

I RECENTLY HAD DINNER with my father, in a Minneapolis restaurant which he frequents so often that our waitress greeted me like a relative. We had a few drinks, martinis for him and grim, wintry beers for me, oatmeal porters and bitter red ales, beers which he saw as punitive but was kind enough to keep buying. The conversation turned to the Writers' Workshop, from which I had graduated a year before. I had since gone to San Francisco and, after a series of summer camp jobs and illegal unpaid on-line internships, moved back to Iowa City.

"You were great there," he said. "Even if nobody ever knows it."

This statement was doubtless meant to be commemorative, a wistful tribute to past glories as a graduate student, and should have been received in the same benign spirit in which it was given; but in a display of the finely-honed passive brooding that is not an uncommon trait among individuals who can list an MFA in fiction writing on their resumes, I spent the rest of the evening staring into my double chocolate stout as though into the abysmal pit of my own inevitable grave.

Would this be my fate? How could anyone be pleased at simply having attended a school, then after graduation dwindling swiftly into obscurity or, in the likely case of more than a few fiction writers and poets, ignominy? Yet, to a reasonable outside observer, this outcome is exactly what most Workshop graduates should expect. It is what the law of probability, crueler than any other statute I know of, dictates. Some of our classmates, with whom we rubbed elbows and more during our mutual years in Iowa City, will become the novelists, prize-winning poets and casino magnates of the new millennium. Others will begin, after the Workshop, a lifelong process of acclimation, transition, career adjustment, compromise, and, we can hope, eventual contentment with all the other fulfilling areas of their lives.

As has been noted elsewhere, the Writers' Workshop is an institution more selective than Harvard Law School; yet I doubt that applications to Harvard Law would increase in volume, year after year, if the majority of graduates failed to become

lawyers. And yet an unabating supply of intelligent, talented people, PhDs and surgeons and movie stars and MLB draft picks, and individuals with a lifetime of odd jobs behind them and singular stories etched like lines on their faces, comes to Iowa City every autumn.

Why?

Is it the marketing? Does the Writers' Workshop promise a lucrative degree in twenty-two months, advertised on web banners that show models in designer glasses smiling at their laptops or sucking on the nib of a quill pen?

As far as I know, it does not. What it does is provide space, time and quiet. The things that have been necessary for thought, for reflection, for consideration of the problems of the species, since at least the beginning of agriculture and possibly since we began to walk upright, with our heads further from the hot, stony ground, seeking the cool shade. What is gained by this reflection? Who knows? That's for future societies, able to take in a little more of the picture, to judge; and in the posthumous arena, if nowhere else, writers and artists have disproportionately won out over their patrons and peers.

Posthumous success is not what anybody wants to be going to school for, but for writers, it's a possibility. Just ask former Workshop instructor Richard Yates, who finally made it into *The New Yorker* nine years after his death. However, since we have only the undetermined span of our lifetimes to produce work—to say, or not say, whatever we are going to say or not say to those who come after us—it is good, at least for writers, that the Workshop exists. Not only does it confer upon apprentice writers the funding and semi-respectability of being a student, but it renders them a service that is both larger and more intangible. It takes what, for the writer, must ultimately and necessarily be an internal space, an internal quiet, and ties it to a particular place that we came to, a particular time that we spent there, a particular group of people that we knew. A particular classroom or a particular bar, or the Quonset huts I kept hearing about. So that, hopefully not too often but as often as we need to, we can revisit that space in our minds, while engaged in the

work none of us ever truly give up afterward though we may set it aside forever, and say, yes, we were great there.

Even if nobody ever knows it.

ADAM KRAUSE, '09

TEN YEARS BEFORE I WAS ADMITTED to the Workshop, my biggest concern was whether diesel cost more in Tulsa or Oklahoma City. Occasionally I shopped at the Coral Ridge Mall in Coralville because semis were allowed to park between Scheels and Sears. After I stopped driving my Peterbilt cross-country, I moved to Iowa City to make a concerted effort to get into the Workshop. I was not only changing professions, but exchanging learning strategies. I no longer washed over the country in search of experience. I clung to a particular coral outcrop in the cornfields of Iowa and let people move past me on the tidal surges of seasons and semesters. Classmates became friends; they moved away. Literary fashions also came and went. What breathless fiction student raves now at first meeting about *The Corrections*? Or *Middlesex*? They have left their valuable marks. Other titles have taken their places and become cultural touchstones for their specific generations.

When I read my journals from those pre-Workshop and Workshop years, amid all the nonsense about whom I happened to have a crush on at the moment (the tone of that love-struck writing, its devotion, its aliveness, has barely changed its desperate, ironic tenor since I was about thirteen), I find to my great relief that serious writing concerns were also being addressed. At parties, and over the carved-up tabletops at the Foxhead, my classmates and I were indeed talking about writing. I could go out on Tuesday night after workshop and strike up any number of unselfconscious conversations about narrative strategy. There was hardly a need for formal plans: Ian and Jeff and Khaliah and Marcela and Amanda and Jennifer and Adam and Tom and Anna and Alex (I'm breathless!) all

knew to show up between 8 and 10. To puzzle over what Ethan meant, or repeat something from our professors, Charlie, Sam, Marilynne, Kevin, Tony, Scott and Jim.

Now that I have graduated, it makes me sad to go in the Foxhead. Or into The Pit, because the L-shaped corner booth is full of ghosts. We are still, it seems, pushing away our baskets of sweet-potato fries to make room for our elbows. Ryan and Alex and Sterling are hashing out the nuances of free indirect discourse. We are all ravenous for the lofty ideas that form over the varnished table, in the barbeque smoke and the darkness, insights that will change us forever, and will vault us, as writers, far ahead.

After graduation, another phase emerged: trusting my artistic judgment, finishing pieces, and sending them to publishers. From the dissolved minerals I had absorbed clinging to this cornfield reef, I needed to let ideas calcify. Heady talk was just heady talk in the end, unless it turned out to be useful for one's craft. But was all that earnest conversation about first, second and third person, about point of telling, about exposition versus scene, Flaubert versus Hemingway, something I should have passed though more quickly, a place where I ought not have lingered so long?

A clue: recently I went through a dusty, velvet-covered box on my bookshelf. Under the beaded lid, mementos: a Slim Jim from a classmate, a silver and red Hershey Kiss from Marilynne Robinson's candy jar, phone numbers (two from Paris), a cork from a long-forgotten party, and a large paperclip with a scrap of paper folded like origami into a tiny paper spring, a quarter of an inch long, a few millimeters thick. As I unfolded it, I remembered that at the end of the Fall 2008 semester I'd served my workshop a rather tough beef stir-fry, complete with fortune cookies. I'd picked this mysterious white speck from Charles D'Ambrosio's plate after he'd left, after he'd helped me wash and dry the dishes. It had been another good evening of conversation about writing. Then, inevitably, my classmates' bunch of boots, which had been grouped neatly by the door, their open ankles looking from above like so many mouths, had shrunk two-by-two, and then was gone.