



PURM
Perspectives on Undergraduate
Research & Mentoring

Finding the Words: An Epistolary Essay on Mentoring in the Creative Arts

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“And if I have anything else to say to you, it is this: do not think that the person who is trying to console you lives effortlessly among the simple, quiet words that sometimes make you feel better. His life is full of troubles and sadness and falls far short of them. But if it were any different, he would never have found the words that he did.”

Rainer Maria Rilke

Letter 1: From Jennifer Sinor to Morgan Graham

Dear Morgan,

I can't remember if you read *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke (2012) with me in one of the creative writing courses we have shared. I often teach it in the advanced creative nonfiction workshop if we are focusing on the short form. The book is a one-sided conversation between the poet, Rilke, and his student, Franz Xaver Kappus. They write letters to each other over the course of several years in the early days of the twentieth century. One of the joyful acts of speculation the book provides is for the reader to imagine what Kappus writes to Rilke—what he asks that Rilke then works to answer. As is all too often the case with primary source materials, only the words of the famous remain. We have what Rilke writes, not what the student asks.

And that is a loss. For several reasons. Letters only come into existence when the two writers are far away. Distance is transgressed by the page and a conversation is born. To have only half the conversation is akin to having only the left shoe. You realize you are missing the other shoe with every step. It is also a loss because we don't know *how* the student defines his struggles to create art. An often-invisible aspect of creating art—the relationship between master crafter and apprentice—is withheld once again.

But we get close. In these letters, we can begin to see how a teacher mentors his apprentice—even some of the apprehensions or concerns the apprentice brings, and how the apprentice frames his concerns. A true teacher, Rilke often ushers his student into his response and in part recreates the conversation for us.

Because you and I have worked together so many years (In your undergraduate career you took four classes from me, mostly in creative nonfiction but also in literature; I served as your mentor for your undergraduate research fellowship; I was your mentor for your summer research fellowship; and I sat on your honors thesis committee. Am I forgetting anything?) and because we have built a

relationship based on respect and a mutual love of language, I wanted to write you and see if we could create a contemporary series of letters that make visible the invisible act of mentoring. You have moved halfway across the country. I no longer see you every day in class. The chair you often occupied in my office is filled with other student bodies. And I miss you.

Here is a place to begin, maybe. Early on in the correspondence, Rilke (2012) reassures his student that the solitude he feels as an artist can be inhabited like a home, that the pain of isolation is the suffering great art requires and one must move toward that solitude, not away. He writes, “go through your own development quietly and seriously; you cannot disrupt it more than by looking outwards and expecting answers from without to questions that only your innermost instinct in your quietest moments will perhaps be able to answer” (p. 8). In ways that I, as a professor of creative writing, often find surprising, Rilke seems to provide much-needed reassurance to undergraduate creative writers in his insistence that they turn inward and trust themselves. Students in my creative nonfiction writing classes are inspired by Rilke’s affirmation that they already possess everything they need to make art, even if they often feel despair. In addressing their feelings of being misunderstood or alone and bringing those fears under the umbrella of art, he creates a refuge.

In many ways, I, too, am girded by Rilke’s insistence that we, as artists, must trust our inner need, the terrain of the heart rather than the mind. I certainly can identify with how much of my own work moves, as Georgia O’Keeffe (1918) suggests, by more feeling than brain. But I am also surprised that students don’t call Rilke out for his Romantic conception of the self or the writer as solitary genius. Living in a world increasingly filtered by social media, they understand that writing, like reality itself, is socially constructed. When I suggest that all writing is collaborative, I don’t mean that all writing is co-authored. I mean no writer writes alone. Just as Anne Ruggles Gere (1987) suggested years ago, “becoming literate means joining a community” (p. 6). As someone who began her academic career studying nineteenth-century diaries, I am especially aware of how even the most solitary acts of authorship are enmeshed with the voices of others. A diarist assumes a certain understanding of “I” given who they think their audience is—even when they think they are the sole member of that audience. We write to be read, even when no one else will ever read it.

That paradox that writing is simultaneously solitary and collaborative, makes mentoring in the literary arts especially complex. The mentoring relationship in creative writing constantly negotiates “recognition and acceptance on one hand,” as Elizabeth Forbes (2017) writes, “and singularity on the other” (p. 266). The artist must indeed look inside for inspiration, must mine their emotional truth, but in bringing that vision forward, the young artist benefits from structure and support.

I was just talking about this very idea with another student during office hours. We were thinking about how the workshop model in creative writing can create “group think” where the essays that come out of the workshop all look more or less the same—and, maybe unsurprisingly, too often aligned with the aesthetics of the teacher. I struggle to balance the knowledge I have as a seasoned writer with the inner vision that is a student’s alone. I sometimes think that is why our mentoring relationship worked as well as it did. We began by having you join me on my project, when you became my research fellow for a year and helped with both of my book manuscripts. For six months, we gathered around work I had already made. Only after that did you launch into your own writing. The focus on my writing then built a bridge—in education circles they would use the metaphor of the scaffold—for you to cross, moving from the known to the new. I am curious if you would see the structure of our time together—that movement from my work to yours—as a particularly important aspect of the work we did together? Or would you name other moments or movements as being more central?

My best, Jennifer

Letter 2: From Morgan Graham to Jennifer Sinor

Dear Jennifer,

I felt nervous enrolling in your Introduction to Creative Nonfiction class. I didn't consider myself a creative writer, but I had recently returned from living in Chile for eighteen months. I felt that my experiences abroad qualified me to tell my own story, that I was licensed now to write about myself. You structured your class as a workshop, where I brought my drafts to share with classmates, and we offered each other feedback. This model required me to think about what worked and didn't in my classmates' writing as well as in my own; applying what I learned—and workshop feedback—to my writing, I began to develop self-awareness as a writer.

I benefitted from the workshop model, an obvious collaborative process, but working on your manuscript was the most meaningful collaboration for me. I hesitated to approach you to ask if I could help you with research. As an undergraduate research fellow, I knew it was up to me to seek a mentor. I remember the day I caught you on our way out of class and walked with you to your office; you walked briskly, like you had important things to see and do and barely enough time. I think I stuttered my question out, and my face certainly flushed like it always does when I'm embarrassed. But I was fascinated by the art you encouraged us to make in class. Though I had no idea what research in the humanities might look like, I think I just wanted to learn more about writing, or maybe I didn't know yet what I wanted to learn. But I trusted you could teach me something that would become important for me.

I don't remember if it was that day or another that I sank into the armchair in your office, decorated with wall hangings and bright drawings by your children, to talk about ways I could help with two book manuscripts you were about to send off to the publisher. I took the proofs home with me in my backpack. I spread them out on the table in front of me one night at the cafeteria, eating macaroni and cheese and drinking chocolate milk. Sitting there for hours, I made tick marks with my pencil on the manuscript, correcting spelling and punctuation errors, and offered occasional suggestions for conciseness. I was only a sophomore in college, but I did have experience with writing and grammar that I could contribute. You validated that the knowledge I brought to our work together was valuable, which increased my desire to continue learning.

Your manuscripts became critical mentor texts for me. I learned the term later in English teaching courses, but we frequently read mentor texts in your Introduction to Creative Nonfiction class: essays that modeled the hallmarks of the genre. As I mimicked them, mentor texts guided my attempts to write effectively. Any reader who reads good writing collaborates with the author. The reader observes how the writer crafts a text, then employs those same techniques in his or her own writing. Over and over, readers can—and should—turn back to good writing to learn how to write well themselves. Readers join the ongoing conversation of writers who are experts in their field; the act of reading, just as you say about writing, is inherently collaborative.

In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke (2012) suggests Kappus find copies of Jens Peter Jacobsen's *Six Novellas* and *Niels Lyhne*. Rilke promises that, as he reads them, "a world will come over you, the joy, the riches, the incomprehensible greatness of a world" (p. 10). Rilke entreats Kappus to "live in these books for a while" and "learn from them what seems to you worth learning" (p. 10). Rilke then outlines a mentor text's impact on developing writers, stating that it will "run through the weave of your becoming as one of the most important threads among all the other threads of your experiences, disappointments and joys" (p. 10). Most critically, however, Rilke postures himself as a learner in this passage, stating that "if I had to say from whom I have learnt anything about the nature of artistic creation, about its profundity and eternity, there are only two names I can give:

Jacobsen's, the great, great poet, and Auguste Rodin's, the sculptor" (p. 10-11). Rilke knows that no one can write in isolation. Any exposure to writing or art becomes collaboration.

Working closely with your manuscripts impacted me more than mentor texts that we read in class because they were yours, my professor's. On the page I watched you using techniques you taught me about in class. As I read for mechanics, I noticed intentional choices you made as a writer; I began to pay attention to structure, form, and language. I witnessed the successful turns and transitions of a book-length text, and I developed confidence that I could recognize and eventually produce those techniques in my own writing. Looking back, I would say I learned first by reading, by collaborating with you through mentor texts.

You write that you worry about balancing your own expertise with the inner vision of your students. I believe you achieved this balance in our work together. As you and I collaborated, I was struck that you were willing to accept feedback on your books from a sophomore. You asked me to make edits on your proofs, and then you implemented many of my suggestions, demonstrating that every writer—not just the novice—benefits from collaboration and feedback. Though you had more writing experience than I did, I had something to offer you as a reader. You taught me that collaboration and feedback should be an essential part of my writing process as well.

You thanked me in the acknowledgements of your memoir, *Ordinary Trauma*, for helping make your final manuscript the best it could be. Not only did your acknowledgement make me feel special, but you reaffirmed that I had something to contribute to the work I was only just learning about. I brought the copy you gave me on my move to Minnesota. It sits on my bookshelf, and I see it each time I sit down to write.

Sincerely, Morgan

Letter 3: From Jennifer Sinor to Morgan Graham

Dear Morgan,

The relationship that you and I have is a special one, not unique but rare. Mentoring students is not easy work. We can see this in the length of time it takes Rilke to write Kappus back. Whole seasons pass before Rilke responds. I do not choose the students I have in my classes; I teach, to the best of my ability, every student who enrolls. But I choose, with intention, the students I mentor deeply. Because I become responsible to them. Yes, I am responsible for the education and, to some extent, the well-being of all my students, but when I mentor a student deeply, over a long period of time, I undertake the role knowing that every interaction, at every moment, becomes a teaching moment. The walls of the classroom no longer create a divide; I am always teaching, always modeling, for those I formally mentor.

The year you took my Introduction to Creative Nonfiction, I had two students named Morgan in class. You both had brown hair. I worried I would have trouble telling you apart. Then you commented on one of the example essays we were studying, and I knew I would not have a problem. From that very first moment, you spoke from a place of curiosity and wonder. Most students want to know enough; you wanted to know more. As a teacher and a writer, it is almost impossible for me not to join a student who is committed to the path of seeking more. It's the only path an artist can follow, the one that does not end.

You write about mentor texts, but the mentor's body, their person, becomes a text as well. I am keenly aware that, even now as we write this essay on mentoring, I am modeling what it means to be

a writer, a professional, and an artist. I am shining a light on the field, the discourse community, the moves you make—in a paragraph or in a profession. In the same way, each conversation we had in my office, gathered around my work or yours or simply talking about what was happening in your life, was a moment where I was aware of modeling—not just how to turn a line of prose but how to balance home and work, how to hold rejection, how to ask for help as well as when to celebrate.

We don't model enough, it seems to me, in higher education. We, as professors, speak, and students write down what we say. We ask our students to journal in response to a question, while we sit in our chair and wait the ten minutes. We ask them to share, but rarely do we offer our own work—not the published, polished work, but the effort itself. Inviting you to join me on my book projects was like inviting you backstage. And, as we all know, backstage is where all the work gets done.

I remember once when I was in college, a faculty member allowed me to watch a ballet from the wings of the stage. In those years, I served as the student representative on a board that selected acts for the performing arts center. That night, I had been given backstage access for the performance. It was cold in the wings, and dark. I mostly tried to stay out of the way as the dancers moved off and on the stage in a choreography the audience would never see. For one piece, the dancers wore pale pink costumes that clung to their muscled bodies. Tulle and ribbons, as well as sequins and lace, followed the curved necklines and waists of the thick satin costumes and trailed in the air as the dancers hovered above the earth. Looking more closely, though, I began to see the sweat marks beneath their arm pits, damp circles, browned fabric stained from the labor of their art. On one dancer, tears in the side seams of her bodice; on another, places where lace had come loose from the silk only to flap like the tail of an escaped kite. The toe shoes of every dancer ground at the point, the fabric thin and worn. In these details, I saw not damage but effort. From where the audience sat, I knew those dancers floated through the air like grace itself. Backstage, though, I was made aware of their labor—that these bodies had put in countless hours on the ground to give the viewer the gift of flight.

That is what all art requires. That kind of labor. Ten thousand hours. And there are no shortcuts. Most students don't know this, don't see it. They read novels and essays as if those works arrived in the world fully formed. Part of my role as a creative writing teacher is to make the craft visible, undo the stitches the author has so painstakingly sewn. When we look at model essays in class, we are reading them not as readers but as writers, and this allows students to get closer to the stage, start to understand that, not unlike dance, writing is performed. But to work closely with a student in a one-on-one relationship over a long period of time is to bring them into the wings, show them the rips in the dresses, the stains that have been set.

What I seek in writing is to make my lines so lyrical that they appear to defy the gravity of language. Lines of prose that can sing do not arise from magic but from work. In that way, successful mentoring in the creative arts necessitates a mentor's willingness to take the student into the wings and show them the sweat required for flight.

But the student cannot remain in the wings. They eventually take the stage. And I am curious to know what happened when you embarked on your own writing projects. What difficulties did you encounter and how did you work through them?

My best, Jennifer

Letter 4: From Morgan Graham to Jennifer Sinor

Dear Jennifer,

After your manuscripts arrived at the publisher, you sat me down in your office and told me I needed to start my own project. I probably blinked twice, uncertain what you meant. For the past two years, I had helped faculty with their research, but I had no idea what it meant to start my own. I felt uncomfortable with the prospect of asking my own question and seeking my own answer because, honestly, I didn't know what that looked like. Despite the experience I gained with your manuscripts, I had never watched a project from start to finish, never seen what motivates the questions that prompt the projects. I may have evaded, agreed, then left your office with no intention of doing anything about it. I may have even asked, "Are you *sure* there's nothing else you need me to do for *you*?"

We met a few times over the next month or so; I threw out a few ideas, but they were sloppy, and we both knew it. That said, the brainstorming we did together—me throwing out ideas, you suggesting improvements—was essential. I still did not know what a productive question looked like, still struggled to conceptualize "humanities research" in concrete terms, and I marvel now how you knew where to give me support and where to require me to work. Ultimately, the start of every one of my projects looked like this—painstaking mental struggle to generate ideas and questions to build on. Because you guided me through these initial hard parts, I no longer expect inspiration to come like a gift—good ideas require work, effort, fine-tuning, and revision before the writing has even begun. Thank you for taking me backstage to understand that all writers must struggle.

The edges of this memory escape me now. But on one visit to my grandparents' house, my grandpa pulled a shoebox full of letters down from the shelf in his office. His older brother—my great-uncle Bruce—wrote home regularly while serving in the Navy during the Second World War, until he was killed by gunshot in early 1945. I was twenty-one when my grandpa first showed me Bruce's letters. Bruce was twenty-one writing letter after letter home to his family, struggling to understand love, relationships, education, and the future he wanted for himself. Writing an epistolary essay, I think, was your suggestion, but the experience reading letters from a man who died too young was mine. I began to pore over my grandpa's transcripts of Bruce's correspondence, and with your help, I embarked on a project to write my own letters back to him.

To be honest, I don't remember well the particulars of this project, only that I was struggling with love and relationships of my own at the time. I found a friend in Bruce's writing, watching as he raised the exact same questions I found myself asking, again, and again, and again. The writing came easy then—I remember my hands trying to keep up with my mind as I wrote pages and pages back to Bruce. In some ways, the words came out too fast, and my writing assumed a looseness, a wildness—defying grammar—but that jumble also felt organic and somehow true to me. I hardly knew what to make of what I was creating, but I wrote from my heart, and it felt wonderful to write something so raw.

I struggled, once the words were on the page, to make sense of what I had created. This is where you entered. You took a step back from my draft, somehow saw the heart of the writing, and gave suggestions for revision to move the essay closer to that goal. You would write comments over my drafts with loopy pencil, then leave an endnote on the back of the last page. Eventually, the drafts began to come back cleaner, and I felt satisfied with the work I had created—proud, even. It was the most organic, real, and raw thing I had ever made, springing from questions that mattered deeply to me: Why is love fluid and transient? Will I ever be able to hold love in a way that lasts? How do I find

and build relationships when I feel isolated in my own experience? Writing gave me space to approach those questions from many angles and begin to make sense of my answers.

At your suggestion, I did consider publication—a process more familiar after working on your manuscripts—and my essay found a home in USU’s Undergraduate Literary Journal, *Sink Hollow*. I remember how I felt the day I received an acceptance email from *Sink Hollow*: thrilled that they wanted my work, and confident that I could write something that mattered so much to me, that I was so proud of, again. Guided by a question, I had used primary sources to produce a product—I had done research—and I wanted to do it again. I signed up for your Advanced Creative Nonfiction class the following semester.

Sincerely, Morgan

P.S. I remember how, before I started working on my essay, you taught me about primary source work. You sent me home with a copy of your first book, *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray’s Diary*, and asked me to read it before I began to study Bruce’s letters. I used sticky tabs to mark the pages that struck me most, watched you as a young academic handling, thinking, and writing about primary sources. I learned the importance of holding a document—to notice the way the handwriting slips down across the paper, the white space and gaps—and to appreciate the ordinariness of a text. Thank you for letting me borrow that book.

Letter 5: From Jennifer Sinor to Morgan Graham

Dear Morgan,

I was thinking about you as I ran this morning. It was dark outside, hours before daylight, and warm for November in northern Utah. When I left the house, I turned toward the main street and saw the most beautiful full moon setting through the limbs of a bare tree. It hung heavy and low, just skimming the Wellsville mountains, and it glowed an orange that I associate with the underside of cowrie shells, rich and illumined. Against the black sky, that hovering moon accompanied me most of my run, finally setting behind the mountains just when I returned home.

You accompanied me as well. I thought of you in Minneapolis and the life you are leading now, how it must feel good to be setting off in new directions while grieving for what is left behind. It’s a feeling I know well. I also thought about my letter to you and what it might say—what bend the conversation could take, what thoughts I had to offer. For all I know, you could have been thinking about our project at the exact same time—both of us joined by this essay that is coming into being. I remember in graduate school reading the philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958) and her belief that truly public spaces, socially just public spaces, could only rise around a common project. When Arendt discusses the formation of community and the potential for action, she furnishes her reader with the image of the table, assuring that community will “spring up” when people gather around a common project. In her words, “a world of things [will exist] between those who have it in common as a table is located between those who sit around it” (p. 52). I have long thought of my teaching this way—that in a class we gather around these tables. Sometimes the tables are provided by other authors and sometimes by student authors; it is the work, though, that joins us.

Here you and I find ourselves sitting around this particular table, an essay on mentoring in the creative arts that takes as its center the certainty of failure. For there is no way that one artist can ever fully enter another artist’s inner vision and join with them entirely. That, of course, is true of all experience. Had you been running with me this morning we would have seen two different moons. My guess is that, having not grown up in Hawaii, your orange would not have been compared to a

cowrie shell but maybe to an aspen in the fall. But because the moon is external—made manifest in the world—you and I could have had a conversation about the exact shade of orange. The moon would have been the table. When you were writing about Bruce, then later about your relationship with your husband and with your parents, when you were creating art out of your truth, I had to try and see the shades as you saw them. I had to find your table and join you there. That is what makes mentoring in the creative arts so difficult. The student chooses the table, and the mentor must find it. The mentor can describe what makes a solid table, the kind of wood to choose, suggest the type of screws, demonstrate what is gained by hand sanding and what is lost, but the table is the student's. It is common in that the mentor is invited to sit down, but the mentor does not understand, on a deeply intuitive level, that this table must be made of oak. The student knows it. The mentor pushes the student to say why only oak will do, but the mentor cannot require walnut. Then the mentor would be building her own table.

The research aspect of some literary nonfiction can, I think, help to externalize what is usually only internal. Unlike fiction, poetry, and memoir, research-based literary nonfiction provides us something to gather around that exists in the world: research. That research may take the form of primary source materials, or documented site visits, or interviews, or secondary sources. Right now, I have students in my advanced nonfiction class researching everything from hip replacement surgery to the life of Django Reinhardt. The mantra for that class, as you well know having taken it, is to follow the research until it yields the story. Writers must unearth the characters, scenes, and tension that turn facts into art. The plank created by the research element of research-based narrative nonfiction only provides a starting point, a place of common ground, where the student and I can gather around the already externalized. Unlike, say, memoir, where I am only privy to what the student can say about their past, research-based work has one foot set in the outside world. The student ultimately tethers the external to the internal, but we both begin outside.

I am not suggesting that other mentoring does not work this way or that even mentoring in fiction or poetry cannot happen this way. All I am saying is that, in my experience, the research aspect of research-based literary nonfiction provides a mentor and a student a useful starting point, a leaf in the table. I have seen it work too often with students to think otherwise. Once you finished thinking about Bruce's letters you turned your attention to the even less familiar: Neruda. And you set off, by yourself, to figure out what you wanted to say.

The tension found in mentoring in the creative arts—between the internal need of the artist and the ability to externalize that vision for others—is not a tension that needs to be solved. It parallels the struggle all artists undertake, and it is what ultimately makes art so valuable. The mentoring relationship just makes the negotiation between internal and external visible. Nothing delights me more than when a student pushes back against me when we are talking about their work. In their resistance, I see their awareness of their inner need. I welcome that conflict because I know it means the terrain has become sacred and the student is writing about something they will defend.

This morning when I was running, I thought about you, Morgan, and this letter, and how a few strong stars still penetrate past the glow of the moon, but these were not my only thoughts. Just a mile into my run, in the pitch black, I came upon a house where a man was yelling in his driveway at what appeared to be his wife and children. He was throwing clothes and bags and boxes from the back of a pick-up truck onto the lawn. The anger vibrated off his body and set the air aflame. "Get out," he yelled. "Get out! You can't do anything." Within minutes, his truck passed me driving in the opposite direction, the man now alone in the cab. And here is the thing: the moon was offering a window into a world made only of orange light, while a man tore his family apart with words. Both of these happened at the same time. It is the world we live in, one filled with contradiction, tensions, suffering

and grace. I am not troubled by the tensions found in teaching or mentoring or the making of art. I trust difficulty. It is real.

I am interested in hearing about the difficulties you faced when you headed to South America alone and then, more keenly, when you returned home and worked to write an essay about—really—the impossibility of translating anything at all.

Take care, Jennifer

Letter 6: From Morgan Graham to Jennifer Sinor

Dear Jennifer,

I decided to apply for the grant to South America before I knew exactly the form my research would take. All I knew is that I hoped to spend the summer writing with you, and I wanted to explore all my research interests together in one final project before I graduated. Up until that moment, I had considered my parents' failing marriage in almost every essay I had written for you, but I had never written about them directly. They hovered, like ghosts. I think I feared writing about that pain, how much it hurt to watch something I'd always believed to be stable crumble before my eyes. The dissolution had been a long time coming. When I returned home from a year and a half in Chile, that Christmas before I first took your class, my dad sat me down and told me that for him, the marriage was over. That he was miserable. As the oldest child, I could not reconcile my responsibility to my family and the anger I felt at my parents for letting me down. In those early essays I wrote for you, essays about ordinary losses, I think I was trying to write about this collapse. By the time I began the Neruda project, Landon, my now-husband, and I found ourselves discussing marriage as the next step in our relationship. I was terrified that if my parents couldn't make a marriage work, neither could I.

I spent many afternoons in your office, confiding in you through tears about my parents' struggles and my fears and hesitations about my own relationship. I know that in those moments, you saw a need in me that I couldn't even find words for. When we turned our attention to the grant application and the question I might be asking, I think we both knew what I had to consider on the page. Neruda's "Poema XX" had been my favorite love poem ever since I learned Spanish in Chile, but I had never found a satisfactory translation in English. You showed me how translation could serve as a metaphor for my inability to understand my parents—the distance between languages and between people. We decided that I would weave together site visits and archival work in Chile, with an attempt to translate a specific Neruda poem, and the dissolution of my parents' relationship. An outsider to all three, I wanted to think about what I could carry across those gaps. For the grant, I requested travel funding to Chile to visit the Neruda Foundation and his three homes. I would return home and write a translation of "Poema XX" with increased insight into poet and place. I received the grant.

I spent a week in Chile where I carried my notebook everywhere like you taught me, recording impressions, quotes from books, useful sources, feelings. My eyes devoured the vibrant trinkets at each of Neruda's houses, the slippery slope of his handwriting, the waves crashing on the shore at Isla Negra. I took photographs of everything, smelled the salty water, followed the audio tours in Spanish. I stood in Neruda's kitchens and bedrooms, rooms I had written into existence over and over in previous essays, fraught with memories of my parents and concerns for my future. I held Neruda's prized copy of *Leaves of Grass*, his copy of *Twenty Love Poems* illustrated by Picasso, and his love letters. The original manuscript of "Poema XX" had been lost, but I watched Neruda's handwritten version from decades later blaze on the computer screen off a tiny blue flash drive. I walked the stairs he tread, through the rooms he decorated; I cradled his books.

I had already moved to Minnesota when my copy of *The Evansville Review* came in the mail. I gingerly turned the pages, found myself face to face with words I knew by memory, back to the beginning, manuscripts across the table, thumbing through letters, soft winter sun through bus window in Chile. The day I sent out the tender thing I'd written, you showed me your publication notebook, filled with lists of journals marked with "A" for accepted, and "R" for rejected. Mostly "R"s—because writers can always revise, and rejection is a large part of the path. I got mostly "R"s too, and we celebrated the "A."

Yesterday I spoke with a student on the phone—remember how I told you I'm working as an AmeriCorps volunteer this year? My student was struggling to write a college application essay a few days before the deadline. I noticed her essay wasn't saying what she wanted it to, so I offered suggestions for improvement. But my student pushed back, defending the choices she had made. My initial instinct was to dig in my heels. Remembering your letter, though, I chose instead to ask questions. I smiled as I caught a glimpse of something deep within her that needed to be said. Even as you and I work on this project together, you continue to teach me how to write and how to teach.

In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke (2012) writes that "in the deepest and most important things, we are unutterably alone, and for one person to be able to advise, let alone help, another, a great deal must come about, a great deal must come right, a whole constellation of things must concur for it to be possible at all" (p. 9). On our early morning run, I would have seen a moon the color of aspen trees in the fall. I would have told you how aspens are my favorite mountain tree—how in Minnesota now, I pull my coat tight around me on frosty winter mornings and miss the Wellsville mountains rising up to brush the sky. And I know you would have told me that you know how it feels to grieve a place where you felt safe, to move across the country, to struggle to become someone new. And the "constellation of things" would come right, and I would make art from my loss. I want to be a mentor who helps my students find the words, the way you did—and continue to do—for me.

All my best, Morgan

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