

ONE. All I want to do is write.

S:

Max began as my student. This is how he began his application to get into my playwriting workshop:

Enter Max.

M:

Dear Professor Ruhl,

Thanks for reading this application. My name is Max Ritvo—I'm a senior English major in the Creative Writing Concentration. All I want to do is write.

S:

He said that he was a poet and a comedian, part of an experimental comedy troupe called

M:

His Majesty the Baby.

S:

A poet *and* he's funny? Huh, I thought.

I re-read his application, which had been left by the teaching assistant to stew in the “no” pile because he'd never written a play before.

But-- because funny poets are my favorite kind of human being, I put Max in the yes pile.

Max reacts, with joy, perhaps whispers: Yes!

S:

It is hard to imagine now that Max could ever have remained in any other pile.

A shift.

S: Max walked into my first class and it was as though an ancient light bulb hovered over his head. (*Who is this boy?*)

M:

Dear Professor Ruhl,

I am writing because, before I had even realized that this wonderful class existed, I booked tickets for *Einstein on the Beach*—

(S gasps)

M:

at the Brooklyn Academy of Music for this coming Friday.

S:
Little did he know that I had longed to see *Einstein on the Beach*, but it was sold out.

M:
I am so so sorry—

S:
Nothing could have been more delightful to me than a student who had the foresight to book tickets to a difficult avant-garde theatrical epic.

M:
Might I have permission to miss class?

S:
Yes, you must see *Einstein on the Beach*, as long as you write a short report (no more than five minutes) on the experience of seeing the show. Maybe you can join us for the first part of class, then high tail it to Brooklyn.

M:
Dear Sarah,

S:
(it took two letters to drop the institutional formalities)

M:
The show starts at seven. I'm worried if I leave later I won't have time to properly get from Grand Central to eat something! The show is four hours long and I have to eat in a really regimented way to keep my weight up as a result of the chemotherapy I had in high school--more on that some other time.

S:
I now had part of my answer as to why Max was different from the other students, why (beyond being a poet) he'd already contemplated the big metaphysical questions—and why he was so skinny.

A shift.

Max delivered an insightful and detailed sermon to the class on Phillip Glass and Robert Wilson.

M:
And then a great tower of light descends...

S:
He was to have spoken for five minutes—

M:
And then this huge metaphysical cage appears--

S:
he spoke for about an hour without stopping.

M:
The most holy *light*--and then, in an almost Vedic incantation, the numbers begin:
(*singing or chanting in tone*) 1234—

S:
A bright young woman in the class was horrified that a man was taking up an hour
of her class time with Phillip Glass.

M: (*singing or chanting in tone*)
123456--

S:
The irritated young woman would become one of his best friends.

A shift.

M: I would really love to take you up on your offer of some post-graduating advice. What
days are you in New Haven, and when would it be convenient for you to be a sage for half
an hour?

They eat soup.
Or mime eating soup.

S:
We went to the local book-store café, Atticus, where we ate black bean soup. Max ate slowly.
You don't like the soup?

M:
I love the soup.

S:
He explained that in high school he'd had Ewing's sarcoma, and the chemotherapy made his
digestion

M:
Iffy.

S:
Max slowly finished three spoonfuls of soup, then put his spoon down. He spoke about his--

M:
--dreams of becoming a poet—

S:
resting here and there to speak about—

M:

--the trials of love.

S:

(A girl was probably plaguing him. A girl was often plaguing him.)

M:

My romantic life is falling apart.

S:

The semester wore on, with more deliciously coined phrases from Max in class, like:

M:

Theatrical onanism!

S:

(Wow!)

And:

M

Lyric complicity.

S:

Did you make that up?

He nods.

And more of the same leaves falling on the same Gothic campus.

Leaves fall.

S:

Then, this, addressed to me and our teaching assistant, Amelia:

M:

Dearest Sarah and Amelia,

Today was my cancer scanning day and an artefact was discovered in my right chest. We are waiting for more testing and surgical biopsy, but it's possible that this is a recurrence of my cancer. I have every intention of carrying on with my work--I just wanted to forewarn you there might be some difficulties on the horizon. I can't say how much you've both come to mean to me in my short time learning from you.

If nothing else, maybe we'll squeeze a great play out of whatever comes of this.

Gratefully, Max

TWO. And a hurricane too?

S:

Hurricane Sandy was about to arrive in New York City, and Max was about to go into surgery. I was supposed to be in rehearsals in New Haven for my play about the letters between Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop. Instead, I was stuck in Brooklyn.

M:

Wish me luck as they cut me open and fill me with opium and hand down the unappealable verdict!

I will get everything in, perhaps just not in a timely fashion. I might want to do a cancer one act. And I might want very much *not* to do a cancer one act.

In the meantime, I thought you might enjoy a few poems I'm working on: proof of a fecundity, if unsoundness, of mind. I'm clinging more and more to my writing as my panic is increasing...

Music:

Max goes to a microphone and reads a poem.

SCAN

Lie flat,
comes the command,
from a voice unsinging.
the voice starts to weep
and I blow it kisses.

S:

Dear Max,

I loved your poems. You have such a beautiful singing ear, and such a mind.

I want you to write in any way that makes sense to you this semester.

You must feel a little like Job stuck in the hospital during a hurricane. Like come on, what gives? And a hurricane too? I'm happy to visit the hospital if you're up for visitors, or do you need books? I probably can't get to you until the subways are more under control. Can I do anything for your mom?

We are all rooting for you.

M:

Sarah,

I can't tell you how much your note means to me.

Today was mostly breathing exercises and limping and coming off of the opiates. Strange dreams with lots of focus on skin texture. My uncle has flown in from Israel--he gave me some acupuncture which unblocked a very preverbal chunk of fear and rage--I felt like I was a prophet channeling my tumor.

It would be great if you visited the hospital. It would be nice to spare you the childhood chemo ward (which is horrific) and the least functional part of my day and see you in the afternoon. Bring me a book and inscribe it! Reading is good. Writing is about all I have.

A breath.

S:

After the hurricane, I was madly baking at home (luckily we had power) and creating apartment-wide scavenger hunts to entertain the children.

On Halloween, Max sent me a photo of himself from the hospital, dressed as—

M:

Yabadabadoo—

W:

Wilma Flintstone, with full make up, and his chemo port visible above his animal pelt. It was captioned:

M:

Space age chemo for a stone age lady.

Sarah visits Max.

S:

When the subways worked again, I visited Max.

(to Max)

I brought a noodle kugel.

M:

Holy shit! You're such a Midwestern goy! How do you know how to make kugel?

S shrugs.

M:

This would pass the muster of my Israeli mother!

S:

I saw that Max's mother was brilliant, and beautiful. And she'd been through hell.

M:
Thank you for coming.
You are such a specific helpfulness in my life.

A shift.

S:
Max was still very much my student—I gave him notes like:

M:
“Put that speech in iambic pentameter.”

S:
Or, cut that monologue down by 25%!
Max handed in his play at the end of the semester, telling me

M:
“I am adamant that something extravagant and silent happen.”

S:
His play begins at an altar. A sick boy goes to get a tattoo, and the tattoo artist is something of an analyst, and something of an angel. The boy and the tattoo artist speak in iambic pentameter. The boy says to the tattoo artist:

M:
“So I have brought inside my little pouch,
a little draft of a Hokusai crane.”

S:
Max got a bird tattoo after every surgery. Each bird was inspired by a different artist.

M:
The tattoo artist finishes, and picks the boy up, very gently like an angel helping another angel. She offers him a compact mirror gently like an angel offering a compact mirror to another angel. He smiles and begins to check it out.

S:
Then the boy says:

M:
“It’s dope. I really love it in this light.”

Something extravagant and silent happens.

THREE: In some ways, you are my teacher

A shift in time.

S:

The semester ended, but Max and I still saw each other from time to time.

How was your poetry reading?

M:

The reading went fabulously. (Some of the other poems were a little deliberately and finicky opaque...) But I have connected with some other poets and they say they want me to come to Brooklyn to do a reading. Maybe you could come!

S:

On the school of poets who surround you, I say: *resist opacity*. I think at the heart of opacity is fear.

M:

Opacity is fear. I'll edit with that in mind. Opacity is fear.

S:

Then he asked:

M:

Can I read your poems?

S:

Max somehow divined that I had secret poems stashed away in my desk, poems I almost never shared.

Emily Dickinson's envelope poems are to me the height of beauty—unshared, unfinished, written on envelopes—as hidden as they are revealed. But Max asked to see my poetry, and he could be persuasive.

M:

Please?

S:

Fine. Here is one little sonnet, unpublished, and largely unread but by my husband, Tony, who I wrote it for.

Music.

SUMMER RHODE ISLAND

You know what a lee is; I don't.
Behind a stone. No wind. Stop boat. A place.

Behind your back. My body. Stop the air.
Travel by stopping, full stop, just there.

As lee is a small word. Sail easy.
Lee and unlee, light is hot.
Rest here, a while longer on my
belly. A lee, a dry derry, a drought.

Words for clarity, words for light and heat,
words for charity—words for sleep.

Maybe a little paper sailboat floats by.

M:
Sarah,

S:
Yes?

M:
I know I'm poetry biased, but this made me shimmer inside. I want to write with this kind of glow one day.

The first stanza... makes me want to play peekaboo. I can't even. It's moving--I want to move. I want this miracle in my life... The elisions. The life!

S:
Thank you. Maybe you will give me the courage to send them out one day. Or, God forbid, read them aloud in public.

You know, in some ways, you are my teacher, not the other way around.

A breath.

M:
Your recommendation letters for graduate school arrived. I nearly cried. You complimented my ear. Nobody ever compliments my ear. Secretly, I am very proud of my ear.

I'm terrified of going back into chemo-land. Everything in my life, the fabric of my life itself, is dissolving. You are not. Maybe I am not? That's what your letter meant to me.

S:
That time is a blur. I was barely sleeping. I was teaching, and checking my three children's temperatures often, as they always seemed to have a cold.

I don't know if my friendship with Max felt like an extension of my mothering, a release from it, or both.

M:

My romantic life is falling apart again. I sense a wall from D. And I can't blame her, I haven't spoken to her in years, and all of a sudden I'm barging very suddenly and cancerily into her presence. We had a meal where she seemed to be obliging me. She called me "dude" at one point. Sarah, can you imagine anyone referring to me as dude?

S:

Maybe it was a compliment?

M:

I don't really know how to talk to people about my illness in a nondestructive way, or how they're supposed to listen.

S:

Always, always, Max wanted to know what was the best way to listen.

M:

You write really wonderful listeners.

Also, a big chunk of our conversing today ended up in a very strange poem-thing. Wanted to share with you, since you are a prime mover in the poem. I would love your input.

Max goes to the microphone and reads:

LISTENING, SPEAKING, AND BREATHING

Pianos are told to repeat
the grieving tones of a bird.

How does the bird focus?
How does the piano focus, in turn?...

I have never listened, alone...

Even the unlistening God
listens more than your own life...

In case of silence, could I cope?
The slender rod of my sense
white and pocked and feathered,
draws a triangle of fire in pure salt...

If I am still an object,
then we'll know that, won't we?

I hope then, you'll talk to me,
and I promise I'll make sense of you.

S:

It is gorgeous and sublime.

That is my input.

My other input is that the answer to the question posed in your poem is always yes—the yes of the poet's immortality.

A shift.

S:

That Spring, a group missive from Max:

M:

Bleak news, though no immediate death sentence impending. My tumors remain unchanged, despite the new chemo. My lungs have been too irradiated due to my first cancer for a second attempt. Surgery also doesn't seem to be a likely option given the sub centimeter size of my tumors, their deep enjambment in my lungs, and the slipperiness of Ewing's cells.

It's more likely that I will embark upon a clinical trial. These trials are trials because they are promising, and they are trials because they are not proven science. I will be on the periphery of medicine. Empiricists (like Dad) love the sentiment that man's reach should always exceed his grasp. My body is being fanned and fumbled by the gloved fingertips. I hope they can get a grip on me, but I can't say the odds are very good.