

“Write When You Get a Chance”

Good evening. I have been brooding about this essay since George Hammond alerted me I was scheduled to present an essay tonight — as we move closer to the winter solstice and prepare ourselves for another year of partisan conflict and linguistic bombast — as we try to figure out how to function in a “Post-Truth” society.

I was encouraged by some friends and colleagues to speak this evening about the increasingly institutional quantification of the conflict C.P. Snow wryly characterized as the “two cultures” in society — and especially in higher education — the conflict between scientific and humanistic inquiry. But I’ve chosen not to speak for my profession or my colleagues, nor to whine about the increasing educational and culture divide seemingly pitting Americans against each other.

Nor do I want to argue for the need to establish either greater coherence for — or a different map of — the shifting demarcations — and potential implosions within fields such as literary studies or history and the flight of students away from humanistic inquiry and toward EECS and Big Data — now two of the largest majors, along with Economics at UC Berkeley.

The headlines of virtually every issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* — a weekly publication addressed primarily to Deans, Provosts, Vice Chancellors and Chancellors — has fallen into this apocalyptic howling. Here are a few headlines: “The Humanities Existential Slide Continues.” “Teaching in the Twilight of the Humanities.” “Does the Book Have a Future?”

The American Historical Association recently analyzed undergraduate enrollments in its discipline. “While all the humanities are afflicted by failing numbers of undergraduate majors, enrollment in history has dropped precipitously. The study observed: “these declines are not ‘just a temporary response to a missing job market’.” They reflect “a longer-term rethinking of what majors can do for students.”

In an era where too many people cross the street while reading text messages or sending tweets, many Americans — young and old — believe that they can learn as much history as they need to know by watching Hollywood movies or checking their phones.

Some students want to know why they need to learn — and practice — writing skills — at a time when robots are drafting content for newspapers. Many students do not recognize that writing is the natural extension of thinking. Writing makes thinking recoverable. Writing enables to trace the development of our intellects and to trace the informative history of our own ideas. William James reminds us: “Life is in the transitions — as much as in the terms connected.”

I would like to invoke a brief — but I think memorable — assertion from Isak Dineson. It reads: “All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.”¹ I am sensitive to the rather daunting responsibility attached to this occasion — a responsibility heightened by the essays my predecessors have presented.

Mindful of the tradition of the Chit-Chat Club, I’m here tonight to tell a simple story about writing, about writing as a matter of life and death — a story about how I now know much more clearly and powerfully what I thought I had known before — about the

dignity and the importance of what we try to do each day in our public and private conversations about students — and I trust in each of your lives.

I pause nervously at the door to room 216, trying with one last, deep breath to compose myself for what I have been told I'm about to see.

It's late afternoon on January 16th, a day already shrouded by low-hung dark rain clouds. I adjust my eyes to the darkness in the room, and I enter its silence. I follow the invitation of the only light that's on — a small and soft green light on the monitor next to the shapeless form on the bed. The light casts a pale glow over the motionless figure. I stand at the foot of the bed, and I suddenly recall the smell of a decomposing body from my summers working at the beach. I decide that this odor is slightly different — that it might be a leak in the catheter that hangs nearly filled on the far side of the bed. I taste the bitterness burning in the pit of my stomach and swallow uneasily.

I stare at what is in front of me, trying to figure out if it's the person I traveled across the country to see and to talk with — perhaps for the last time. I linger there for a moment or two, and then I decide to pick up her chart — to confirm her identity and to peer at the medical staff's account of her illness. Standing at the foot of the bed, her past and her future in my hands, I suddenly remember she never had a birth certificate. I recall that she told us once that there was apparently no official record of her birth — anywhere. There was only a baptismal certificate. I saw it once; it said: Adelina Pisano, Blessed Sacrament Church, January 21, 1907.

My mother had no reason not to trust her parents when they told her she was born on Christmas Day. She always seemed pleased that I had been born on December 26th.

We celebrated our birthdays together late on Christmas night, and she always had a kind word to offset the disappointment I invariably felt when our relatives wished me a Merry Christmas and a Happy Birthday with a single present.

But there is no voice to hear this afternoon. Her lips are motionless; the rings around her eyes underscore the darkness of her sleep. Her body seems shorter, her head smaller than the image I carry around with me. Several wisps of thin grey hair evade the snarls of the net she no doubt struggled to put on — so that she wouldn't bother the nurses with having to comb her hair before her children's arrival each day during visiting hours. Smiling at the sight of the black hair net, I remember how self-effacing she is, how she never wants to bother anyone, how she doesn't expect anything from anyone, and how — when someone does try to help her — she responds with embarrassment and with the conviction that she hasn't done anything to deserve the attention, how someone else needs it more.

She never claims any authority for herself — for her perceptions, for her experiences, for her distinctive sense of self. She habitually disqualifies her point of view — before she speaks it. I recall from my childhood her most often repeated phrase: “Go ask your father. He'll know about that.” I remember her telling us that she wasn't upset when the nuns in grammar school “officially” changed her name from Adelina to Edna — to make it easier to pronounce her name. “What was I going to do? Those nuns were tough then — not like today. They all wore stiff habits, even in the summer —not like today. Then, they didn't

take any guff from anybody. . . .” I can hear her constantly interrupt herself to say “I know I shouldn’t say this.”

The soft stillness of the body lying in that bed reminds me that she sees herself at the receiving end of experience rather than at its origins. She doesn’t seem to have determined the history of her own life. After she was robbed by the young man she had asked to help her cross an icy and busy street on her way to daily Mass, she told her children, “Look, you gotta take what comes your way . . . the bad with the good. But don’t worry. I asked Josie the tailor to sew pockets on the inside of my overcoat. When that bum tries to steal my pocketbook again, he’ll be surprised. There won’t be nothing in it next time.” It seemed almost as if she were eager to see him again and to stare at him with contempt. But she allows herself few instances of such sweet revenge.

As I look intently down at her, I remind myself that she never likes to call attention to herself. She talks a great deal, but always about others — and especially about her sons, about her daughters-in-law, and, whenever anyone would listen, about her grandchildren and how blessed — and lucky — she is.

As hard as I try, I can recall no time when she allows herself to be at the center of anything public. She somehow manages to make herself inconspicuous, even the time when she was invited to City Hall to receive a certificate — suitable of course for framing — from then-Mayor Ed Koch for her volunteer work among the elderly. She was proud of her award, but modesty, if not embarrassment, seemed almost to compel her to cover at least partially her mouth whenever she spoke about the occasion. Her family seemed much more excited than she allowed herself to be, and none of us was surprised that we had a difficult

time trying to find her in the official photograph: she had tucked herself into a tiny space between two beaming — and large — women at what, as fortune would have it, turned out to be the edge of the photograph.

As I move my eyes slowly across her deeply-lined face, I see there reminders that in virtually every significant sense, she probably still views herself as unimportant, as someone who doesn't matter, as someone who finally sees herself as fundamentally expendable.

I notice her chest moving slowly — to the rhythm of the monitor. Her skin takes on a slightly yellow hue in the soft green light, and it drapes loosely — and even elegantly — over the small, brittle bones that somehow still keep her body together. Her wrists are attached with thin rubber tubing to the metal bed rails — to protect her, they say, from hurting herself if she suffers another stroke.

I sit down at her bedside and reach for the short, stubby fingers — fingers I imagine still bear traces from the years she devoted to raising her children, years when, as she hesitantly told us, she “helped make ends meet” by working full-time in an insurance company and by typing address labels at the kitchen table after preparing, serving, and cleaning up dinner. She did that late-night work against a never-ending cycle of pressured deadlines from an insurance company that wanted its renewal notices out on time.

Her hands are ice cold, and I slide my nervous fingers up to her wrist — in search of what I expect will be her faint pulse. I'm no longer surprised by what I see and touch. She looks as if she's dying quietly, if not peacefully. Her arm moves slightly, and I am quickly drawn to her face, and then to her flickering eyes. She opens them and turns her head toward me — slowly. I lean closer to her, but she doesn't speak. I sense her surprise and

wait for her to say something. She looks at me with more focused attention, smiles, and tries to force words out of her body. I feel the attention in her quickening pulse and sense the emotion pushing the words through her stiffened jaw and parched lips. Her voice finally relaxes, taking comfort in recognizing its own distinctive sound. She whispers: “Da Professor!”

She seems too weak for conversation, so I launch into a hurried — and scattered — report on her grandchildren in California. The news seems to course through her fragile veins, and I try to make her stronger with funny stories about the children, about life on the west coast, and about the trips she took with us after her husband died. I ask her if she remembers the trip on TWA to the old country — when one of my former students bumped all of us up into first class. “Somebody should fly first class,” he said, “Why not you and your family?” When I remind her that I found that logic compelling, her smile broadens and deepens. She says softly: “I was a nervous wreck for the first half-hour. I had my rosary beads out. What if they found out that we didn’t belong?!”

I lean back into the chair and ask: “Do you remember what happened when we landed in Rome?”

“Yeah, she said. I wouldn’t speak Italian. I didn’t want to embarrass you and Susanne by speaking with such a terrible accent. They’d know I was from Brooklyn in a second. . . .” I remind myself that she wouldn’t speak for either herself or for others, and I conclude, mistakenly, that she didn’t want to embarrass herself.

As we relax into each other’s company and settle into a quiet conversation, a hospital orderly announces himself and reminds her that it’s five o’clock. Positioning her dinner tray

over her now raised-bed, he proudly announces “I’ve got something special for you tonight. I know you gonna like this.” He releases the restraints on her wrists and sweeps the metal cover from over the plate, like a magician heightening the anticipation before revealing a surprise. He backs away from the bed with the metal lid still in his hand, and as he turns to leave, he takes special pleasure in trumpeting the word “Lasagna!”

Almost immediately, her head drops, as if it has been suddenly disconnected from the rest of her body. She moves it back and forth, trying to muster a sigh of despair at the same time. She tries to arch her head back up to see if the orderly has left. “They’re very nice people here,” she says in a hushed voice. “They bring you your tray right to your bed. I don’t want them to be insulted, but I can’t eat this stuff. Look at it. They serve carrots with lasagna! I tasted the sauce yesterday.” Her eyes dart toward the doorway. She tries to lean forward, but she resorts to another whisper: “They don’t know how to make sauce — not like we do.”

I try to reassure her that I understand. “I know,” I say softly, “but try to eat it anyway. If you wanna get outta here, you have to eat. You know you need to get strong.”

“I know. . . . I know. . . .” Her hand moves slowly, reluctantly toward the fork. She lifts a small lump of the lasagne from the right side of the plate, and as she moves it haltingly — and almost horizontally — across the plate toward her, the fork touches the carrots. She doesn’t seem either willing or able to hold the fork any longer. Her eyes move away from the food, and she stares intently at me. Her tongue reaches the edge of her lips, but she doesn’t speak. I fill the silence with a nervous refrain: “You have to eat it if you want to get strong, if you want to get out of this place.”

She forces herself to lift her right hand with her left and to move it once again toward the fork. She picks it up and tilts it slightly toward herself, perhaps hoping that some of the lasagna will slide off and onto her pale green nightgown, putting an end to the awkwardness we both feel. But the sauce glues the pasta to the fork. "I'll try," she murmurs, "but I can't promise that I'll eat all of it. This sauce is so lousy."

"Try. . . . Do the best you can."

The second bite is even more reluctant than the first. "I can't eat it. It'll kill me."

"You gotta eat," I say, and somewhat impatiently. "All right. Leave the lasagna. Try the carrots. . . ."

She responds more quickly, and with a slightly sharper edge in her voice. "The carrots?! I just tried the lasagna. I can't eat the carrots now, not with lasagne."

"You gotta get stronger if you wanna get out of here."

"I know. But I can't eat this stuff. The lasagna and the carrots are cold. Nobody can eat cold lasagna. It'll kill me."

Her eyes reach for the cup of lime Jello. "Let me try the Jello. It's got fruit cocktail in it. What the hell can they do to Jello?!" Her fork disturbs the sheen of the Jello. The surface wobbles like she knows it should. She forces a slight smile, and as she eats it, she says "Everybody knows how to make Jello."

At 7:15 that night, I'm sitting at a linen-lined table in my younger brother's dining room, eating a steaming plate of ravioli. Our eyes are glued to the television set nervously propped atop the credenza so that we could eat and watch the news before returning to the

hospital. At precisely the same moment that news reports from Baghdad announce that the war has begun, raining steel on that city, the phone rings. Annoyed by the distraction, I pick it up and before I can say anything the voice on the other end urges “Come to the hospital — fast.”

As soon as my brother, sister-in-law, and I arrive at room 216, we’re redirected to the intensive care unit, where my older brother paces the hallway. “She’s had another episode,” he reports anxiously. “I don’t know if she’s gonna make it this time.” I spend what seems like the next hour or two sitting on a vinyl-covered couch, thinking — nervously — about the word “episode.” Finally, the doctor emerges and asks us to step outside the waiting room to find a corner or a wall that will provide some semblance of privacy.

“She’s had another stroke, but this one is far more serious. She’s also suffered respiratory arrest, but because the nurses and the doctor were working on her in less than a minute, I’m confident that there’s no brain damage. We can always do a CAT-scan later. She didn’t seem able to keep her food down, and it came back up into her lungs. I’m afraid she’s also suffering from double pneumonia — a combination of bacterial and gastric infections in her lungs. Look, I hate to bring this up, but the hospital staff needs to know whether you’d like us to try to resuscitate her should she experience another episode like the one tonight. She’s stabilized now. There isn’t anything you can do for her at this point. Don’t let me push you into a decision. Why don’t you go home and try to get some sleep.” Even in the face of her own death, she doesn’t have the opportunity to speak for herself.

The next morning brings the startling news that she’s made remarkable progress during the night. We take turns going in to see her. When my brother and I reach her

bedside, we're stunned by the sight of the number of tubes running into, and through, her body. While technology rained death on Baghdad and Allied forces used "smart" bombs equipped with cameras to film their own success in living color, one tiny, frail Italian woman was kept alive by six humming consoles and by what apparently was an indomitable will to live.

She looks up at us from the center of the other side of that terrifying sight. The tubes prevent her from speaking, but her eyes plead for an explanation. We tell her, as best we can, what has happened to her. We try to keep talking, to reach beyond the veil of silence that seems to have descended over her.

The more we try to offer her encouragement, the more her eyes seem to dart around the room. She fixes her attention on the table to the right of where I'm standing. She motions toward the table with her eyes. The only items on it are a stack of the bookmark-sized prayers she carries around with her, a half-filled cup of water, a pencil, and some sheets of paper with "Mercy Hospital" written across the top and "PROGRESS NOTES" printed in large boldface beneath it.

Instinctively, I gather up the prayers and ask her if she'd like me to read them to her. Her eyes dart left and right. Once again, she uses her eyes to motion toward the table. After what seemed like the longest — and most awkward — moments in my life, I finally realize that she wants me to hand her the paper and pencil. I rush to the nurse's station and ask for a clipboard. Within seconds of my return, a torrent of prose rushes across that piece of paper.

It seemed as though nothing — not her ninth-grade education, her shaky handwriting, her weak grammar, nor her spotty punctuation — could encumber what she wanted, almost desperately, to tell us about what had happened to her. Here's a sampling of what she wrote:

“Last night after you left, they started working on me from 8:00 to through the night. The doctors and nurses never left me. No sleep until 5:00 o'clock a.m. in the morning. They were good to me. I will not ever forget them in my prayers. They all very very nice to me, and I hope you all feel the same way about them. Sorry. Bad handwriting. Love and Prayers.”

She wrote virtually continuously for twenty minutes that morning, pausing only to allow us to figure out what the appropriate next question was and to press her for greater detail. She wrote until she slid into exhaustion and a deep sleep. That afternoon, as soon as we arrived, she was back at it. And the next day, when her grown grandchildren arrived, she told them slightly different versions of the same story in writing. She was proud that she had survived, but she couldn't fully release herself into saying that directly.

It seems as if she is writing to keep herself alive, almost as if herself would be lost if she stopped — lost, or suffocated, in the maze of tubes and wires and contraptions that not only were keeping her alive but also allowing her to speak from the other side of her silence. Each time we visited she pours out one “Progress Note” after another. Each becomes more detailed, more compelling. She writes, for example, about the CAT-scan they put her through on the night she suffered her last stroke. She describes feeling trapped inside that silver machine, feeling as though she had died and had been placed inside a silver casket. She

writes that she felt so alone and that she is glad she can tell us about that experience, and how she hopes she won't have to go through it again. "Next time," she writes, "just bury me."

Over the course of several visits, we ease her — or she eases us — into taking up different subjects, but she invariably returns to the events surrounding her last stroke and to their aftermath. She seems to shy away from describing the central event, the "episode," in any detail, but she doesn't hesitate in the least to take us inside the world of the machines she's still hooked up to. She explains, for example, that she sometimes feels as though she no longer has a body, that she is little more than an extension of the equipment. "I don't know how I'll ever get out of this place," she writes.

Yet, slowly her tone grows slightly more confident. She seems able for the first time in her notes to distance herself from the trauma by characterizing it in a phrase we heard applied for years to anything she judges unpleasant. "You have no idea. I went through the tortures of hell." Everyone smiles, knowingly. It's also time to leave. She motions me to stay, and as soon as she is sure that everyone else has left the room, she starts to write again. After about a minute, she hands me the clipboard, and smiles wistfully and coyly: "It was the bad lasagna I had. . . ."

Driving home from that evening, I take pleasure in the fact that perhaps for the first time in her life, Adelina Pisano has chosen to reserve for herself the authority to make — as well as to articulate — a decision. Needing to tell her stories, but trapped in silence, she turns to the only medium available to her: writing. Writing for her took on a life of its own; it became not only a self-affirming but also a life-affirming activity.

Another day — her final day in intensive care. The doctor reports that she’s “out of the woods now” and that they plan to move her in the morning to a bed in intermediate care. We thank him for his help, and he turns toward me: “When are you going home?”

“I guess I can go back tomorrow night.”

The flight to San Francisco proves more intriguing. How unusual: the plane is far less than half full. Yet I can’t understand why I don’t sleep on the long flight home.

My body is in neutral, if not reverse, but my mind jump starts the takeoff. Before we reach cruising altitude, I realize I need to make some sense of what we all have gone through. I order some wine — to celebrate Adelina Pisano’s will to live and to toast her for caring enough about her family and finally about herself to tell them each day through her “Progress Notes” that she is alive and that she hopes — with the help of God and some good luck — to stay alive. I take pleasure and pride in the dignity of her struggle and in her resourcefulness with language and the power she now exercises over it. But I quickly caution myself to resist sentimentalizing her and what she is accomplishing as a newly-practiced, although still self-effacing, writer. I remind myself of my rekindled anger about the resources of language denied to her as well as about the skills she denied to herself.

I know her resourcefulness with language is culturally as well as personally determined, but I can’t decide which prevails in Adelina Pisano’s life — then and now. I can’t figure out where she is in relation to her own experience — whether she is at the center or at the margins of her own articulateness.

I sit in a silver cylinder at 35,000 feet, alone with my thoughts and plenty of time, so I decide to pursue some better understanding of what it means to be “marginal” or

“marginalized” and to live “in” and “on” the margins. It doesn’t take long for the negative associations to surface. Those who are “marginal” or “marginalized” lead lives determined — in fundamental ways — by others. Characteristically, they are reported by others to regard themselves as closed out, if not shut down, from experience. Characteristically, they are reported to be viewed — and treated — by others as though they were inert, ignored, forgotten, left out too long — like a faded shirt hanging on a clothesline at the back of an abandoned tenement.

The prevailing view of living “on the margins” doesn’t differ markedly. To be “on the margins” is to be superfluous. After all, a margin (of profit, of space, of time, of material goods) is an amount that is available — or allowed — in addition to what is estimated to be strictly necessary for or essential to a predefined purpose.

I gaze out the window and reflect on the significance the term bears when viewed from the perspective of spatial relations. To be “on” the margin means to locate oneself — or to be located — at the edge of a boundary. This place — this state of mind, this socio-economic condition, this linguistic or political or sexual identity — is in some way marked off or distinguished from the rest of what is perceived. In this sense, to be “in” or “on” the margin is to be identified as different — but negatively so — to be seen as unlike the rest. But the demarcations between the center and the margins are always in flux. And complex identities result from these shifting grounds.

I realize the terms of Adelina Pisano’s life — and especially its shifting grounds — confirm the contradictions of living “on the borders” or “in the shadows.” I begin to challenge traditional definitions of the word “margins,” each of which focuses on some

limitation of the place or the person described. The inaccuracies and the inadequacies of these definitions become clearer —when applied to individual acts of self-articulation.

For Adelina Pisano — to live “in” and “on” the margins might well bear more positive implications. For these two women, in very different places and in very different ways, to live “in” and “on” the margins is, in many respects, to be free: to try to reach out, to speak out from behind the veil of silence, to take risks, to take chances, to open themselves to experience in what are possibly, although not assuredly, informative and enduring ways.

To live productively “in” and “on” the margins is to be “on edge,” to recognize and explore both the terms for experience as well as the relations between and among the terms, those seemingly silent gaps, those seemingly still spaces between one experience and another.

The voice of William James resonates as I pause to take a deep breath. “Experience itself, taken at large, can grow by its edges,” James reminds me. “Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected: often indeed, [life] seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn. In this line, we live prospectively as well as retrospectively.”³

I ponder those lines from James, and I think I understand the connection: the margin is not only a place, it is a locus for relations. It may even be an activity. It’s more — not less — than a noun. It’s a noun in process — like the word “education,” or “knowledge,” or “experience.”

I spend the rest of the flight conjuring up images that might sharpen the distinctions between and among such terms as “margins,” “borders,” “edges,” “boundaries,” and

“fringes.” I think first of the students I work with. I realize the margins are where most teachers of writing live in relation to students. It’s a location (a place) as well as an opportunity for us to demonstrate (an activity) the generosity distinguishing our work as teachers — the reciprocity we express in response to what they have written. I suddenly find it curious that teachers and students call such writing “marginal notes,” and I remind myself that I need to think more often — and more seriously — about the nature and the implications of writing.

Being “in” and “on” the margins of our students’ lives is where they ordinarily expect us to be. Versions of the dialectic surface in all corners of the academy. I begin to understand that the margins may well be where many students and faculty spend their time thinking and writing — even though every one of us is expected to do something quite different: to speak and think and write and perform at the center of the intellectual communities and the cultures in which each of us seeks to posit his or her voice.

My thoughts drift to the difficulties, to the strains, to the pain some — and perhaps many — students and teachers experience as they struggle with the pressures and expectations imposed on them: to toe the line rather than, as James says, to live in the line, that is to “live prospectively as well as retrospectively.”

The silence is broken by the sounds of my mother’s voice and by the painful edge of women’s stories, and I recall another. Francine du Plessix Gray’s account of a recurring — and harrowing—nightmare from her youth. “Facing a friend, I struggle for words and emit no sound,” she says. “I have an urgent message to share but am struck dumb. My jaw is clamped shut as in a metal vise. I gasp for breath and cannot set my tongue free. And at the

dream's end, my friend has fled, and I am locked into the solitude of silence.” du Plessix Gray attributes the nightmare, at least in part, to her father's impatience with her youthful writing, to his swift and sardonic tongue, and to his having constantly interrupted her when she tried to speak. Later as a student in a workshop at Black Mountain, du Plessix Gray submitted revisions of several prize-winning stories she wrote while a student at Barnard. Her mentor, no less an imposing figure than the 6 foot 8 inch poet Charles Olson, told her “You're writing pure junk. . . . If you want to be a writer keep it to a journal.... And above all don't try to publish anything for 10 years.”

Francine du Plessix Gray's first piece of fiction was published in The New Yorker one year after the distant deadline Olson had set for her. In struggling to come to terms with why she persisted at writing, she says: “I write out of a desire for revenge against reality, to destroy forever the stuttering powerless child I once was, to gain the love and attention that silenced child never had, to allay the dissatisfaction I still have with myself, to be something other than what I am. . . . I remain sustained,” she says, “by a definition of faith once offered me by Ivan Illich: ‘faith is a readiness for the surprise.’ I write because I have faith in the possibility that I can eventually surprise myself.”⁴

That image of a jaw clamped shut, that sense of revenge against reality, that definition of faith, that readiness for the surprise propel me back to the place I left nearly eight hours before.

I am standing at Adelina Pisano's bedside. She finally frees herself from the machines that regulated her recovery. She can talk now, but I know that she won't — not unless she has her teeth in. We're both nervous. We hold each other's hand tightly, but stiffly.

Neither of us dares to be the first to talk. I feel the quiet tension between us. I finally say: “I’m leaving tonight. I have to go. Susanne has been alone with the kids for a long time, and I start a new semester in two days.”

“I understand, she says.”

I tell her how happy I am to have spent time with her, even in such difficult circumstances. I tell her how sorry I am to leave, and I try to deflect attention from my sadness by reminding her of the funny stories we traded on the first day I visited her. She looks at me and fixes my attention on her eyes for what seems like a very long minute. Finally, she speaks. “I understand. I’ve caused you boys too much trouble already. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be all right.” Her voice rushes forward. “Listen, say hello to Susanne and the kids, and send me a new picture of Christine and Marc. The ones I have are getting old. I bet he’s grown a lot.”

She pauses, but only for a few seconds, perhaps to summon a word, to change the subject. “Oh, they say I can have a phone in my new room. Call me once in a while.” She drops her hand slightly, but her eyes hold mine. “You take care of yourself, do you hear . . . and write when you get a chance.”⁵

Donald McQuade

Notes

1. This quotation from Isak Dinesen appears as an epigraph to chapter five of Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (175).
2. See the "Preface" to Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands: La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.
3. William James makes this point in an essay, "A World of Pure Experience," in *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (42).
4. Francine du Plessix Gray's statement appeared in an essay in *The New York Times Book Review*, "I Write for Revenge Against Reality" (3).
5. Adelina Pisano died on August 6, 1991.

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