

“Once you have kids, it’s never about you again.”

I chewed this one over halfway across the Mississippi on the Tenth Avenue Bridge. My mother, on the phone, was explaining how she could still worry about my older brother. He is into his thirties with his own family. I had been heckling her for fretting over him.

“At least it *should* never be about you,” she went on in my silence.

I was thinking of how true that was in her case. For years, my every need was placed before her own, to the point that even after the homeless shelter, when we moved in to my aunt’s house in Duluth, my mother needed to be told that it was okay for her to eat, that there was enough. So I know what she was talking about, or at least I know what it looks like. But what does that feel like, to be on the margins of your own universe? Is it a heaviness? Does she feel the weight of each new soul strain against her like the yoke on the ox?

Then I remembered her voice. I played back her words in my head, “Once you have kids, it’s never about you again.” My mother had won first place for soprano in the Minnesota State Fair as a kid. That lilting voice that could turn so terse in the presence of misbehavior had escorted me into my dreams so often as a young boy as always she sang as I fell asleep. Even today, when I hear her voice, I sometimes feel the lightness of sleep.

Lightness.

There was lightness in her voice when she said that. “Once you have kids, it’s never about you again.” I have heard her words be heavy. At the age of seven, “I am sick and tired of being sick and tired” slogged through the air like an over-encumbered soldier with too-big boots and miles to go. But there was none of that sluggishness about her now.

I wrapped up our conversation. Charging up the steep, narrow stairs of my efficiency, I thought of all I had to do that day. Chores and errands swarmed my mind. Striking one off my mental list yielded only the time to do those behind it. Opening my apartment door, I was greeted by my two mewling kittens. My life was the very image of hectic that semester, and here like a Greek chorus were two sobbing kittens to confirm what I felt. I scooped up some dry cat food with their empty bowls in order to occupy their mouths while I set down at my computer. Without a second thought, I opened up the document I had been typing my British literature unit into. Working on my lesson plans although more homework was due in my methods courses at the university was a sort of Zen centering practice for me. As I would shuffle activities this way and that for students I was just getting to know, I would feel a security of purpose. I imagine it’s the feeling one gets when they’re doing what they know they should be doing. All my other obligations for the day would fade to white noise. Here I was doing something that mattered, and I felt that I should feel the weight of one hundred forty students upon me. Fact is, I felt as light as a feather.



"everybuddy
pull out a sheet of paper
yr going to reflect"

groans n' moans rise like steam over a lake

i look into my blank sheet of paper like a mirror
"mine don't work!" i alert the prof

bewildered me – mine ears tell me the 'hort snickers
"just do yr best" consoles me the prof

i strain my eyes into the paper again
like a child looking for animals in the clouds
then i see me! i'm the blank stuff
unfinished busyness, see?

then I set about caulking the paper with what i'd like to be

"Well, I've got to get going, I have SVP in half an hour."

"SVP?"

"Yeah."

"What's SVP?"

"Oh, it's a TLA."

"Naturally."

"Ha ha. A TLA is a three-letter acronym."

"I see."

"And SVP is solar vehicle project. The electrical engineering department loves its TLAs!"

"I suppose the college of education does, too. ESL, ELL, UBD, BPR, PLT, AYP, MCA, ACT, M.Ed."

"It's an institution."

"Pretty soon TLAs will need their own college."

"Ha ha."

"When you add in NCLB, L1 and L2, all these acronyms strung together start to sound like the mother of all Street Fighter cheat codes."



With all the warmth of an ER waiting room,
Peik hall's sickly pumpkin-orange chairs
yawn at passersby from the "lounge";
they have terrible breath.

Then comes the cohort.

Two at first, then three more, and four, then five,
then you stop counting.

They gather on the chairs, the tables, against the walls,
by the trash cans, in front of the vending machines,
by the microwave, at the kiosk.

They settle over the basement of Peik hall like dust.

Watching all of this unfold, I half expect David Attenborough
to step out of the brush and explain in a loud whisper
that we gather Tuesdays and Thursdays,
that our eating habits are atrocious,
that we are some of the more resilient creatures
he has ever seen.



As the sun sets (see what I did there?) on the last day this cohort will for sure meet, it seems to me time to stitch these many experiences together into a single tapestry. Certainly, the piles of course readings are in there, so too are the pages of reflection, the thousand or so stray notepad documents on my desktop all titled “reading notes,” the hours of pity parties get dishonorable mention, as do the pounds of Cheezits eaten out of the vending machine. All of these details, however, are incredibly low on Bloom’s taxonomy, reference-level stuff. For the meaty bits, the inference-level details sitting high atop Bloom’s, I return irresistibly to those moments in CI 5441 and CI 5461 when I was reminded why being a teacher looked so good from my desk as a student five years ago in high school. Participating in these two courses was a bit like having a magician methodically walk me through how they did each trick. Now that I am equipped with more than the simple ability to identify an effective lesson, I am eager to push out into the world and see if I can’t recreate these moments for my own students. Thank you, Jessie.

