

The Writers' Studio

BEN MILLER

Karen Sternberg's Coup

ON THE THIRD FLOOR of Byerly Hall, standing eye-to-eye with tiers of chestnut-tree leaves, I often thought of how certain good deeds, like tiny seeds, can grow in significance as decades pass and circumstances are better understood thanks to images that refuse and refuse to fade. One was the face of Karen Sternberg, the blue-eyed, red-haired member of Writers' Studio, a club of adults I attended on Thursday nights in 1981, since I was that kind of teenager, no other.

Karen's fair, delicate features, like characters on typesetting blocks, were at times very still and at other times not, as worry broke through and nervousness rearranged expressions. She was a devout Catholic and the group's most gothic novelist. Each week, following the deluge of rhymes and plot gyrations, she bought me a mountain of the world's crispiest onion rings. I didn't think anyone could do anything nicer until she figured out how, and turned repeatedly to relate the news of her coup in the midst of a meeting at the folding table that made our circle rectangular. It stood on fidgety legs in the center of a basketball court in the rented gym of a decommissioned school, right off busy Locust Street.

Her bright red lipstick parted once, twice, thrice, but there was just no interrupting the hup 2 3 4 hup 2 3 4 march of a new story that Gordon, hair parted to the right, had crafted for *Boys' Life*. The same story as usual. The G-rated magazine only published one kind.

The rope bridge dangled ahead, pitching in the high wind. Eagle Scout Ernie Simms warned of quicksand. "Watch where you step boys! We're in a tight fix!" Etc.

I noted Avalon noting Karen's commotion. Avalon was Karen's cousin. Avalon's eyes, each one centered in a turquoise gyre of make-up,

peered over the top of her latest clipboard petition taking Powers That Be to task for dirty real-estate dealings. Karen no longer taught first grade. The previous year she had invited me to her classroom to read my fables, as I called them: “The Tiger in the Rose Garden” and “The Sand Piano” and “At Night the Ballerina Dances.” The floor gleamed as if coated with ice, not wax. Karen’s trembling hand made a ruler tremble, which maybe was why she was fired or retired, or quit. Forty-five? Fifty? She worked at Woolworth’s now. The drastic alteration of her status—professional pantsuit to blue smock—had not kept her from continuing to treat me to onion rings at Riefe’s after meetings. That was reassuring.

Scout Tom grabbed a shovel, crying to Scout Billy: “Forget the spyglass! It doesn’t mean diddly-squat when you’re dealing with QUICKSAND!” Etc.

All members, save for President David R. Collins and Lucille Eye, ignored the sentences Gordon’s mouth launched, eyebrows wiggling like eels. President Dave’s head sank, as if the sand shoveled by Scout Tom were filling his skull. Gene Beenk, the new member, from DeWitt, Iowa, meditated on glyphs of floor skid marks. Norm slept. Howard followed the passing of minutes on his chronometer.

Lucille squinted at Gordon laboring below the line of caged gymnasium windows. NoDoz was her heroin, and I suspected she was on it again so she would never tire of being courteous. Her spec-magnified eyes were grayish. Pale sliver of nose. Set, bloodless mouth and the jutting dot of the chin jibing with the tin buttons, burnished gold, on a dime-store dress. Observation of her curls was the only way to get a clue as to her opinion. If she liked a story ringlets appeared a little curlier, if she less liked a story the ringlets appeared less springy. Quicksand apparently was her thing.

Tom and Ernie were the sole hikers who had studied maps close enough to identify the deathtraps. But the owl in the tree also knew. WHOOO. WHOOO. Etc.

“Thank you, Gordon. Lucille? Do you have anything for us tonight?”

“Nothing to present at this time, thank you, Mr. Collins.”

Her politeness had a nice pugnaciousness to it: Harry Truman crossed with Miss Manners. Dave looked right, Dave looked left.

“Roy!?” he exclaimed.

Big Roy in the leather vest woke up chin by chin. He shoved his bottom teeth back in. Then read another story about gangbangers that had plenty of pulp but no juice.

The chain fight started in the parking lot at midnight when. . .

Karen, pinching a pencil, tried writing me a note. She crossed out words.

She lived with her short father in a small white house across the Mississippi River in Illinois, and often showed up at meetings with the frenzied look of one who had seen an abomination still lurking too close for comfort. Our faces were alike in that way. I kept my hair buzzed to avoid having to wash it in a bathroom with its one shit-streaked towel, one toothbrush chewed to the nub, black toilet bowl. Karen’s red hair was assiduously combed, every strand stood out, a mane of antennas. Shaky hands she mostly kept in her lap, draped over the patent-leather purse. Her high-pitched voice made words sound too urgent. For this reason she rarely commented on material other members presented and never read more than a few pages of her novel-in-progress about the mansion where a pharmacist named Eldon lived, throwing Tupperware parties that some of the female guests did not ever leave, hostages addicted to his pills served on teak trays and, eventually, interred in the backyard.

She started a new note, lips pulling back against teeth. . .and finished this one. She tore the page off the pad and handed it to me.

DO YOU WANT TO TAKE A CREATIVE WRITING COURSE
AT MARYCREST COLLEGE? SISTER ANNETTE SAYS IT
MIGHT BE POSSIBLE.

I reread the note. I still did not understand the last word. Possible?
How?

She explained after the meeting at nearby Reife's family restaurant, where club members were greeted by the thin owner (arm still in a beige sling: serious grease accident) before retreating to the back to huddle in brown booths around pitchers of ice water and baskets of moist buttered hunks of brown-sugar-coated Bishop's Bread.

"I told Sister Annette about you."

"You did?"

"You and your writing. How you won the Mississippi Valley Poetry Contest grand prize when you were fifteen."

The entire seventy-five-dollar prize spent on the wrong Christmas presents for family members.

"But I can't write poetry anymore."

"I told her about your wonderful stories too. She's interested in it all. She says you can take her class for free—and earn four hours of college credit—if you successfully interview with her at Marycrest. What do you think?"

No one knew better than myself that higher education did not guarantee a higher, or more suitable, existence. My mother and my father owned law degrees in addition to the dump we lived in. But college credits were another thing to grab at, if there, and I assured Karen, yes, I'd answer Sister Annette's questions. I'd really like to meet the nun.

"She's battling an illness," Karen added softly.

"What is it?"

"Liver cancer."

Dressing for Success

Before the interview I picked a sampling of recent prose to bring, as I was asked to do. I wasn't proud of these pages, but I did not despise their nebulosity. The texts were like me: distorted by unmentionable events and the wish to overcome them.

I washed a wrinkled button-up as clothes were washed in our home. I sprinkled water on a dirty striped shirt, threw it in the dryer, waited in the unfinished basement, trying not to breathe. Down there

my father's unpublished novels from his 1950s literary fling were filed, along with cat shit atop the shit of the pigeons that had once cooed in the corner coop and fluttered in and out of a broken basement window. My younger brother thought he could make money to buy weed selling the birds. He didn't sell one. When the dryer stopped spinning I removed and slipped on a warm, wrinkle-free, dirty shirt, tucking tails into my best pair of pants. They were tan. That's why I thought they were the best.

I did not want to arrive "tousled"—to use a Lucille Eye verb—by a run or walk across the city, so I next had to do what I had been trying not to do since age fourteen: get into a distressed, and distressing, Bonneville sedan with my mother and Moby Purse.

"Off to see Sister Annette!" the driver surreally piped as I stepped off the cracked alley driveway and slammed the door shut once, twice, it catching then.

I read the west-side address to her red eyes, oily hair, unwashed dress. I inhaled Philip Morris Commander cigarette fumes left behind by father, man of smog.

"Is Sister Annette Irish?"

"She has liver cancer."

"She'll be yellow then!"

She said it like it was a good thing. It was a different thing. To her any different thing was a good thing. It made her feel less like a freak? It made her feel less that way.

She stomped the accelerator. The dashboard true-crime library—*In Cold Blood, Where Are the Children?, Helter Skelter, The Onion Field*—shifted as the coughing engine and dented bumpers careened backward into the alley, then plunged down it.

Marycrest College stood on a river bluff on the newer west side of town: more bungalows, fewer trees, more white people, fewer minorities. Same chains. A&W, Dairy Queen. A Turner Hall left over from the days when this was the most German part of the city and the immigrants needed a place to do gymnastics and drink. The campus's open acres welcomed as surrounding stuffy neighborhoods did not. Benches to sit on.

She pulled into the lot I pointed out.

“Off to see yellow Sister Annette!”

That was low. Her in Lenny Bruce mode, making the forbidden forays always surprising while also being something I had been used to since the bitter “momologues” on morning walks to elementary school, during which she tried to teach me that the best response to the injustices of America was mocking other people.

Envelope of samples tucked under one arm, I told her not to wait, I’d walk home, “No problem!” I slammed the car door to make it stick. Off rumbled the stink of exhaust and anguish.

I blinked. The bright light was like falling snow.

I wondered if Sister Annette would smell the leaded gasoline on me. It leaked into the fucking car through rusted-out spots. As I walked, I picked at the shirt to freshen the stickiest swatches of fabric. I tugged some of the shirt out of the tan pants to create an air pocket.

Tea with Sister Annette

I recall a basement apartment in a brick building in a row of brick buildings, classrooms above the living space, although the weight of the recollection could be causing those rooms to sink into the earth. The bell I rang. The door opened.

“Hello,” said Sister Annette.

She was not wearing a habit. She was wearing clothes like anyone else.

“Hi,” I said.

“Come right in.”

I came right in, observing as much as I could without moving my head too much and appearing rude. Rocking chair. Kitchenette. Bookshelves. Collaborations of blinds created diagonals of sun and exact patterns on tabletops. Shade around the light, as if an invisible tree cooled corners. Sister Annette’s abode was warm like a holiday, smelling of toast. Shadows looked as delicious as fruitcake slabs in a market’s damaged-goods cart in January. (Fruitcake was too dense to be truly damaged—it could not be outdated either—reliable

sustenance.) The large phone with its twirling cord. The King James Bible with the plastic cover lying on a white cloth on a special shelf. I ignored the color of her cancer.

“Sit down.”

At a far end of the apartment was the place where she had decided we should talk. Two chairs without a table in between. I sat, samples across my lap.

“Would you like tea?”

“Sure.”

“Lemon? Sugar?”

“Sure.”

The pot must have been already made. She came back with the cups quickly. Nothing—except a subtle, consistent sway—would have told you she was sick.

I thanked Sister. She sipped and for a few moments silently examined me.

“So many students want to go into business. At Marycrest we need more creative writers. There is a program that allows talented high school students to take college classes for full credit, and for free. You are from a big family?”

I cited the too-large number: eight.

I decided not to reveal that early on my family had attended services at Sacred Heart Cathedral. Bishop Gerald O’Keefe. Monsignor Menke. We arrived late, depositing our noise in a rear pew. Father—hissing “Cut out that racket!”—thought he was a Roman Catholic. He forced us. For a year his spouse—to get back at him and the Pope—taught Sunday school by giggling and afterward, in a community room, gobbled free powdered-sugar doughnuts and flirted with another lonesome teacher, alto Anita in parachute pants, until Anita made a pass at her and got ridiculed too. Our family’s Sunday ritual now consisted of father honking at the stone steeple, as if that replaced devotion, and speeding on down the hill to Walgreen’s for cartons of cigarettes and the Chicago newspapers.

“Karen tells me you’ve been attending Writers’ Studio for—how long?”

“Almost three years.”

“And you were recently named Scholar of the Week by the *Quad-City Times*.”

For years there had only been a Prep of the Week article featuring an athlete, but now, for dull reasons of automatic parity, there also had to be recognition for clumsy students who could not make a basket, throw a football. A reporter called Central High, asked me questions. First author photo at the newspaper office downtown. I wore my best short-sleeved shirt—a sedate polo I had picked for fabric quality at a tag sale—and was told to clutch a pen, lean over a notebook. Competition for the honor was very weak.

“Tell me about the poetry you’ve been writing recently.”

“I started out writing poetry, but I don’t write it anymore. I can’t.”

She chuckled. “It’s hard to write poetry. Most teenagers don’t know how hard. Your knowing it is hard already tells me you know more about writing than most.”

I shrugged. Absurd it was, a beginning writer beginning by stopping, but true. I sipped the disappointing tea. Plain old Lipton it tasted like. Not any special nun tea.

“Tell me about what you write now.”

“Well, I . . .”

I was apologetic. I was ashamed. And I managed hopefulness too.

What I TRIED to say: I composed fables (be they first-grade silly or third-grade Kafkaesque) to spite my real-life American nightmare, to undermine its cynical chaos with placid harmonies or a broader, more fascinating, confusion, and this failure, this galling and infuriating and altogether sickening artistic lack, and the discomfort it caused, had to be acceptable if I was to return to Writers’ Studio to receive gifts of fellowship awaiting there weekly, so I made it be acceptable: a writing of waiting for incoherence to develop in time’s dark room into portraits and landscapes of useful sharpness—a biography, an identity.

“Really?” she said in response to my bleating, and tilted her head slightly.

I heard surprise. Interest too? Did I hear that?

“What was the most difficult thing for you about poetry?”

What I TRIED to say: I had set too much loose too soon. Truth I couldn't keep up with: *Moby Dick drowned today. / Romeo and Juliet got divorced*. Truth of a house full of wonderful literature but nothing else wonderful: roaches crawling over covers of Signet classic editions, a violent torque between ideals and deprivation that left all realities in tatters. After a prize-winning moment of sterling-silver clarity all that was left was wreckage I could not see through. Truth that had given me *writer's shock*. That's the lostness it felt like. No block. Shock at how simultaneously bleak and rich the messages were. Shafts of midday sunlight sneaking around a shade, rooting like a row of incandescent daffodils illuminating the bugs and the cats and discarded newspaper sections.

“I hope you brought samples of your recent work.”

The samples were in my hands. I didn't recall picking them up. The envelope was wet with sweat. It had been twisted to and fro. I smoothed it. I passed the package on.

“Could you make an afternoon class in the middle of the week?”

“I have study hall late in the day. It's easy to get excused from.”

“Very interesting discussion. I'm looking forward to reading your prose.”

Handing her that envelope made pages within somehow not just writing anymore but prose. She might, Sister Annette, show me a better way.

“I'll let Karen know where things stand in a few days.”

She rose. I rose. She walked to the door slower than she had walked earlier. She had large eyes. That aquiline face I could still see after the door closed in front of it: skin simultaneously a hue and a transparency like cellophane.

Hard part over, I kept reminding myself on the five-mile hike home. Prim pastel bungalow neighborhoods grew less prim toward the center of the city. Davenport had no ghetto. It had slumlords that allowed front porches to dissolve into ruin between Brady Street and Jersey Ridge Road. In this area, ages ago, I had attended Mrs. Worden's

preschool for a second year when the first year didn't turn out too well. I made no friends, and worse—stood out for other reasons. I was instructed by my prankster parent to tell Mrs. Worden I could not eat hot dogs with pork in them, and that made the Presbyterian matron believe I was Jewish. The beef hot dogs became a joke among the other students. The second year, I recalled as I hiked on, things got worse. I refused to fight for one of the Tonka trucks to push around. I stood and thought, "I don't believe in war." I said it out loud too. War was real. War was being taken each year to watch fresh flowers being dropped from a helicopter on fresh graves of Vietnam casualties at Arsenal Island Cemetery. War meant I was obliged to bury my plastic toy soldiers when I got home from the outing.

Further down Kirkwood Boulevard—one of the few brick streets left from the 1800s—I thought of high-school classmates that lived in the slumlord housing sagging on side streets. Tony O. who snuck into the band room to play stride-piano solos reminding me of Art Tatum's playing on the cassette I got at Target for 99 cents on the day after Christmas. After hearing Tony O., I introduced myself, and we became friends.

James, he showed me a charcoal portrait of a black woman cradling her infant, and its deep mood—realistic and romantic—made us allies too. I didn't go to their houses though, nor did they visit mine. Too fraught.

Karen rushed into the next Writers' Studio meeting with good news. Sister Annette had invited me to join her workshop! I'd earn four free hours of credit. The paperwork was being sent to Central High administration for "the rubber stamp."

Mr. Buis's Bottom Line

Central High with a student body of more than fifteen hundred. The mascot, the Blue Devil, sported foam-rubber horns. The main building's stained stone overlooked downtown's meager skyline abutting Mark Twain's river. In the brick gym, I had seen the basketball

player Vic Couch slip while dribbling, fall to his knees under the hoop, and get off a successful shot through a forest of arms overhead. In there I had passed a physical exam by a school doctor who seemed not to care about my limp, which was diagnosed as a stress fracture a few weeks later. The doctor's name was Congden. He was the doctor for the state-champion football team.

In the main building I had been inducted into the Talented and Gifted program because of my writing and been deleted from the Talented and Gifted program when at the first meeting I expressed dismay with faculty leader Flippet's notion that we should spend an hour cutting pumpkins out of orange construction paper to decorate halls. Out loud I wondered: "If that's all you think we're fit to do, maybe we're not gifted?" He didn't chase me out of the cafeteria. He quietly made a note not to invite me back.

As if to prove the point, I flunked out of Latin and Geometry that first semester. The next semester (by then known for exotic thrift-store threads, and appreciated by some for my entertainment value) I donned pink cardboard rabbit ears of my own creation and leapt around the cafeteria giving out Easter candy to laughing classmates. In the coves of halls, just about every day, I fell for a Penelope I'd never talk to—infatuated with an easy laugh, a razor wit, or a cool way of wearing school hours. There was a student named Andrea who wore long dresses and had waist-length blond hair and rode a bike with a basket on it. I imagined us running away to France together. I dismissed the impediment of the ocean.

I had another philosophical tantrum when the English teacher Mrs. Burstedda insisted on showing films of literary works like "Bartleby the Scrivener" rather than assigning reading. I quit paying attention and almost failed. On the plus side, I brought a crimson copy of D. H. Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers* to the class called Speed Reading and earned an A just by turning forty pages an hour. The teacher knitted while the Blue Devil linebackers and I gave our wrists another kind of hard workout. One teacher, Miss Kipling, was stellar—in my view—because her exercise routine involved arriving at school an hour before classes started and roller-skating in a wool skirt

through the gloomy halls lined with wooden lockers. Edgar Allen Poe was her specialty, and we hit it off.

I was serious? A terminal joker? Above average? Way, way below average?

An educator might have differing opinions about this daily. I didn't help anyone out much when it came to developing solid conclusions. Disgusted by what I saw at Central, I ran for student representative to the school board. I won. No one else wanted to run. Then I went to school board meetings, got disgusted about what I witnessed there. The push to close Tyler School, especially. Davenport's most famous artist, jazz cornetist Bix Beiderbecke, had attended Tyler. Dr. Sinning, the board president, gave me rides. Nice Dickens touch, that Sinning name.

I felt always in trouble at Central but always nicely aloof from punishment. How could they reach me where I was? I was at a place that year of actually reading Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* and, like some others in the family (including my mother), peeing in the side yard to avoid a trip to the bathroom shared with seven others. I shook it below the lit kitchen window on the terrace above, where courtly Mr. Hickey sat in a sweater vest in front of his pill counter, waiting to serve any visitor a 7-Up. We lived like animals. We were better than that, and we were not, I guess. I wrote fabulist fiction at my desk while teachers strutted. When I did not know what to write next, I wrote anyway. I had to keep going, had to. In margins I jotted: *Who knows?*

When word arrived that Assistant Principle Buis *must* see me in his office, I walked. I did not hop. Smiling, I sauntered down the locker-lined hall, conjecturing there would be plenty of pride over my coup of free college credit. He might even call Vahl, faculty advisor to reporters for the school newspaper *The Blackhawk*. Propose an article.

"Mr. Miller!" boomed the tall bureaucrat in the back office of the gray suite.

Tom was his first name. He waved me in. I went in, still grinning, thick plastic eye-frames and rummage-sale clothes, yes, but each item carefully picked out of a church basement table heap for its vivid color

or esoteric pattern. I occupied a metal chair that did not swivel. His chair with the cushion swiveled, but he settled into it with such game authority that it did not move a centimeter, cemented in place by the weight contained in a plain, perfect, suit. His head was bald and oval. The sculptural brow. A pinkish cardiac face of jowls and a network of veins stretching across the heap of the nose. His eyes appeared half-closed when fully open, as now, staring down at a folder on the desk's pea-green blotter.

"What's this here? From Marycrest College?"

"You haven't read it?"

"The thing is: I'm a numbers man."

They were either that or that. And just like that, as if he had heard the silent swipe at his pomposity, his head lifted and forearms too. Elbows still planted on the blotter, ten plump fingers formed a basket that rocked to and fro under the double chin.

"You have a grade point average of 1.8."

Perhaps the rarest 1.8 in the United States of Dale Carnegie and Lou Reed. I had earned the 1.8 by being present: never once had I cut a class, valuing the writing time in a place cleaner than my house.

"I see you even flunked out of Driver's Education."

I could explain. I had had only one driving experience prior, in Oakdale Cemetery after dark, half-lane gravel road, my supposed instructor, the vampire with the bowl cut, squealing "Turn!" twice at every turn, "Slower!" then "Faster!" and otherwise dueling with me madly. After the dusty ten-minute drive I had less of an idea which pedal was which. But I didn't want to bring her into this. Not mother. Bad luck.

"Sister Annette—she—she's seen my writing," was the defense I produced.

"You need my approval to leave school before the final bell at 3:30."

Blood promenaded across his pressure-flayed face. Within a year he would have a heart operation, and I would walk over to his ranch house and stare at the pulled curtains and wonder what the surgeon found in his chest. Charcoal maybe. Blackboard erasers.

"I'm concerned that this—ah—college class will interrupt your learning."

"Interrupt it?"

"Learning is vital here at Central. Education comes first."

"Education?"

"Paramount."

"Then why—?"

"Time and place for everything. You appear to have enough trouble passing the classes you are already taking. Twice you have flunked out of Geometry."

"My last period is a study hall. I wouldn't be missing any classes."

"But, Benjamin, you would be missing a fine opportunity to *study*."

My nervous gaze trailed over office buttons, dials, graphs, charts, cabinets.

"Which means, I'm afraid, it would be irresponsible of me to sign these papers and let you run off unprepared to an institution where you'd fail, giving Central a bad name, hurting the chances of other students who might apply there in the future."

"You are not going to let me take a free class for college credit?"

"Not at this time," he practically crooned.

I remained seated. He said it all again to assure me I had heard him correctly.

My left knee did the jitterbug. How is it you can distrust an adversary completely, yet for all he is distrusted, suspect the man is not distrusted enough? Because a Buis deserved more distrust than any one human being could summon. He deserved the distrust of many thousands, maybe millions, maybe tens of millions, of young people. But even so I knew I had messed up too. Big time.

At that moment in the building were a few who might have helped. Betty Christian, the tennis-playing English teacher who had awarded my story "Where is the Balloon Man?" first prize in the *Devil's Diary* literary journal contest. And another English teacher, Dick Stahl, who often presented his formal poetry at Writers' Studio. Either might testify to my industriousness, my possibilities, but it hadn't occurred to

me to ask for their help in this matter because—because I had Sister Annette on my side, and if that was not enough, well. . .how could that not be enough?

“I’m sorry. I realize you are disappointed but that’s the way it is.”

He nodded in agreement with his sane, strong judgment.

“Anything else would send the wrong message. Understand?”

He not only considered it his task to stop me from taking the class at Marycrest College but also felt it was his job to convince me he was correct in nixing the generous offer. And for all he knew this was the only opportunity I would ever have to attend college! He had good reason to think it, given my GPA and the economic situation I wore head-to-toe: taped eye frames, frayed sleeves, the repurposed bowling shoes.

“We can’t bend the rules. You’ll thank me some day.”

He was practically demanding I applaud my own demise. Arms rising again, a maestro at orchestrating *yessir, right you are sir*, self-humiliation. Jacket sleeves pulling back, cuffs, accurate watch. Male bulk almost seeming to bubble under its starched cotton seal.

My sins were what? I had failed to take incompetents like Burstedda seriously, failed to covet a meaningless “gifted and talented” title.

“It’s for the best,” he contended.

He was doing a different thing than Mrs. Toher, my counselor, had done weeks earlier. “Forget about college and go to vocational school,” she advised. That was her opinion given my GPA, and just an opinion. She wasn’t snatching away anything I had. Buis was. He was doing an aberrant, irrational, possibly evil thing as if it were an absolutely normal thing to do, and it would work perfectly if I was who he thought I was.

“You’ll see. You’ll see.”

One for me. The other for him. But few functionaries were as confident as they acted. I’d seen a strange parent with holes in her shoes rattle a slew of stuffed shirts with non sequiturs and finger pointing.

“You may return to class now.”

How many others had he done this to? How many more students

would he double-talk and bully and try to dispense with like trash just because they were self-taught? Tony O., the musical genius? James, the school's Picasso?

I stood at last. I was shaky but not tearing up as would have happened at fifteen, in the immediate wake of that untreated mental breakdown and battle with anorexia that writing helped me win. If attending Writers' Studio had—despite my artistic debacles—granted me too much nerve in this instance—neither was that nerve vanishing. What I got from Karen Dave Howard Carole and the rest only seemed sturdier in comparison with the weak antics of Buis. From them I had learned how to fail better—to paraphrase Samuel Beckett. I had learned that if you do not discard your hopes in the dumpster, your hopes are not in the dumpster, period. At Thursday night meetings I discovered I needed no system's approval to exist.

I walked away from the narrowed eyes of the school leader with his hands on his love handles. I looked ahead at the metal frame of his office door. I had to pass through it first. I looked to another door, beyond secretarial desks, the next frame I must breach, and got there, and stood in the hall looking at the fact that I now had to tell my mother the bad news, listen to her crow, "*I'm right to be paranoid! You should be too! The world is against us!*" and then watch her make not one call in my defense because she was all talk, full of guilt about how she had lived, and eager to confront authorities only when she could catch the male fool off guard. Buis expected an angry parent call—she wouldn't fall into the trap—this new predicament would instantly become all about her comfort and no one else's. Then I had to tell anxious Karen the bad news, and then she had to inform Sister Annette quietly dying in the orderly apartment.

The Human Tree

I winced on seeing Karen enter the next meeting, patent-leather purse with the brass buckles swinging off one arm, but I wanted her there.

"Mr. Buis won't sign the papers."

“Wouldn’t sign? He—it was all set. Sister Annette . . .”

I told her the rest. She took it hard—as in a story any club member might write. She took it harder than me. The pod of tissues led her to her seat. I sat in the folding chair next to her, and, as if they were scabs, picked at pen caps appended to my pocket.

Listening to Roy, the evening’s first reader after the fifteen-second “business” meeting (triple play: President Dave to Secretary Bess to Treasurer John), I again heard I wasn’t the only one who arrived desiring resuscitation via art’s ministrations. Roy’s false teeth sawed a saliva surf to free the corpses of characters from overboard coffins of phrases delivered in the practiced he-man voice of a serial submitter to *Argosy*.

See, when Dandy Fancy, the Hi-Lite Lounge torch singer [coincidentally a red head], got off work at four a.m., seven roaring choppers saddled by cutthroat Birchies waited, planning to follow her home. The rival Oakies watched from bushes, yeah.

“I’d suggest renaming your main character,” said Betty Mowery. She had just placed another of her short suspense novels with the publisher called Avalon. She lived below the hill in Rock Island with her husband, a car mechanic.

Roy agreed right away: Fancy Dandy was better.

Dave called on other blocked members. Jack’s conventional creative constipation. John’s “reading block” that prevented him from uttering a haiku in under one minute. Howard’s “submission block” that allowed for writing but forbade sending manuscripts to national editors. Norm went next. He had a tried-and-true escape from blocks, the Amtrak free pass tucked in his wallet, retiree perk for Rock Island Lines accounting-department personnel. Another chummy choo-choo poem chugged out, the sound effects abetted by sinus difficulties.

Gordon was AWOL. Possibly stuck in quicksand down by the levee. Gene Beenk, our Jonathan Swift with a Buddhist twist, too was absent.

Cozie waved a vanilla brochure sent to her by New York agent Scott Meredith. He had descended on junk-mail wings into the mailboxes of countless spinsters and widowers and middle managers

yearning to express what they had held in for a lifetime. Meredith—who had just made news by landing Norman Mailer a multi-million-dollar contract—offered to read, for an unsight fee, anything, even cat poems. Cozie said she knew it was a “scam,” but confessed the attention “excited me anyway,” and was absolved.

Blanche and cigarette started to recite a sonnet. The lines were intercut with her scowls of disapproval followed by mutters with a tone of *Must my hang-ups rust before I can be free?* In this instance she got to the tenth line before tearing the draft up.

Karen passed on reading the latest pages about the psychotic pharmacist Eldon. Fingers in her lap kept trembling. Thin shoulders scrunched up, bookending her neck. She worried that I had no path to college now. To her artistry was tied to education. She had lent me a few typed pages of an unpublished Faulknerian novel her English Professor Cousin Herb had written. The first item she had showed me in her house at the first holiday party she threw for the club was the diploma from a correspondence course her mother had taken “under auspices” (as Blanche would say) of some New York School of Design. Karen did not just point out the framed diploma. She yanked the frame off the wall and thrust it at me, elaborate letters and numerals—month, day, year—quavering like an extension of her circulatory system, quavering like a web under the weight of prey.

Karen hadn’t said how many calls she had made, or how many letters she had written, in pursuit of free college credits for me. She never would. But I had a feeling it had been a full-out effort, and the rejection in turn was a full-out deflation. It hurt her more than me, I could see again. What was I going to do? She didn’t deserve that.

The first thing I did that night was read another of my so-called fables. One called “The Human Tree.” I tried to read it with what Lucille would have labeled “zest” and Dave “flare.” I hoped that a zesty, flaring reading would show Karen that I was stronger than Buis in a way.

Renine caught the leaf as it blew through his yard. It was a big green leaf. He wondered where it came from. There were no trees in his neighborhood.

Renine held the leaf in front of him as he walked down the sidewalk. The leaf waved in the wind like the flag of a foreign country.

As Renine watched the leaf it began to change colors. Turning into a bright blue, it didn't seem like a leaf at all. It was more like a painting without a canvas; a color in midair.

"Jonil, look what I have," called Renine, "A leaf—a very strange leaf that just turned into my favorite color."

Jonil jumped off his porch swing and ran across his yard.

"A minute ago this leaf was green, and now it is blue," said Renine.

Jonil took the leaf from Renine and it turned bright yellow. "Hey! Yellow is my favorite color," said Jonil. "What a magnificent leaf this is."

"What's up guys?" said Michael who rode up on his bicycle and skidded to a stop right in front of the yellow leaf.

"This leaf is amazing," said Jonil. "Hold it and it will become your favorite color."

"That's nonsense," said Michael. "I don't have a favorite color."

Michael grabbed the leaf and it became transparent.

"What kind of trick is this?" said Michael. He let go of the leaf and got on his bike and rode away.

Renine caught the leaf and it turned blue once more.

"Let's take it downtown," said Jonil, "and hand it to everyone we know."

Renine and Jonil went downtown with the leaf.

They handed it to an army man and it turned red, white, and blue.

They handed it to an old schoolteacher and it became red.

They handed it to a race car driver and it became black and white checkered.

No one had ever seen a leaf like it before.

"Let me have it for the museum," said the museum keeper. "We'll name the whole mummy exhibit in your honor."

Renine looked at the leaf and he knew he could not let it go.

"It's not mine to give away, sir," he replied. "I don't know who it belongs to."

As it began to get dark, Renine and Jonil headed home. They were tired from walking all day. Renine held the leaf high in the air like a torch. The leaf glowed orange.

“What a wonderful leaf,” said Jonil. “Just think of the tree it must have come from.” Renine tightened his grip on the leaf. But it didn’t feel like he was holding the leaf anymore. It felt like the leaf was holding him.

After he got home, Renine noticed how much the leaf had grown. It was even bigger than his father’s hand.

Renine laid down on his bed and put the leaf by his head. He loved the leaf and its beautiful colors.

Renine thought about all the other things he loved—birds, grass, wind, the sun, turtles, chocolate, lions, the ocean. . .

The leaf grew and became a hundred different colors at once. It split into two leaves and then four. Those leaves got bigger and they split. The stem of the leaf thickened and the leaf became a tree full of leaves of all different colors.

The tree filled the room, growing out the window. The tree became the sky—pink, red, purple, or gold leaves umbrellas for the stars.

Wind blew into the tree and became music. Renine heard the music and woke up.

Renine started climbing the wonderful tree. Now he had a million leaves like his first leaf.

Higher and higher went Renine. He was not afraid. Renine knew the leaves would not let him fall.

When Renine got to the top he rested and sang and let the wind blow through him. Renine had become the biggest, brightest, most beautiful leaf of all.

My tone calmed Karen. Dave liked the technology of the shape-shifting leaf. Howard liked the short sentences. Betty liked the message at the end. Cozie liked it all. There were smiles. There were comments on other details that were liked best.

They were going easy on me. That was appreciated. Then Blanche, MA, University of Iowa, stickler for usage, spoiled the party and that was funny. She aimed a lit King at my brain and remarked in her smoke-beveled voice: “Not laid. Lay. *Renine lay*. . .”

I folded shut another fable faltering like my few good poems refused to, but in failing as it did—playfully, sweetly, gently—pumping energy into a notion of art as a pursuit capable of extracting overlooked treasure from the barrenness of experience, even if that harvest consisted solely of the dreams impoverishment could spawn. Art was the life left to live because it was the life left to love.

Lucille Eye's Diverting Acrobatics

The other thing I could do that night was accompany the rest of the club to Riefe's for a snack. Brown booths like giant friendly mushrooms on a *Star Trek* planet. Strong waitresses in their dun-colored aprons accurately aiming spouts of heavy chattering ice-water pitchers.

We got there. I slid in next to Karen to the obese irritation of Roy, still after that second date with her he would never get. We split onion rings again. I mean, she plucked one off the top of the gnarl and pushed the rest over to me, and I made a royal sauce of catsup on top and with a fork stabbed at tangles that bled golden drips of oil.

"I can't believe it, Ben. It was all set! Sister wanted you in her class."

"I wanted to be in the class too."

"He has no grounds. You were accepted."

"Buis does what he wants."

Blanche, hearing aid on high, could not resist another chance to be irked.

"Ach! Phooey on Buis!" then "What is a Buis?" then "Phooey on Buis!"

Howard concurred. And Avalon. And Cozie. Roy jiggled.

I reminded the crowded table of something.

"That judge who gave me the Mississippi Valley Poetry Contest grand prize—Professor Dana—he told me to write him when I was ready to go to college. I'm ready now. Buis convinced me of that by trying to discourage me!"

Blanche at first snorted at the preposterousness of discouragement being inspiring, then reconsidered. Two flicks of her lit

King—two meaning “correct”—granted the point.

“I’ll contact Dana this week. Don’t worry.”

They tried not to worry. They tried to tell themselves the truth: the disaster had bruised but not broken me. We laughed next. We had to. Laughing was superior to accusing and judging. In toto (Dave word) the best form of cultural oxygenation.

We laughed about the absurdity of a purported educator saying “education” every fourth word while denying a student the access to higher education, and because Lucille Eye was not present, we could lift our spirits further by reveling out loud about her recent, and completely successful, coups of courtesy accomplished despite the weedy obstacle of a ditch, and while wearing a loud shimmery red dress and high heels.

I said parts. Karen said parts. It went about so:

After Dave adjourned a meeting a couple of months ago, reticent Lucille quick-stepped across the court, desiring to put as much distance as possible between herself and the rather frightening public forum where feelings were bared like chests at the Moulin Rouge, and it was rude not to look, listen. The rest of us followed her into the July night. I was sweating. The rented gym was hot in a different way from the previous rented space in the tenement in downtown Rock Island. The tenement lacked air. In the gym too much old air came at you from too many angles. No matter how hot it was outside, exiting a meeting was akin to having your face splashed with cool water.

Elderly club members called vehicles automobiles. Younger club members drove cars or, in the case of Jack, a pickup. Whatever their proper nouns, these gas guzzlers drove over to the Riefe’s parking lot. Carless wonders—Cozie, I, Blanche, and Lucille—liked to walk for practice.

In parking-lot dark we saw Lucille’s red dress ahead, at asphalt’s edge, where a ditch separated the school property from a side street. The ditch we always walked around. Did she forget? Had her specs fallen off? Before any of us could shout a warning, we lost sight of Lucille’s red dress and matching hat. It all dropped. She vanished as if swallowed by a mine shaft. The three of us stopped. The three of

us held our breath as in a story by Gordon, especially. Then the stick figure of Lucille Eye pogoed out of the ditch! on the other side! no worse for the wear! “Slow pokes!” she cried back at us.

Hat pinned in place. Dress in place. Specs in place. Shoes on.

We chugged to catch up with the hat, yet did not achieve that. By the time we arrived at Riefe’s, Lucille was nestled in the corner of a booth farthest from the aisle because no one else liked the seat, which allowed her to like it dearly. Party complete, the waitress took orders, pad flat against palm, the usual grease. Passing semitrucks on Locust Street jarred the tinted window. The basket full of Bishop’s Bread emptied. Hot brown food came on brown trays. Lucille ordered nothing but more water to go with further brown slabs of free bread and refused offers of onion rings, French fries, pork tenderloin. She did not refer to the ditch event nor did any witness. If it had not been a near-death experience for her, it was for us. Lucille Eye smiled at the ice in her glass, and remarked once, firmly, that summer was “flying by.”

Karen was to give Lucille and Blanche a ride home, and Karen had to work in the morning at Woolworth’s. I had not even finished half of her half of the crispy onion rings, let alone started on my half, when she mentioned it might be time to leave.

At the sound of that five-letter word, Blanche, on the outside of the booth, stabbed her cigarette out and gathered her collar around her neck in case there were Buisés out and about. Lucille *had been* in the corner of the booth, hemmed in by Cozie’s dress bow and the berm of Norm, but *sat there no longer*.

Cozie felt it first. Tickles below the tabletop. Gordon felt it next. A rustling down there. I felt the movement, one ankle brushed, the other, and out popped Lucille Eye from under the table, saying to Karen on the way up, “I’m ready when you are.”

Hat pinned in place. Dress in place. Specs in place. Shoes on.

Rather than disturb others, ask them to move, she had done the limbo to get from the corner of the booth to where she stood, staring with surprise at us staring at her.

Karen, arm slung over the back of the booth to steady senses, searched for a few next words—a way to acknowledge an Olympian Miss Manners feat—and did not find the words. She—we—kept gazing at Lucille. There were things a body and a mind and a spirit might do when trapped that were just not to be comprehended unless it was true all—no matter who—had in them a few seconds of rubber, a few seconds of steel.