she didn't agree with her at that moment, she believed my aunt was right, and she had for much longer. For all my schooling I could have been something other than an English professor instructing students how to read and write. (What kind of work was that anyway? Didn't people learn how to do that in grade school?) On the other hand, *without* all that schooling I could have been something *more* than an English professor. That day at my aunt's house my mother was essentially defending me about becoming something she had done her best to prevent me from becoming. No wonder she didn't have the words to express it. To her I was a "Doctor of . . . of . . . of . . . what?"

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If I was uneasy that day it was because after I'd read so many working-class academic narratives the irony of the moment was agonizingly clear to me. In testimonial after testimonial, despite the encroaching distance between parents and children, narrators recount the stories of proud parents who saw their children "as inherently important and intellectually promising."[12] Parents often were asked how proud they must be of their gifted children, as Richard Rodriguez's were, while one Scholarship Girl recounts how her "mother pushed [her] toward a life of higher education very early."[13] Even though Mike Rose, in *Lives on the Boundary*, informs us he wasn't exactly "gifted" as a child, his parents still thought of him as someday becoming "a doctor"—the real kind.[14] My mother (and my father) was not one of those parents. And I was not one of those "gifted" children. That came later. It took a lot of time, effort, and patience for that to happen. I've got the scars to prove it. My mother's transformation into the proud, supportive parent was practically magical in comparison. All she had to do was simply change the storyline. She made it seem as if she'd supported me from start to finish. In altering the past, she had placed herself in the archetypal role of the parent of a typical Scholarship Child.

In effect, she was revising her real role in how I acquired my doctorate.

It was a rather abrupt about-face. She had, after all, only a few months earlier tried to convince me to put down the books and pick up the trash as a livelihood. Years later, when I wrote my first scholarly book, she asked me several times why I hadn't dedicated it to her and my father. It wasn't as if I were ungrateful or considered their parenting the epitome of recklessness. But it did seem disingenuous to reward them for erecting so many barriers toward my writing it. Unlike in traditional narratives, the disconnection between me and my family wasn't because I was ashamed of them. If anything, they were ashamed of me. There was therefore a disconnection between the past and the present, a revisionist account of family history. As a result, my mother did something I was incapable of doing after reading so many of the narratives. *She* found herself in them. She became the longstanding, approving parent who had encouraged me to become what she knew all along I could become. The backstory therefore underwent drastic restaging once I earned my doctorate, as if the very scenes I appeared in had never been performed. Of course, they had. In the actual roles established by central casting she hadn't played the part of the admiring parent.

In altering her part in my educational journey, she was completely rewriting *my* history, conducting her own form of "erasure," thereby negating the resolve it had required for me to obtain my doctorate and join the academy. More important, how I arrived has had a lot to do with the kind of academic I became and the kind of teacher that I would become. I took a different route from those of other working-class academics. My route involved tenaciously clinging to the ER "vision," along with a heck of a lot of perspiration, sweating it out in unbefitting places. Unlike gifted working-class academics, acquiring my doctorate and landing in the academy seemed epic—in the sense of how damned long it took Odysseus to return home. My mother never approved of my intellectual ambitions and scholastic goals, and I've always been fine with that—really. To this day I don't resent her for trying to figure out what would be the best career "fit" for me. She had her reasons, one of which was the botched robbery and how it tainted my character in her estimation. The other was my rather sketchy, if not pitiable, academic past. I wasn't exactly proud of either. I get that. But I also overcame both to "redeem" myself, starting immediately down that path when I walked to my local library the day after I was released from the hospital. There never has been any acknowledgment of any of that on my family's part. Instead, in my mother's version the task was made easier, perhaps made entirely, thanks to her and my family. By claiming to have been a source of encouragement and motivation when

she historically had been a source of discouragement and opposition negated the authenticity of my journey and what I accomplished to become a professor. It was worse than an erasure. It was identity theft.

For her and for my family I became what they least expected. If anything, they seem more anxious around me than I am around them. Maybe it's because they got it so wrong. Still, if I had been they I might have had as little faith in my competence as they did. Granted, I would have preferred less conviction about my shortcomings, especially on my mother's part. Yet in her own awkward way she believed she was acting like the concerned parent. Like many good-hearted mothers, she got it wrong because she was trying to safeguard me. She was trying to protect me from myself, from my own crazy notions that I was intellectually fit to succeed, first in college, then in graduate school, and finally professionally in higher education. That's why she sent me the announcement about job openings in the Sanitation Department, just a few months before I received my doctorate. Joining the Sanitation Department would save me from terminal and inevitable embarrassment and disappointment. It was a reason she never expressed then, or has owned up to now—certainly not now, when my success had so much to do in her mind with her support. Before now, she was certain I'd be a roaring failure in the academy. In short, I had no business being there in the first place, so acquiring a doctorate in English would be a tremendous waste of time.

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If indeed the gifted child, replete with supportive parents, permeates working-class academic narratives, I didn't add up. A "shot story" is far removed from the traditional "gifted"-child versions. I couldn't add myself to the traditional story, after all. While not all the narratives contain accounts of archetypal cheerleading parents pushing for their children's academic success, they almost all contain the "gifted child" who would warrant such praiseworthy attention.

So pervasive is the "gifted child" in the stories of working-class academics that it has become a trope, just as the narratives became a genre. In *The Gatekeeper*, noted literary scholar Terry Eagleton considers "the scholarship boy" an archetype. Recounting his experiences growing up Catholic among Protestant England's working class, he stepped into "the process of becoming that most archetypal of post-war characters, as much part of modern mythology as the Mad Scientist or the Dumb Blonde, the Scholarship Boy."[15]

The recurring theme of the "gifted," bookish child originated in Richard Hoggart's "Scholarship Boy" in *The Uses of Literacy*, the granddaddy of all working-class academic narratives. In it, he describes a child (like

himself) being identified as intellectually endowed, someone "marked out early" and therefore "set apart" from his working-class environment because "'e's got brains." Meanwhile, the books he brings into his home "look like strange tools" to other members of his socioeconomic caste.[16] In due time, his "brains are the currency" that pays for his ticket out of the working class. Similarly, Richard Rodriguez, who frequently cites Hoggart in his narrative *Hunger of Memory*, describes how the Catholic nuns in his California grammar school quickly earmarked him as a candidate for academic success. Rodriguez was unlike other children from his socioeconomic class because he loved to read at an early age—"So I read and I read," he explains. By the time he entered high school, not many years after entering first grade knowing only "fifty words of English," Rodriguez had read "hundreds of books."[17] Essentially assured that higher education loomed on the horizon, Rodriguez used his atypical talent to catapult him beyond his Chicano working-class background. For both Hoggart and Rodriguez, their childhood bookishness literally and figuratively removes them from their working-class environment. In time, like most working-class academics, they grapple with its psychological and emotional ramifications.

Another Hispanic from the working class, Victor Villanueva, was less assured than Rodriguez that he would advance beyond his roots. His story, like mine, was more circuitous. Nevertheless, in *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color* Villanueva reports that he "would correct [his] folks when an English rule was broken," just like Rodriguez, and at an early age he discovered "the Brooklyn public library's air-conditioned reading room," a place drastically different from the spaces inhabited by his working-class schoolmates and neighbors.[18] I was close to graduating from high school before I discovered my local library—and look what it took to get me there! Keith Gilyard, an African American who grew up in two different New York City working-class neighborhoods (Harlem and Corona, Queens), received scholarships from Notre Dame and the University of Connecticut. He proclaims in *Voices of the Self* that he knew "just how important [. . .] reading was" even before he entered the first grade. "In fact," he continues, he "had been doing a considerable amount of reading before [he] received any formal instruction."[19] For Gilyard, Villaneuva, and Rodriguez, being bookish—all at *very* young ages—helped them to overcome not only the drawbacks of class but also the liability of race in a white-dominated society.

Scholarship Girls fall into the pattern as well. Linda Brodkey notes that she "literally read [her] way out of the children's library in the summer

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of the fifth grade" and immediately feasted on the "books in the adult library" section. "Only the best books,"[20] she adds, would do—a sharp contrast to my latecomer visitations to my local library. In the Introduction to *Calling Home*, Janet Zandy tells us, "I went to college on a scholarship. I studied literature. No, I embraced it like a lifeline." She expected her extraordinary passion, which starkly differed from that of the working-class world around her, would take her "across the great divide of class."[21] Like their male counterparts, Scholarship Girls were looking for a way out, and books supplied the means. Other Scholarship Girls throughout *Working-Class Women in the Academy* and *This Fine Place So Far from Home* also describe their bookish and gifted backgrounds.

On close inspection, most narratives duplicate Hoggart's and Rodriguez's accounts of the gifted and bookish child from the working class who rises above his (or her) station. This theme cuts across boundaries of race, sex, and gender, with class shared by all. The "child as intellectual prodigy" is a common feature in the narratives, whether written by a white male or an African American female, as are the "best books" they read, as if *their* lives depended on it.

For instance, Robert Brown, the son of uneducated Irish immigrants, notes in *Strangers* that his "library card became [his] most valued possession,[22] and Robert Cole, a coalminer's son, writes, "I loved school, and I was in awe of learning."[23] In *Coming to Class: Pedagogy and the Social Class of Teachers*, Karen Fitts proudly informs us, "My parents, teachers, and friends saw me as inherently important and intellectually promising,"[24] while Patricia A. Sullivan recalls being "a star" in school and "[excelling] at it."[25] Writing in *Working-Class Women in the Academy*, Suzanne Sowinska discusses how she and her twelve-year-old classmate had the "highest scores on that year's academic achievement tests." At the same time, she "coveted the books" a neighbor owned, spending "most of [her] time" reading "(what most university English departments) referred to as classics."[26] In the same anthology, Donna Langston points out that her "mother pushed [her] toward a life of higher education very early." Not only her mother, but all the women in her family "indoctrinated" her "with the idea that [she] possessed extraordinary intelligence."[27] As bell hooks explains, "a scholarship girl," like her fellow male prodigy, frequently "lived in the world of books."[28]

However, working-class women in the academy face a "doubly-pronged threat," Pat Belanoff contends, because working-class male language "has a value" greater than working-class female language, which is "certainly a quality our society rates highly."[29] Overall, gender and race

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relations continue to privilege white, male, working-class kids over females and minorities in their class, while male prodigies have a leg up on their female counterparts. But we shouldn't forget that largely *within* the working class, bookish boys remain targeted as "pussies" and "faggots" or any other insulting term that questions their manhood. Lately it seems that sentiment has begun to creep into all classes. Any male from any class who is bookish often isn't a "real man," especially if he's reading more than his schoolbooks. It is one thing to be a boy from Palo Alto reading a required high school text like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which helps certify entrance into a college commensurate with his class, but it's another matter altogether to be reading *Anna Karenina* just for the heck of it.

More specifically, among the working class being bookish potentially differentiates *any* child from other working-class children. It accounts for why the child is "discovered" as gifted and eventually guided toward academic advancement. By the second grade Keith Gilyard, for example, had reached "the so-called cream of [his] grade level," and he'd been "'identified'" by his teachers as academically special.[30] His family knew too, which is why his uncle reminded him while he was in junior high that he had "a good head for the books" and that all young Gilyard had to do was "stick with the books and they'll take [him] places."[31] Going places, for any child of the working class, regardless of the social disadvantages of race or gender, is made easier by showing early signs of owning cultural capital.[32]

Some of the most culturally diverse stories of the bookish, gifted working-class child occur in *This Fine Place*. Gloria D. Warren reports in "Another Day's Journey: An African-American in Higher Education" that she passionately read Shakespeare and Langston Hughes in grade school and announced to her mother at such an early stage that she was "going to get a Ph.D."[33] Rosa Maria Pegueros maintains in "*To-dos Vuelven*: From Potrero Hill to UCLA" that she seemed an aberration to the people around her: "To my family I was an oddball: bookish, self-absorbed, reaching beyond my family."[34] Dwight Lang, who grew up in Montana, felt equally unusual for the same reasons. He was an "anomaly in [his] childhood" because he "surpassed" his parents' already high expectations of his academic accomplishments.[35] Mary Capello, a self-described "Woman / lesbian / feminist / Italian American," realized at a young age that "studying and reading" would be her escape, certain that she "deserved" to attend Princeton and that it "would open up to" her.[36]

Escape! That's what they're after. For working-class academics, books were swapped for a tangible exit strategy, a way to get out of Dodge. At first, books may simply provide the means to mentally or metaphorically

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flee working-class conditions. Books might start out as symbolic flights of fancy, even for those who "love to read" for its own sake. In time, much more is possible. Real flight can be seen in the not-so-distant future. Books train working-class kids in the cultural practices of the elite, equipping them with information and discourses typically not circulating in their daily lives. Books, and their association with elite literacy, can sometimes supply upward mobility, the very real escape from a working-class environment seemingly at odds with the bookish child who has been singled out for being different from others in her class. Books are "strange tools" to many in the working class, Hoggart asserted, and the child who wields them may seem just as strange, "an oddball." This stage of the passage therefore involves more than a socioeconomic leap because the bookish child often desires to join a cultural setting in which such bookishness is not an anomaly. Moving from one class to another, Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey point out in *Strangers*, involves "moving from one cultural network to another."[37] For some, the conscious exchange of cultural capital begins at a young age. Naton Leslie "used to wonder how [she] escaped the anti-intellectualism of the working class." Leslie observes that she "did not grow up in a house of books and intellectual aspirations." Nevertheless, because her mother noticed that she liked to read, she would be left at the local library "for hours" where exposure to privileged discourses could occur.[38] According to Suzanne Sowinska, "education was devalued in the white, working-class culture in which [she] was raised." As a result, her "deep passion for reading" became "intricately connected to notions of escape [and] survival." Seeking to escape the material *and* cultural conditions of [one's] working-class life is a "reality," she argues, "of almost all the poor and working class women in academia" whom she knows.[39] It's likely the "reality" for all working-class members in academia.

Out of the intellectual preparation for escape, physical flight typically becomes the next step. In some cases books therefore represent socioeconomic salvation, a way to rise above a family history marked by "extreme go-to-bed hungry" poverty, as Nathan Green recalls.[40] Books represent more than just cultural capital. They accrue bankable, real capital enabling some to find "a way out of" limiting economic circumstances, as Alice Trent recalls of her growing up in a "small town in the River Valley of Pennsylvania."[41] In "Nowhere at Home," Christine Overall tells us that when she was twelve she "decided that education would be [her] way of avoiding a future as a waitress, factory worker, or clerk-typist."[42] Writing in "Bronx Syndrome," Stephen Garger declares, "What saved my butt was reading."[43] George T. Martin also saw reading encyclopedias from

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cover to cover and excelling in school as "a path to a better life."[44] For several working-class academics, being bookish in childhood, along with the ancillary "gifted" label, rescued them from the material conditions of working-class life. Whether it develops unconsciously or deliberately, "a deep passion for reading" imparts to the working-class child a view that the culturally alien and economically restraining world of the working class can be overcome. "In a working-class milieu," Sharon O'Dair claims, "a child's desire to read books or to succeed in school signifies difference—not just emotional or intellectual difference but material difference as well."[45]

But the books present a double-edged sword for the working-class academic for two reasons. First, while offering salvation they likewise create estrangement. Books often are responsible for the intellectual, physical, *and* emotional split that occurs between working-class academics and their home culture. The closer Rodriguez gets to becoming "the prized student" who eventually attends Stanford on a scholarship, the more he "cannot afford to admire [his] parents."[46] Instead, he turns his admiration toward his teachers. In time, the break from his parents and family progresses from an intellectual one to a physical one, concluding in an emotional fissure as well. For him, the "closeness" and "intimacy"[47] with his family life are replaced by "a lonely community" of scholars.[48]

It's a jarring tradeoff, shared by others. For some working-class academics, little in their new environment reminds them of the familiarity of their past. Many may have to "leave behind the familiar validations of experience and community offered by [their] family and friends," as Suzanne Sowinska claims.[49] Karen Fitts and Alan W. France wonder how working-class academics, "nurtured in the bosom of [their] reasonably sane and loving families, emerge so disaffected."[50] It would seem that Fitts and France weren't listening close enough: The disaffection often develops because loving family and friends *have* been left behind.

This explains why "especially bright" Sharon O'Dair still feels uncomfortable with what she sees in her rearview mirror, even though she "vowed" in her youth never to "cross to the other side" of middle-class life. While she currently sees herself struggling to "resist" the academy's elitism, she's not exactly pining for those bygone working-class days either. It's "dual estrangement" with a twist, she tells us in "Class Matters." O'Dair mentions the "alienation and shame" she continues to bear for "what [she] left," no matter how hard she tries to defy "what [she's] become."[51] This alienation often can result in "diffused anger," according to Ryan and Sackrey in *Strangers in Paradise*, as the "strain of disconnection

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from the past—parents, friends, etc., those who you left behind" takes its toll.[52] For many working-class academics, overdeveloped bookishness bears a sobering irony: On the one hand, the books provided the means to leap across the divide of class; on the other hand, they also lead to an unexpected emotional separation from those "left behind."

On occasion, the emotional estrangement can progress into such a tremendous source of pain that the main "tools" in causing it are blamed, as occurred in Dorothy Bryant's semi-autobiographical novel *Miss Giordano*. In it, the main character, a lifelong English teacher who rose from the working class, undergoes a book-burning, book-exorcising crackup. In some instances, those who'll be left behind want to prevent the flight from occurring, as occurred in Willy Russell's play *Educating Rita* when Rita's domineering husband burns her books and papers because—emotionally—"the girl he married is gone."[53] Such dramatic (and "fictional") scenes illustrate the contradictory role books play in the lives of many working-class academics whose butts may have been saved by them, but who also face the offsetting anguish that books may have helped destroy intimate (if, at times, oppressive) ties with those from the past.

Books carry another unsettling irony for many working-class academics. While being bookish may signal an exceptional position for the gifted child in the working class, that quality is in bountiful supply within the academy. What makes the child so uncomfortably different in the academy is certainly not bookishness but, rather, the very thing that he or she had escaped: the working class! While being bookish is not remarkable among academics, being working class is. But there is an important difference between these "special" qualities. Among upwardly mobile working-class kids, books were special—particularly "the right ones"—because they advanced the gifted child's cultural capital and claim to higher socioeconomic positions. However, the uniqueness of being from the working class may be a source of embarrassment and even distress, especially if the academic displays or betrays markers of working-class identity. This situation may prompt some to feel "an urgent need to mask [their] working-class origins."[54]

Neither gifted nor bookish as a child, I held no great expectations of climbing out of my social situation. It never occurred to me that school could provide social mobility or that books could lead to my great escape. Even when I became a voracious reader, and even when I became a "good" student, I didn't take advantage of either to leave through the front door and return through the back. For me, it was more of a revolving door. My ascent to the academy came in fits and starts, hurdles jumped

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and jumps foundered. There was no quick exit that started in my youth as it had with so many other working-class academics. It was more like crawling along the way rather than clawing my way to the top. Perhaps most important of all, it began after I'd been shot. That rather shameful event fueled my bookishness and made me take to my studies. By the time I became bookish and began inching toward "gifted-student" status, most working-class academics had already received their scholarships and were attending top-notch schools. Because of these things, I knew too little to be embarrassed about my class origins.

As a giftless child, I failed three subjects in second grade (when, not coincidentally, my father left), spending that summer in a devilishly hot classroom making up the failures. Like any child in summer school, I thought I had died and gone straight to Hell. My school memories differ dramatically from those of many working-class academics who describe their successes. I certainly can't say that "I loved school," like Robert Cole, a coalminer's son.[55] Or that I had a great "belief in education," as did Gloria D. Warren, an African American from Detroit.[56] Never did I believe, like Keith Gilyard, that my "eventual prominence" would evolve out of my "academic progress in school."[57] In no way growing up could I relate to Laurel Johnson Black, the daughter of a handyman, who states: "I wanted to be like my teachers."[58] Nor could I see how someone like Linda Brodkey would actually "prefer school to home."[59] Maybe the typical Scholarship Boy, according to Hoggart, will make "a father-figure" of his teachers,[60] or, like Rodriguez, even go so far as "to idolize [his] grammar school teachers,"[61] but I sure didn't.

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For the most part, I disliked teachers, especially the nuns, who seemed to enjoy belting kids, although the girls generally evaded their assaults. Any "bad boy" might be slapped in the face or have his hands whacked with a thick wooden ruler. Or he might be pinned against a wall and have his head bashed against it. Sister Louis Marie, the principal at St. Charles, roamed the hallways like a commandant, chiefly whenever a class spilled out into the corridors during bathroom breaks. Students weren't permitted to use the bathroom on their own. Entire classes would be herded to "the lavatory" right after recess. (The nuns and most of the lay teachers rarely said "bathroom." I guess it sounded too naughty, it being the room where people get naked to take a bath.) During potty training, Sister Louis Marie was known to corner boys she'd learned had misbehaved. She'd grab a wrongdoer by the hair with her left hand, hold his head in place, and slap him several times with her right. If she was having a particularly bad day she'd then pound his skull against the wall for additional effect.

Unlike the other nuns she was quite strong, and whenever we saw her in the hallways we were terrified. We all thought she looked like the Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz*, which she did. Both possessed sharp features like a pointy nose, headdresses that crimped the face into creepy contraction, and remarkably similar ways of addressing prey by pointing a crooked finger at the victim, pulling him into sight with beady eyes, and threatening him with a high-pitched, menacing voice.

One time Sister Louis Marie slammed classmate Jay (Pooh-Stain) Ruane repeatedly over the head with a hefty geography book because he'd scratched his initials on its cover. She often popped into a class unannounced to "observe our progress," but her primary objective was to make us crap in our pants, which most of us did, on sight. She could strike any boy at any time for something as innocuous as not wearing laced black shoes or not wearing accompanying black socks. Jay's infraction of writing on his book was therefore akin to practicing Judaism. When Sister Louis Marie spotted the graffiti she practically hurtled to his desk. She picked up the book and started slamming him over the head with it. "What [*whack*] have [*whack*] you [*whack*] done [*whack*] to [*whack*] your [*whack*] book [*whack*], Mr. [*whack*] Ruane [*whack*]?" She could have at least spared him one wallop by not pausing between "Mr." and "Ruane." When he tried to explain he hadn't done anything, she started hitting him again. "Liar!" she screamed, really giving it her Whac-A-Mole best. At one point, she accidentally dropped the book and watched it crash to the floor. "Pick that up," she demanded, pointing to it with her bent index finger. When Jay did so and sheepishly handed it back to her, she continued pounding the piss out of him.

Less severe attacks from the general nunnery included having ears twisted, noses tweaked, hair pulled, or scalps wrenched by knuckles—the notorious "noogie." Evidently, the nuns borrowed their pedagogical practice from Moe of The Three Stooges. Perhaps St. Charles was harsher than most places and an abnormality, even among many parochial schools. After all, Richard Rodriguez, Linda Brodkey, and Mike Rose thrived in their seemingly nurturing Catholic schools, while other gifted working-class academics appear to have hailed largely from less oppressive public schools. Still, I don't recall any Scholarship Boys or Scholarship Girls in my school, just a few "do-gooders" or "brown-noses," as they were called, who behaved and did their schoolwork, even though they were just as apathetic about it as the troublemakers who failed to behave. For staying in line, they were rewarded with good grades and a pat, rather than a smack, on the head. The rest of us were called morons, idiots, stupid, stupid idiots,

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brainless, stupid brainless idiots, useless, vegetables, useless vegetables, and stupid idiots with vegetables for brains. Positive reinforcement was not a strong suit of the nuns.

I reacted to their cruelty and indignities, along with the boredom, by rebelling, especially from about the sixth to the eighth grades, as did many of my classmates. What the teachers dished out, we gave right back, including their indifference to our educational development. Most of our assignments were returned to us obviously unread, branded with nearly page-long checkmarks indicating we had completed our "busy work." Book reports, copied verbatim from the dust jacket, received passing marks. I should know. I did it all the time. I knew I didn't have to bother reading the book, so I didn't. Once, I wrote an assignment using microscopic print, way too tiny to read (to see if they were paying attention or to receive it?). I didn't know what to expect. Would my sixth-grade teacher, a senile, wispy nun, notice? She did. As I sat at my desk Sister Mellette returned it to me, pulling my nose with her feeble fingers. "Bigger, you silly fool," she said, throwing it onto my desk. The next day I handed her a ream of paper with one enormous word written on each page. (Really, what was I thinking? I wasn't trying to show off to my classmates. Did I do it out of principle, or a lack of principle?) After she boxed my ears, I ended up in the corner of the room for the rest of the day sitting in the garbage can. Whatever set me off, I wasn't alone. Other boys pulled similar gags.

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As time went on, our rebellious behavior took the form of intricate, patiently planned pranks that attempted to disrupt the steady flow of tedium. By eighth grade, for instance, someone (sometimes me) would pass a note around the room that read, "At 1:15, cough." Sure enough, as we sat rigidly erect at our desks, our hands dutifully folded in front of us, nearly every boy (fifty of us) would begin coughing. After the failed seventh-grade experiment of pulling out the really "bad" boys from one class and putting them in the other, the school irrationally decided to place all the boys in one eighth-grade section. It was believed that we could be broken and corralled by the meanest nun in the history of Catholic school–dom, Sister Marcella. She also happened to be one lousy teacher who didn't know the first thing about creating a credible learning atmosphere, let alone inspiring kids to achieve. Even the Goody Two-Shoes disrespected her for that and participated in our hijinks now and then, like the timed coughing.

Such public displays drove Sister Marcella nuts. She couldn't single out anyone, either by hitting someone or by sending a boy downstairs to the principal's office where Sister Louis Marie might be waiting, yardstick

in hand, ready to spank a kid like a dominatrix—except the outfit was all wrong. Instead, Sister Marcella would announce that the entire class had to serve an hour's detention as punishment. Was she kidding? We were just getting warmed up. Ten minutes later, right on cue, another note would float around the room: "At 2:00 sneeze." Simultaneous, near-symphonic sneezing would commence at the designated time. Predictably, an additional hour would be tacked onto the first. We'd all get home just in time for dinner, but few of us cared. Clearly, the nuns had the upper hand (literally!), but we managed to generate power through numbers, to undermine a school system that appeared hopelessly meaningless and obsessed with discipline and punishment. (Boy, did I appreciate Foucault when I first read him.) Over time, I became more intractable and got into even more trouble. In eighth grade, I was suspended four times (a record, I was told twenty years later), and Sister Marcella informed my mother she should prepare to visit me at Sing-Sing someday. I was in fact getting into some trouble outside of school, so the good sister was not too far off the mark, I suppose.

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High school brought little change, except that now I was exposed to an even more diversely dedicated group of innovative delinquents, although most of the damage (to myself, mainly) was conducted outside the classroom, culminating in my getting shot. I was gaining a lot of ground in "Sidewalk U," as Keith Gilyard describes his own tumultuous teen years, except that no one had ever told me that I was as "bright as a star," as he was, nor was I ever accepted into a Special Progress Class, as he was.[62] As at St. Charles, no one I knew in high school was gifted or in love with books. For various reasons, Staten Island wasn't exactly home to the intellectually curious. As a result, I was never exposed to the kind of academic role models or intellectual mentors frequently featured in the narratives. In contrast, my mentors taught me how to hit a curve ball or spit great distances, as if it were an Olympic event. In some of the narratives, future working-class academics brushed against fellow bookish travelers, such as Mike Rose's high school English teacher Jack MacFarland, who became more than just an intellectual father-figure following the death of Rose's father. Then there's "the guy who lived two blocks from" Charles Finder, the son of a Boston fish peddler, and stimulated Finder to become an avid reader. Finder's nameless "guy" was simply described as an "underground Trotskyite."[63] If any such characters lived in my conservative neighborhood, they undoubtedly were so far underground I would have needed a backhoe to dig them up.

I'm convinced that my youthful nonbookishness altered my view of

intellectual work as less transcendental and more tangible. I didn't think of books as taking me out of my social situation or even out of my "trapped" condition, the way many other working-class academics describe their books, permitting them to flee (however provisionally in their imaginations) from the vulgar around them. After I was shot, I started reading because it seemed that being an ignoramus had had its disadvantages. I wasn't heading away from anything, more like heading toward something, some unidentifiable (intellectually) brighter future. Furthermore, by being giftless I had avoided some deeply conflicting attitudes that escaping my working-class background could bring, as described by several narrators. For one thing, I never set out to escape, nor had anyone dangled that prospect in front of me based on my intellectual talents—even when I was months away from obtaining my Ph.D. My brain wasn't supposed to take me anywhere, and those who knew me best assured me it couldn't whenever I tried. I would be better off staying in place and forget thinking of going places.

But, then, how can I explain my near-absolute comfort in the classroom as a teacher? It happened the first moment I walked into a classroom, along with my own sense that of the few things I've ever done really well in life—short of hitting a fastball or catching a one-handed pass—teaching is one of them. All in all, being giftless, *and* being a late bloomer deterred from blooming academically in the first place, has shaped my attitude toward my students and my intentions as a teacher. Sometimes I think I connect better with "flagging" students than with "successful" ones. My attitude toward books and my approach toward students surely explains why many of the voices from the working-class academic narratives sound so different from mine, like that of Gary Tate, who describes his "love" for books as a child, along with the "scorn [he] felt for [his] past" as well as for "[his] students." But it "was nothing compared" with the scorn he "felt for [himself]" for so many years as a working-class academic.[64] My past didn't involve growing up gifted, but neither did I ever view it with disdain, nor have I thought of my students or myself with contempt. Maybe being giftless and succumbing so long to those who wanted me to think of myself that way rescued me from these feelings. Coming so late to the scene and never feeling like a star may be more of a blessing than a curse.

As it turned out, I've been unlike those working-class academics whose bookish and gifted childhoods led to estrangement from their working-class past, and different too from those like Louis Potter who admits that he "spent most of [his] career trying to live down [his] past."[65] Like Potter, Carol Faulkner once hid from her working-class past and tried to mask it,

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but she changed directions by eventually embracing and celebrating it. She regards the shift as amplifying her scholarship and, especially, her teaching. She writes in *Coming to Class* that she "saw [her] class background in the same way [she] saw" other embarrassing features, such as her youth, as "weaknesses, drawbacks, things to overcome." But, she continues, "it's taken [her] a long time to understand and accept how profoundly class has influenced [her] pedagogy, how inseparable it is from the way" she teaches. Faulkner was the classic "successful student" who struggled with her former identity and the conflicts associated with it. Once she accepted her working-class past and even "returned" to it, she felt better off for it.[66] In fact, this unexplored theme appears in a handful of other narratives as well. Despite being "wrenched from the culture of [her] birth," Sharon O'Dair finally realized that "the weight and significance of class" was not something she should "dissolve" or abandon because she had entered the academy.[67] Being a child from the working class could be worn as a badge of honor rather than be the cause of embarrassment.

However metaphorical the "return" was for O'Dair, Faulkner, and others, it typically influences teaching practices by spotlighting class inside the classroom rather than concealing it. Actually, Faulkner believes she has become a better teacher as a result of her "return"; perhaps it has even helped her negotiate the typical conflicts of academics from those of the working class. She writes:

> As I become more myself as a teacher, I find more ways to allow my own experience to shape the way I respond to students and to validate my place in the college classroom. In spite of its drawbacks, I feel fortunate that I grew up with a strong working-class identity. It gave me enough of a sense of what matters to me or enough discomfort with what doesn't that I had to find my own way, true to myself, true to my class.[68]

Now this was a position I could relate to, the idea that a working-class identity could enrich a teacher's life and inspire a more creative and rewarding classroom experience for the students as well. Finally I'd found some connection between me and other working-class academics. Once that cartoon light bulb switched on over my head, I thought more and more about how "the return" could explain how I practiced my own intuitive working-class pedagogy, maybe even allowing me to "become more myself as a teacher." The return concept revealed the value of working-class roots for a teacher negotiating his own class identity. Of course, what doesn't fit into that model is one's having been shot nearly

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to death. Something tells me there aren't too many academics (working class or otherwise) who were gunned down by a cop during a botched holdup. I can't say that having been shot has in any way helped me navigate through the academy as a giftless working-class academic among my "gifted" colleagues. If anything, it's made me more reserved than gung-ho (or should I say more gun-shy) compared with most, professionally speaking, in carving out my "rightful turf" during the inevitable turf wars. However, inside the classroom that experience has generated an everlasting, ever-present approach to how I conduct myself. When it comes to being "in the moment" (an altogether overused New Age phrase that has lost its meaning), I'm at my best in the classroom. The intensity is palpable, as some of my students have remarked. I think this intensity—a profound passion, if you will, of bringing to bear the importance of "the moment"—explains why I am so good at it. In fact, my near-death encounter overshadows my having always accepted my working-class past as a pedagogical tool, which probably comes as no surprise to anyone who's undergone such a traumatic, life-altering experience.

In addition to that, being "giftless" in my youth is certainly a significant component of my teaching DNA as well. It too strongly influences my teaching. Because I hadn't tried to escape from my working-class roots, I didn't need to "return" to my past to become a teacher "true to my class" or to feel the "weight and significance of class." This is the condition of those of us nongifted who barely left. By the time I started my graduate studies I was already in my thirties, and by the time I started teaching college I was nearly forty. I was still closely tied to a world of Sanitation tests, real doctors, homemade zeppoles, and reminders that "you're the one who was shot" as I continued to go camping and play darts with childhood friends. I carried the weight of my class origins around with me. Despite the differences, of being giftless, and feeling neither especially estranged from my past nor terribly conflicted about my class identity, the importance of "the return" as a trope in teaching was the thing I most understood from the narratives. As a whole, the stories of Scholarship Girls and Boys armed me with discourses on the problems and anxieties of class, even if I wasn't an official returnee.

Several working-class academics discuss the advantages of retracing their past and its importance in enhancing their teaching practices, like John Ernest. He describes how his "background journey continues" to inform his understanding of how he and his students fit into the culture of the academy, along with how class overall fits into his classroom practices. His "understanding of class, and the role it plays in the classroom" began

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with a retrospection of his own story, of what he "discovered" about himself.[69] Olivia Frey likewise reports how her "return" influenced her work as a teacher: "My own teaching has changed to reflect my reconception of knowledge—where it comes from and what it should do." Before then Frey admits she embraced a more traditional approach, much of it stemming from her development as a Scholarship Girl. "When I left my small town in South Florida," she writes, "I knew I was bound for such 'greatness'—high aspirations, great books, the great tradition, everything above and beyond that low, small, common place on the map that I called home." Like others, being bookish and gifted propelled her beyond her working-class origins, and the academy, which appeared in the distance as an institutional Shangri-La, drew her into a new class identity: "I left behind my working-class parents and their friends and my friends and all they represented to me." She credits her students with reconnecting her to that abandoned past: "[I]t has been my students who have compelled me to come home to my working-class values." She claims that such forgotten values resurfaced when she noticed how her students were steeped in the "immediate" and "practical" experiences of working-class life. Over time, such lived experiences were incorporated into her curriculum, and she now believes all learning should involve the same principles. The "immediacy of language and events" must be the cornerstone of a lively, rich, and meaningful pedagogy.[70]

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Janet Zandy argues in favor of a similar curriculum, which she adopted for the same reasons. As a Scholarship Girl, she too had lost sight of the importance of class. In her final remarks in the Introduction to *Calling Home*, she states, "It took me twenty years to circle back." Growing up in Union, New Jersey, across the street from a factory where the "whirr of the machines" could be heard inside her family's tiny apartment, Zandy was "determined to escape" the working-class life that engulfed her. Like other working-class academics, she went to college "on a scholarship," convinced that the books she "embraced [. . .] like a lifeline" would bridge that journey. But the great tradition and the great books, according to Zandy, ignore working-class life and create "holes" in a person's formal education. Part of circling back therefore involved "fill[ing] in a small part of what has been left out of [her] education."[71] Eventually she discovered the significance of a curriculum grounded in class. In a subsequent essay in *Coming to Class*, "The Job, the Job: The Risks of Work and the Uses of Texts," she claims that stories of "working people" need to be "at the center of study rather than at the margins of a syllabus or not on the page at all." Teachers engaged in these activities will be pursuing a "working-class

democratic pedagogy." In doing so, the course she teaches at her school seems more "*real*" and "the 'real' world [is] not out there somewhere," which parallels Frey's creation of an "immediate" and "practical" curriculum after she "returned."

Frey and Zandy are right about the need for creating a less abstract curriculum, but they and others are wrong to assume it can occur only if "working people" are its focus. My not being a Scholarship Boy and never "determined to escape" my past may explain why I differ with them and others on this point. Oddly, I feel better about the usefulness of The Great Tradition than they do. Maybe that's because I didn't reach for it like a tow rope to pull me out of my "low" and "commonplace" socioeconomic waters. I reached for it in the very "real" and "immediate" sense of advancing my literacy. For me, at least, it worked.

Generally speaking—and I mean that literally, not just rhetorically; I'm *generalizing* bigtime here—it seems that many working-class academics who now feel guilty about leaving the working class blame the very things that got them out: books. They especially regard the classics as the main accomplice in the "crime" they committed. First, the Great Books in their youth represented a step up from the kinds of improper or incorrect material someone like Linda Brodkey's father read. Now in adulthood they may feel bad about having identified the "inferiority" of their loved ones based on the books they did (or mostly didn't) read. Next, they associate books and the "right" books with their increased socioeconomic status and very real material gains. Books were the stepping-stones that permitted them to "escape" the working class and join the ranks of the academy. Many testify to feeling uncomfortable about that. In effect, they are correctly criticizing the way books are deployed in school: not to increase literacy but to evaluate and rank. Scholarship Girls and Boys are living proof of not only this practice's implementation but also its effectiveness. (The system is designed to detect and then skim off the cream at the top, eventually homogenizing the different classes of containers.) *Now* working-class academics resent what took place. But *then* they clung to the practice "like a lifeline." In the narratives, *nearly* every working-class academic acknowledges that he or she wanted to be measured. Measurement brought rewards for many working-class kids who measured up. The grand prize was social mobility, gained through the acquisition of cultural capital. They see now that they were judged "better" than their peers because of their bookishness, and they begrudge their books (now) for the inequality books created. But that was the name of the game, and it still is: Books in school mainly exist for exchange-value rather than for

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use-value. Nearly all the narratives contain testaments of Scholarship Girls and Scholarship Boys who banked on that system, bigtime.

Books were the great un-equalizers that working-class academics trafficked in. For them to feel ashamed today about being singled out seems somewhat disingenuous. Most admit they didn't want to be seen as "equals" among their working-class families, friends, and classmates. Their books, along with their academic successes, separated them from other members of their class, and they showcased their bookishness. They banked on them. Books are why they're no longer among the working class. Books made them different. As described in the narratives, many presently feel conflicted about that. And they appear to be taking it out on their tools when they should be taking it out on their teachers who marketed books as measuring sticks, or better yet on the system's inequitable structure. They want to "punish" books (or burn them as in Dorothy Bryant's fictional story) for facilitating their rise out of their socioeconomic position because after their "return" they realize schoolbooks often don't foster a "democratic pedagogy." As the "special" and "gifted," they are living proof their analysis is dead-on. There was nothing democratic about their departure.

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This attitude is rather unfortunate. It's not the books that are to be faulted, no matter how "strange" they may seem to the average member of the working class. It's how most teachers use them—or in many cases misuse and abuse them. Used as benchmarks, books become hostile instruments to the nongifted, and even to the average student, as they were to me. At best, they exist in the abstract, intangible instruments at odds with a student's "real" life. In turn, they often breed indifference, causing no real harm and doing no real good. Books and the Great Tradition seem so vastly unreal and so disconnected from the student's "real world" that teachers like Zandy who "return" and study the problem want to create a more "*real*" curriculum. Perhaps for some Scholarship Girls and Boys the best means to that end is the establishment of "a working-class democratic pedagogy" with "working-class people at the center of study." I'm all for that, up to a point, so long as working-class kids aren't denied opportunities to read fascinating and edifying material such as Sophocles' *Ajax* or Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Incorporated thoughtfully into a classroom, such works can be very "real" for students from any socioeconomic stripe. And shouldn't our objective as teachers be to turn out conscientious, articulate, and literate students, whether they escape from their class or stay behind to repair elevators or clean streets? The pedagogical bridge that working-class academics should be building

is one that connects the concrete, "real" world of the working class with the abstract, "calculating" world the academy has made out of books. Let's keep in mind, too, that in letting the pendulum swing too far in one direction we may end up with an "intellectual" landscape dominated by *Real Housewives of New Jersey*.

In the "return," working-class academics largely ignore the "tools" that catapulted them out of the working class and focus instead on the class conditions of those "left behind." Zandy does that through her "working-class pedagogy," which she argues owes itself to the influence of "the return." While she "can't go home" per se (most of her immediate family is dead), she, like other returning working-class academics, returned home metaphorically. During her career, she writes in "The Job, the Job," "something happened" that transformed her thinking and she "came to understand that [her] circumstances were classed circumstances." What she "experienced was not so much a change in consciousness as a recovery of consciousness," in what she describes as "a reclamation of working-class epistemology."[72] Gary Tate reached the same conclusion. In "Halfway Back Home" Tate recounts how, after thirty years of teaching, he finally became "comfortable" with himself and found a more "meaningful" way of teaching by reclaiming his working-class origins. He tells us that encountering *Strangers in Paradise* for the first time "served as a catalyst" for him to think more fully about social class, which also acted as a portal into his own buried working-class background. This journey back involved an understanding of his "past," which enabled him to understand his "present"; as a result, he started teaching "more effectively" and "more imaginatively." Before that, he admits, he felt disconnected and bitter, and he frequently took these feelings out on his students.[73] Tate's comments seem both brave and sad: brave because Tate courageously reexamined his life at a point in his career when most have turned on the automatic pilot, and sad because it shows how much the academy often forces working-class academics to erase crucial parts of who they are. Furthermore, his comments demonstrate how rejecting class origins or ignoring class differences can profoundly affect teaching (and scholarship), as well as the relationship many working-class academics have with their institutions, but especially the relationship they have with their students.

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Because the subject of class has been "academe's dirty little secret," according to Patricia Sullivan,[74] working-class academics like Tate often can develop unhealthy attitudes toward their work. Before he returned to his roots, Tate felt "discomfort in the academy" and held "negative feelings" toward it. But his "turn to [his] rediscovered past," combined with his "at-

tempts to cease denying" it, provided "something worthwhile in the academy" for him: It infused and invigorated his "pedagogical work." In the long run, a greater affinity with his students developed, and Tate acquired "newfound confidence" from it. Before his return, he was "inclined to use the textbook, the syllabus, the content of the course as barriers to protect [him] from [his] students," whereas the return allowed him to open up. He writes: "I am attempting to use the strength that a better understanding of my past has given me not as a barrier between myself and my students, but as a means to understand them more compassionately—and thus, hopefully[,] to teach them more effectively, more imaginatively."[75] By reevaluating and reconnecting with his past, Tate reinvented himself as a teacher and as a scholar.

After reading Tate's narrative and others like it, I began to think that my life as a nongifted academic wasn't so bad after all. Being a late bloomer has had its advantages. As a giftless working-class academic, I hadn't uprooted myself, at least not in such dramatic fashion as reported by the bookish prodigies in many working-class academic narratives. Whenever I tried, I was considered more of a weed to be picked than a flower ready to bloom. Also, I didn't need to go back twenty or thirty years to those roots, not when my aunt was telling me I could have been a real doctor or my mother was reminding me to take the Sanitation test a few months before I obtained my doctorate. Then there's the irreversible and un-erasable view of those who knew me in my youth as "the one who got shot." I've always known I can't "escape" my past. To some, my having been shot still overshadows all my accomplishments—my doctorate, articles in prestigious academic journals, the publication of a scholarly book, and the high regard in which I am held by my students. People can change, but the experiences that caused the change don't. For many, it's not the changed person but the unchanged event that stands out.

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Not long ago I attended a grand reunion at St. Charles for most of its graduating classes, from its founding in 1964 to 1994. It was held in the school auditorium, the same place where I received my communion and confirmation. It also was where, high on mescaline, I walked onto the stage during our graduation dance party to receive tribute for being voted class clown. I wasn't trying to be a comedian as a student there. I simply started clowning around because it gave me something to do. I wasn't entirely enthralled with my schoolwork, so goofing off filled up the time. You can imagine how upsetting it was when my mother learned of it. It was bad enough I wasn't studious; the dishonor further confirmed my waywardness. Clearly, I was heading more in the direction of getting shot

by the time I entered high school rather than reading hundreds of books, as Richard Rodriguez had done by the time he entered his. Long before that, I'm sure plenty of people saw me as a troublemaker, a fucked-up kid with a dim future. Maybe those early impressions are too imprinted on people's minds no matter what I've achieved since then, thereby making it virtually impossible for me to escape my past even if I wanted to. As time went on, it became clearer to me why my father was so mistaken to advise me to pretend as if my past was different from the one I'd lived through. It can't be done.

Five minutes after I arrived at the reunion, a hulking figure walked over to me and placed a beefy arm around my shoulders. "Order any pizzas lately?" he said, chuckling. I didn't recognize him. He'd gained a pile of weight and had aged considerably for someone, as I learned, who'd been two grades below me. As one would expect, we'd had nothing to do with each other in school. I also barely knew him from hanging out at The Station and around the ball fields. He sure as hell remembered me, though. He removed his arm from my shoulders, stepped back, and pretended to fire six-shooters from an imaginary holster, imitating a character in a Hollywood western.

While I was bewildered—what was I supposed to say, "It's nice seeing you again too"?—I was neither flustered nor embarrassed, just as I wasn't when I ran into my former high school classmate at the College of Staten Island. It didn't bother me that he had brought up the shooting, other than its being awkwardly weird, because I think about that night nearly every day, despite the advice my father gave me about doing otherwise. Mind you, it doesn't haunt me, materializing as an unwanted, nightmarish memory. As crazy as it sounds, I summon it. For one thing, it makes me so astonishingly grateful to be alive, to love life, in its entirety, no matter what. Even when the shit hits the fan, it's better to have it splash across your face than to have the gravedigger's dirt thrown on it. It also acts as a reminder of where I'm from and who I am. And who I am is not a Scholarship Boy. I'm more a teacher (man) than a scholar (boy). For me, teacher (man) has a more reassuring ring to it, confirming that when I settled into teaching there was some mastery to it from the start, unlike how other working-class academics admit to their discomfort inside the classroom. If I can speak for my students, it may be better that I wasn't a Scholarship Boy. I never needed to go back to figure out how to connect with them, especially students from the working class or "average" or "below-average" students. I don't zero in on the "gifted" students and ignore the rest. Moreover, the ER scene turned out to be a powerful force

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in my teaching. The intensity and attention I devote to each classroom moment derives from it (as does every moment). My effectiveness as a teacher therefore has always been grounded in my past. I've never tried to escape it or needed to recapture it. It's always been a welcoming source of inspiration. Not an embarrassing source of desperation.

In "Passing: A Family Dissemblance," Patricia Sullivan concludes that working-class academics are not only physically removed from their homes but inhabit "a metaphysical world light years from home" as well.[76] In many ways, being giftless meant that I had never left, even metaphysically. To my family and friends, I hadn't. Because of these things, I wonder if I settled (instinctively?) upon the value of not erecting a barrier between me and my students or wielding the tools of the trade, like books, to build a pedagogical wall between us. As a giftless student I had seen how books were often used against me and others, sometimes literally, like when Sister Louis Marie clobbered Jay Ruane with one. Obviously, it wasn't that severe for everyone, but I don't recall a time when the nuns and lay teachers presented books as user-friendly. In addition, books were rarely read contextually, or as a way for us to find meaning, or even simply as a pleasant experience. Instead, they were used to regiment our "progress," or in my case my backwardness. Identifying individual illiteracy, rather than promoting general literacy, was the primary focus. Reading enabled teachers to grade, classify, and standardize students. Books were their tool with which to rank us. As a child I failed to see the legitimacy of this approach. I am not making this up in hindsight. Even at that age, like many children, I had a visceral sense of the joyless, perfunctory existence of books in my life at school (and at home). I'm the first to concede that I wasn't bookish in the first place, but what mostly constituted reading in grade school and high school back then (and still, sadly, to this day) seemed pointless.[77] One minute I might be answering questions based on a passage about volcanic activity in ancient Athens and the next minute I'd be answering equally goofy questions based on a passage about the history of haberdashery in London. In high school, when we were asked to read a book—which I likely didn't until I was shot—we were told by our teachers what to think of them and what they meant, with the exception of two, Mr. Larson and Mr. Keck. Interestingly, I can't remember a single name of all those others.

Most teachers ignored me because I wasn't bookish, which is the academic fate of the nongifted. I was therefore unworthy of instruction. I admit that some of my academic indifference and obstinacy may have been born out of resentment or even spite. I'm sure many teachers considered me stubborn and incorrigible, which I probably was. It wouldn't take long

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before I might be written off entirely, perhaps as early as October, or classified as inept, along with the other poor performers. But just like in Little League Baseball, where all players, no matter how badly they play, must appear in an inning or two, so too did a "bad" reader get to read now and then. For both player and reader alike, though, it could be an embarrassing proposition. Whenever mandatory readings occurred, with students reading aloud in alphabetical order or row by row, weak readers like me were told "that's enough" after a few sentences. Judging the sequence of readers, I would scan ahead trying to calculate the passage I might have to read, practicing it in my head in advance of being called on. It rarely worked. It was impossible to gauge how much the better students would be permitted to read. Unlike the gifted, I considered reading an insidious teaching device to make me look bad and books as impenetrable "things," certainly not "tools" of the trade, that the nuns and lay teachers used to separate the wheat from the chaff. *That* was my experience with books growing up giftless. There was nothing transcendental about them. I never viewed books as assisting me across the great divide of class. I considered them an albatross. Books were instruments of domination, wielded by the dominant to subordinate the lesser or marginal students like me.

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As a teacher, I don't use books to distinguish and judge the good apples from the bad. Doing so, Sharon O'Dair points out, ultimately "institutionalizes subordination and thus class."[78] From the moment my students walk into my classroom I want to ground them in the very real, material conditions of their lives and the lives of others. Working with your hands was considered "real work" among family and friends, and that idea resonates in my teaching practices because my pedagogy can best be described as hands-on, and I don't necessarily mean mine. Ethnographic projects and research are the cornerstones of my writing courses. In my literature classes, students design their own tests. In my Romantic Movement course, for instance, I have produced a fifteen-page, single-spaced handout on "The Atlantic Slave Trade," along with one on "The Ways of Women" and "Game of Tomes: The Rise of the Publishing Industry and Reading Public." The last one runs to twenty-five pages. Each student is responsible for coming up with at least three questions based on that unit, that handout. In a classroom of thirty-five students I compile a list of forty to forty-five questions. (There is a fair amount of redundancy.) We go over the list to determine the most important ones for them to answer, typically about twenty-five. Those will be the questions that will appear on the test. This practice operates at two levels, the micro and the macro. For one thing, it makes the students better readers, "close" readers.

For another, it empowers them. Finally, this entire democratic process reinforces the material, really allows—in the case of "The Atlantic Slave Trade"—that ugly, despicable practice of trafficking in human flesh sink into their head. This is evident when they take *their* test, with almost all of them getting a perfect score.

In that same course, they must "discover" their own essay topics, whether it's comparing *Pride and Prejudice* with the movie *Maid in Manhattan* or contrasting enclosed literal and figurative spaces in "Monk" Lewis's *The Monk* with our own postmodern claustrophobic world. Clearly, much of this "discovery" is based on our classroom discussions, grounded in the present, which is of my own doing, I admit. It seems to me that developing critical literacy skills through literary works should involve situating students in an "immediate" social and political context rather than present it exaltedly as "timeless," semi-holy artifacts, often done to separate the good, the bad, and the ugly. Nor should it be put forth as potential bootstrapping apparel that will save some and damn the rest. To me, that means delivering "literature" as close to home as possible. This methodology undoubtedly stems from my earlier giftless experiences, while the writing assignments I assign and the literature I select originates out of it. I saw how teachers sometimes used books to maintain distance or relied on the curriculum to erect boundaries, as Gary Tate acknowledged, or—to put it more bluntly—to establish the condition of *us* (teachers and a handful of bright students) versus *them* (the rest of the mediocre and dull ones).

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Since I knew what it was like to be one of *them*, I haven't developed an antagonistic attitude toward my students or sought to erect barriers to be crossed or stopped at. I've been unwilling to wedge a book between me and any of my students, not after what I went through. I want to make books appealing to students rather than employ them as enemies of their mental states. When I became a teacher I swore a silent oath to avoid rote instruction like a disease and not use the curriculum to protect me from my students. I was determined to make learning student-based, a state that can be achieved even in a seemingly dead-end curriculum like my Grammar and Style class, a course designed to be highly interactive around the theme of "Living Languages." I knew that different ways of knowing and experiencing the world were not valued in the academic discourse community. (On the street I was considered witty and a pithy storyteller, yet in school I was "illiterate" and ignorant.) I place a premium on those differences. I don't automatically categorize such differences as deficits, even hoping to encourage nontraditional or giftless students to feel that they belong. I don't value some students over others because they've

already pocketed some cultural capital. In my experience, teachers tend to advance such students and hold back the rest—often unconsciously, I suspect. This classification operates as a subtle form of oppression, with profound social consequences. In all probability, it means that the giftless will more likely be hauling trash because that's what they were destined to do. With even greater adverse social consequences, they might be doing it while believing that learning and knowledge are for the privileged and not a right to be enjoyed by all. Only the elite (and thus "The Man") gain from it. Knowledge is rigged against them. In addition, we never hear their stories because they didn't "escape." I'm an odd bird for the unglamorous reason that I was shot almost to death. I guess it takes that kind of extraordinary event for some of us to begin altering our giftless track records and tell our side of the story.

Having been one of those countless giftless working-class kids, I feel obliged to invite all my students into the conversation, generating as many voices as possible. From the time I began teaching writing, I automatically did not "settle for teaching students the discourse of the academy," which remains the prevailing practice, according to Pat Belanoff. She insists that discourse, like books, is frequently used as a device in "dichotomizing" one social class from another.[79] I don't teach academic discourse, pure and simple, even in my literature-based courses, and I'm determinedly inclusive. That I was practicing this method *intuitively*, in my own rudimentary way, before I knew to call it a Dialogic or a Freireian pedagogy, has a lot to do with my giftless background.

As a result, I usually begin assignments by asking students what they already know as a way for them to compare it with what we're about to explore. It may simply begin by my writing a single word on the blackboard—"marriage," "school," "sin," "work," "justice"—and having them free-write about it for five minutes. As they're speaking, I take copious notes, turning our conversation into its own text. I'll often rephrase some of their statements into questions and ask other members of the class to respond to their fellow students. I'll write down those comments as well: The class is constantly being built around student discourse—information and misinformation. Later, we'll compare those statements with the readings and their writing. Now and then I'll circulate a "Newsletter," a series of the most illustrative statements, including some of mine. Sometimes it can get noisy and chaotic, with students firing off answers and talking all at once, and often not to me. At times, I feel as if I've lost control of the class and that therefore little learning is going on—until I remember those deafening-quiet, ultra-structured days back at St. Charles,

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and the sounds of passive silence I've heard repeatedly in well-managed classrooms elsewhere. As a giftless child, I was left cold by the well-run classroom. I'm the first to admit I was emotionally and intellectually unprepared to gain from such supervision, although a part of me believes I intuitively resisted being treated like a clever robot.

Richard Hoggart argues that the typical Scholarship Boy undergoes a "system of training" that is essentially uncritical and heedless, turning him into a "blinkered pony" because he has become an "expert imbiber and doler-out" of information and knowledge.[80] Richard Rodriguez repeated this claim when he suggested that the Scholarship Boy experiences learning as an "imitative and unimaginative process,"[81] becoming "a great mimic" who rarely has "an opinion of his own."[82] To Hoggart and Rodriguez, the Scholarship Boy tends to absorb learning with little reflection and processes it like a thoughtless machine, largely as a set of doctrines and accomplishments that will prove his worth. He becomes a shining example to his teachers of the value of being a bookish drone. At that exchange rate, cultural capital has enormous value. It can be exchanged for social mobility, placing the dutiful, credulous child inside the prestigious corridors of the Ivory Tower.

Being giftless meant that I was a bucking horse rather than a blinkered pony. I was either too incompetent or too unwilling to become an expert imbiber and doler-outer, and it seemed that much of what passed for vital information was mostly part of a capricious disciplinary system that had little to do with the real world. I couldn't stomach having lessons shoved down my throat so that I could regurgitate them on command. I knew that's what "good" students were supposed to do, so I guess I wasn't "good" enough in that respect. I'm not trying to make myself sound as if I were some wise old pedagogue as I sat in my fifth-grade class, rolling my eyes in conscious mistrust of the limitations of rote instruction as we recited the names of state capitals. It was more visceral than that. I also don't want to overlook something else that likely was going on: Plain and simple, I probably wasn't a "good" student because I lacked a disciplined mind and/or didn't have the right temperament. Who knows if one gave birth to the other, how my undisciplined mind emerged from my temperament. Both may have sprung from my upbringing. All that time sitting by myself in strange rooms for hours on end after being shuttled from one home to another had made me more reflective than methodical. Countless hours alone as a boy had afforded me more time than normal to ponder—errantly—life's larger issues, such as the fragility of human relationships, which overshadowed the minutiae of my schoolwork. I just

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couldn't wrap my head around what seemed like trivia when the world around me required greater scrutiny.

A great deal of that time in cousin Andrew's room or anywhere else was spent day-dreaming, losing myself in a dappled mental world for the purposes of survival. These are not quite the qualities compatible with official academic approval. If anything, they usually signal an untrained, unproductive mind. It's the "imitative and unimaginative" child who shines in the classroom, for the most part, the future Scholarship Boy or Scholarship Girl. I wish I could say otherwise, but schools aren't exactly in the business of reflection. They're in the business of accounting. Now that I'm on the other side of the divide, I can see that what passes for knowledge in many classrooms doesn't involve calling for student introspection but rather the teacher's conducting student inspections.

Both skeptical and unimpressed with what was supposed to pass for knowledge, I didn't think to mimic it. In all likelihood, my reaction to my own system of training accounts for why as a giftless working-class academic I have insisted that learning be extraordinarily real and engaging. I would sooner work for the Sanitation Department than deliver the dull rote instructions I had received as a student and that still generally passes for learning in many classrooms to this day. (It doesn't help that state and federally mandated tests hamper even the most imaginative teachers at our public schools, constituting as they do officially sanctioning motorized learning.) That I wasn't terribly enamored with my teachers I'm sure had a lot to do with the kind of teacher I became as well, having never turned them into the kind of "over important" figures Hoggart describes.[83] Carol Faulkner maintains in "Truth and the Working Class in the Working Classroom" that as a bookish, "successful student" she "learned" to retain "a too deferential attitude toward authority," which "made [her] too accepting of traditional approaches" when she first started teaching.[84] Linda Brodkey admits that as a "good Catholic girl" she "succumbed so readily" to what she now views "as senseless hours of tedious exercises, distracting at best and debilitating at worst." While slogging through this game, she "learned to trade [her] words for grades and degrees." In doing so, she "trusted teachers" but "distrusted" herself. "[T]o make matters even worse," she adds, she was a child "who lived by rule."[85] Not exactly a good Catholic boy from the working class, I never felt loyal to authority, and I think this pointed me toward democratic pedagogy (unconsciously?) because I've never been "too accepting of traditional approaches." I also trust my students to find their way, even if that means bumbling along in their thinking. If they don't trust themselves, I trust I'm providing them

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with some guidance to do so, maybe not right then and there but, I hope, at least some time in the future.

Another less obvious way teachers maintain distance is by taking themselves way too seriously, which was part of Tate's story before his "return." As he explained, he stopped being so darn self-imposing, and he became a better teacher because of it. My giftless upbringing taught me that uptight, intimidating teachers didn't get very far with their subjects, unless they were the "good" ones, the students who jumped through hoops. In some ways, I am now the proud class clown in my classroom, a different kind from the one I was as a student. Humor, even the self-deprecating kind that spared an ass-kicking from bullies, can go a long way in the classroom. As that old educational ad used to say, it makes learning "fun-damental." Moreover, humor, as Freud informs us, connects us to one another. Laughter often reveals that *we* get it. We get the joke. It can also reveal that students "get" how delightful learning can be. In my youth, some teachers seemed so distantly alien as to appear inhuman. I was shocked whenever I ran into one of them outside of school. In class, they looked so glum teaching I thought that if the material they considered essential to our educational survival brought them so little joy, then maybe I'd actually be better off dying cheerfully ignorant than depressingly intelligent. Some embodied both masochism and sadism: They were unhappy making us miserable. In addition, humorless teachers were also the worst listeners, rarely interested in what any of us had to say. It was *their* time we were wasting if we didn't learn, and it was our fault if we didn't understand *their* lesson plans. Some were so full of themselves and their agendas that we might as well not even have been there. All in all, I see being a good listener as key to being a good teacher, as long as the listening is done joyfully, perhaps even compassionately. That's why I take dictation. (Maybe, Mom, I should dust off the court reporting machine, finally. I could take down student talk, verbatim.) Listening demonstrates you're present, engaged in the moment, not riveted to the past and not tied to the future. You know, as I wrote those words it sure sounded an awful lot like the epiphany I had in the ER. See: I told you at the beginning of this Not-So-Short-Story it was the worst thing and the best thing that ever happened to me. Now do you finally believe me?

In re-crossing the great divide of class, many working-class academics want to reclaim greater kinship with "those left behind" (even if only in the figurative sense). On the whole, those left behind were not gifted, suggesting that the return involves a symbolic reconnection with those of so-called average, borderline, or even slow intellects. It is, in effect, a

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form of solidarity through re-identification. Essentially the return brings working-class academics closer, in spirit, to the giftless of their former working-class world. The return also seems to bring academics like Tate and Zandy closer to their students. In seeking to become more comfortable in their own skins as working-class academics by re-identifying with the scores of "others" from their past, many working-class academics open up inside their own classrooms. They become less vigilant about hiding the residual markers of their working-class past, which may have been hidden under the veneer of pretentious academic (im)posturing. They become less gifted, so to speak. For Tate, who shares constructing the curriculum with his students, and for Zandy, who advocates practicing a working-class democratic pedagogy, becoming better teachers meant setting up classrooms wherein there is room for the giftless and average student to participate as fully as the gifted in the development of the curriculum.

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Their approaches question the built-in elitism of academic mobility because working-class academics now see the earlier disconnection they felt with their students as potentially related to their identification with their teachers when they were gifted students. Both stemmed from the same principle, that education is dominated by a hierarchical structure, with the teacher institutionally on top and only the best and the brightest with access to such heights. Time and time again, books are the primary measuring devices and the primary vehicle by which to secure such plateaus. Singling out gifted students in a classroom that is composed of mostly average or giftless working-class kids is one way to impose undemocratic class relations through the very ordinary practice of teaching. For Tate, Zandy, and others, the return may animate creating a more egalitarian learning experience for their students and inspire the establishment of a curriculum grounded in social justice. They became more-gifted teachers by reevaluating the meaning of being gifted Scholarship Boys and Girls. It may have taken Zandy and Tate twenty and thirty years, respectively, to get there, but they had to go back before they could go ahead.

In my case, being giftless seems to have been a blessing rather than a curse. I didn't have to reach far back in order to return to my students because I didn't go that far ahead or away. It never occurred to me that school learning was transcendental—socially or spiritually—or that books offered salvation or compensation. I started paying more attention to my schoolwork and became a library rat because I'd nearly had my head shot off by a cop during a botched robbery. Furthermore, in my youth I wasn't gifted enough to impress my teachers with any hint of someday becoming