



Department of English

Michigan State University

Professional Goals

In “The Boarding School, an essay written for and published in *The Seneca Review*’s special issue on lyric essay, I describe my transition from poet to essayist, the most important transition of my professional career so far:

Becoming more knowledgeable and rule bound, I lost something raw and uncooked. I became cautious, hesitant—I am compressing here a process of years—mulling every word before committing it to the page, then crossing out my commitment, now crumpled and discarded. I perfected my poems in the manner of one who has some cleaning disease. Production became a laborious effort, and I the forewoman. I became headmistress to my own poems.

Academic poetry was like LAX. From the air I saw connected terminals, but on the ground I was lost in the maze. I couldn’t synthesize my knowledge of the history of poetic experimentation with my own writing, and I stagnated in the waiting areas. My sense of restriction was largely self-imposed, though a product of the time’s fashions, too bound to watered-down, formalistic ideas of what a poem should be, and limited by the dominant deep-image style, which flattened out the peculiarities of voice for the sake of an all-knowing purity. While my private sense favored a Romantic notion of the artistic

work as a form that generated its own principles of order in response to historical pressures, when it came time to write I fell under the sway of the tenets codified at the time. I lost an expansive sense of what poetry could be. The poems I produced were hard and anonymous, bare as workshop walls. My poems shrank smaller—a little box, a sentence, a word, a letter, a blank space where the poem was supposed to be.

One spring, sitting at my desk in the converted attic of my house, looking out onto the rooftops and trees just come into deep green leaf, I said out loud: “Put the poems away.” And I did. I put my sheaf of poems into a drawer and closed it with a decided push. I felt confined, sitting in my narrow chair pulled tight to the little desk. I shoved away from it and walked over to the rumpled bed where I liked to sprawl and think.

An hour after the ceremonious burial, an hour of bed-lying, a piece of prose came to me, triggered by the letter *P*. An explosion. First *P* popped to mind, then *permanence*, then *perfect permanence*, *prudent*, *pain*, *a procession of pain*, *peril*, *past perils*, and so on in this burrowing manner until I came to *posture*, and off I went about my poor posture, my sisters’ perfect stance, my mother’s despair at my adolescent slump. In her eyes, good posture was a prelude to a good husband—a goal next to godliness. My ingrained slouch foretold a cheerless life story, one without a wedding ring at the denouement.

My prose piece tracked in unpredictable directions—an effusion around the idea of posture with no prefabricated sense of what I was to write. Besides my own posture and standing within my family, I reflected about what posture stands for, and the many meanings we assign it. Until that moment I wasn’t aware I had feelings about any aspect of my bodily history. Unbeknownst to me, forces had been percolating and taking shape in words, in images, in sounds and rhythms that formed a pattern. I realized that gravity

was very much with me. My body was not a large box into which rebellion had been stuffed and locked down. The sparking words were released, my voice amplified, and the rock wedged into the mouth of the cave rolled away. In the voice that emerged I recognized my personal rhythm, a relationship between sentences and the drama of the self, what [REDACTED] called "A radiograph of personality." I had written a lyric essay.

Since then, I have become a practitioner in the fourth genre, and continue to write in unpredictable directions. I have been and still am many things-- a scholar, a poet, a teacher, a mother—and my career has not followed a linear and predictable path like my best friend, who arrived at graduate school knowing her scholarly focus and remains true to that focus even now. Every professional move she made furthered her specialization. It is an admirable career model, but like all models one size doesn't fit all, and it didn't fit me. Since the day I wrote my first lyric essay, though at the time I didn't know how to name what I had written, I have steadily been devoting myself to the fourth genre. Today I am in the enviable position of having all my interests in the fourth genre be aligned. But obviously, it was not always so. For most of the 1990s I was teaching in various scholarly areas (modern poetry, American literature, women's literature) and writing in another. It wasn't until 2000 when I was able to transition into teaching creative writing (at least a course or two a year) that all aspects of my professional profile began working in unison. In January I became the Senior Editor of *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*, an award-winning journal of literary nonfiction published by MSU Press, and thus have added editing to writing and teaching. In its 12th year of continuous publication, *Fourth Genre* publishes a wide range of nonfiction reflecting the contemporary essay's

flexibility, energy, and expansiveness—from personal essays and memoirs to literary journalism and personal cultural criticism. *Fourth Genre* features interviews with prominent writers, roundtable discussions of topical genre issues, commentary by writers and teachers of literary nonfiction, along with full length and capsule reviews of current books. As Senior Editor, I am responsible for making all executive decisions about the journal's content and direction, and for overseeing efficient editorial and production workflows. In addition I have created an active learning credit-based internship for MSU undergraduate editorial assistants.

I have a strong publication record in the field. My memoir *Girl Rearing* was published in 1998 (after having received tenure two years earlier) [REDACTED] was selected and included in the Barnes and Noble Discover New Writers Series, and subsequently named on the list of "Notable Twentieth-Century American " in *The Best American Essays of The Century*, edited [REDACTED]. Several of the essays that became part of *Girl Rearing* were recognized as Notable Essays in *The Best American Essays* series, and one "Hair" was published in *The Best American Essays*. It has been included in the college edition of the best of the *Best American Essays* and in *The Beacon Book of Essays by Contemporary American Women*. "Hair" is once again being reprinted in *Diogenes Laughing Matters*, edited by [REDACTED] Stanford University. My essay is included in a chapter called Observations on Gender, and keeps company with work from [REDACTED]. Since the publication of *Girl Rearing*, I have continued to steadily write and publish personal essays in such places as *Arts & Letters*, *Brevity*, *Diagram*, *Gettysburg Review*,

Northwest Review, *Seneca Review*, *Puerto del Sol* and so on. Ten of my essays have been selected as Notable Essays.

I am in the process of completing the follow-up collection to *Girl Rearing* called *The Mother Bed, and Other Portraits*. "The Mother Bed" appeared in *The Gettysburg Review* in 2007 as did "The Making of The Mother; Portraits" in *Diagram*. "Portrait of a Ring" is forthcoming this fall in *The Pinch*. I have also written a book length meditation on suicide called *The Substitute Teacher; Notes of a Suicide*. "Walkaways," was published in *The Seneca Review* and nominated for a Pushcart Prize; "The Bed of Metamorphosis" was published in *Fourth Genre* and subsequently selected as a Notable Essay in 2006. "Spoon Altar" was published in the fall of 2006 in *The Tampa Review* and "Death's Acres" appeared in September 2007 from *Under the Sun*. "Return Baggage" is due out this summer in *Rock & Sling* and "Sightings; Binoculars" will appear in this fall's *Southeast Review* as the finalist in this year's nonfiction contest.

While I've successfully placed my work in literary magazines whose editing tastes are more literary, by that I mean interested in stylistic experimentation and not shaped by marketing concerns and financial bottom lines, after *Girl Rearing* I have run into difficulty placing my work with trade publishers. The manuscript of *The Substitute Teacher* was not seen as commercially viable by my agent, the same agent who placed *Girl Rearing* very easily. She auctioned the book off in 2 weeks and I received multiple offers. Not so with my book about suicide. To say I've been thrown off my game by the reaction would be an understatement. Despite the discouragement, I still hope to figure out a way to package the whole that someone will publish it. Publishing the pieces has strengthened my confidence in the quality of the writing and the value of the story. I've

also run into the industry's resistance to publishing collections of essays, and this resistance runs through trade and university press publishing. No one wants collections of essays unless your name is [REDACTED]. This resistance poses a serious difficulty for the essayist, who by and large writes pieces that must stand alone in order to be accepted for magazine publication, the essayist's bread and butter. I can't tell you how many exemplary essayists are struggling to find ways to structurally and creatively get around calling their work collections. But for many essayists, our sensibility has more in common with the painter than the novelist. My essays share a kinship with [REDACTED] shadow boxes, each one assembled individually from an assortment of materials along principles organic to that work. All of his shadow boxes are related to one another and would form a gallery or series, but they don't necessarily have a hook to pull all the exhibits together. I put together a book manuscript last fall called *The Mother Bed* and while a press is interested in the project I was given what has now become familiar feedback: the book reads too much like a collection; there isn't a sufficient hook and progression to the structure, but the writing is terrific, first rate. Our problem is not with the writing. So, I'm back to rethinking the structure and am nearing completion.

Service

I have taken my department's three categories of evaluation-- research, teaching, and service—seriously and have endeavored to contribute and succeed in each category. My profile has been consistently balanced. Since my first semester at Michigan State I have reliably served on committees, whether onerous or not, whether rewarded or not.

As the most dramatic evidence of this I have served on the Policy Committee, the main governing body of the Department, for 10 years. I was elected my first year, served for multiple terms subsequently, and am going into the second year of my current term. I've been on the Salary Committee twice for 2 year terms since it was instituted (some faculty have never served) and Chaired the committee last year. Serving on Salary isn't a task most people desire: it is time consuming to read all the materials of all the members of a large department, and it's unpleasant sitting in judgment of one's peers. I was the first female faculty member to handle the task. I directed the Honors English program, chaired the University Honors Committee, have advised and mentored more students than I can keep track of. I've been the advisor to the undergraduate literary magazine and Director of Creative Writing, I've brought in most of our visiting writers, organized and managed our creative writing awards, been our liaison to AWP, created courses, served on our undergraduate committee, helped develop the Residential College for one semester, participated with RIOAL (the residential option in Arts and Letters)—all work that is time consuming but institutionally unrewarded and underappreciated. I've invested myself for a variety of complicated reasons: 1) I have a vision of the admirable faculty member and it includes volunteering, serving; 2) I have a vision of an admirable community and it requires volunteering and stepping up to the plate, and 3) I want to serve students, to be a part of what makes their experience at MSU positive.

In sum I am not a writer who reluctantly has to teach in an academic setting because fame and money have not found them. I am a writer who understands what working in a academic setting means: it means teaching writing to students and being a member of an academic community. I have chosen to be a teacher, to juggle the multiple

demands of teaching, service and writing. It's tough to do all well, and sometimes I do one thing better than another, but the struggle is worth it.