

Dear writers: I look forward to getting to know you and your writing in Huma-101, Elements of Craft. At the request of students in a previous section of this course, I want to share a short introduction to my own writer's journey: why I came to writing and how I stayed.

The why I came is probably similar to most writers. I always loved to read, have carried books around, and hold my share of embarrassing stories of being lost in a book, including getting fussed at by an elementary school teacher in Austin, Texas, where I grew up, for reading through the national anthem (I was in the middle of a great book and hadn't noticed the rest of the class was singing). As a kid, I liked to write poems and plot out novels (though I never actually wrote them—not until adulthood). I liked to keep journals.

Writing became a focused endeavor for me in college, when I was a student at Harvard from 1997-2001. I had applied for but been rejected from several Harvard College creative writing classes, and so my sophomore year I looked elsewhere: I signed up for a Radcliffe Seminar (community education course) taught by a writer named Hope Hale Davis. The title was "Journal-Writing: Weaving your Autobiography." When I showed up on the first day, I thought I was in the wrong room: all of the other participants were over seventy and the teacher, Hope, was 96. I was nineteen. After our collective initial surprise, the older writers welcomed me, and I wrote with Hope's group for the next four years, crafting weekly autobiographical pieces and turning them in, receiving Hope's feedback, trying to improve and revise. This weekly practice of drafting, crafting, and sharing paid off: writing became a habit, and I improved at it. As a college senior, I was accepted to write a creative thesis in the English Department, which felt like a great triumph. I wrote a memoir.

The year after college, I stayed in Cambridge to continue writing with Hope's group—Hope was 100 at that time, and I remained in her seminar until she died a month short of age 101. I took on odd writing jobs, such as doing research for Harvard's Expository Writing Dept., tutoring at a writing center, and writing Sparknotes (the highlight there: I got to write the summaries of *Harry Potter* 2-4, as well as *Princess Bride*!) Because my teachers had always been important to me, I applied for several teaching jobs, including one at my old high school in Austin, but as I had no teaching experience, nobody bit.

By this point, I was 21 years old and had completed two full-length books, both memoirs, neither published. I set out to write a third. But the free-fall of early adulthood, the unanchored feeling of having no schedule, and the plain fact that for a college graduate with an English degree, one's twenties are pretty much one big google, overwhelmed me. Also after a year of unsteadily claiming the job of "writer" and having no answer when people asked me what I had had published, I felt discouraged. I took the GRE and scurried off to graduate school the following year.

Graduate school, where I spent the bulk of my twenties, felt like a luxury vacation after my single year out in the "real world." For one thing, it served as an incubator, a safe spot to keep on writing, but under the veil of having a concrete, nameable role in society ("What do you do?" "I am a grad student!") But my biggest reason for pursuing a graduate degree in English was twofold: I wanted to become a better reader because I believed it would help me become a better writer. I also believed I would enjoy teaching, which of course turned out to be true.

I moved to Washington D.C. to get a Master's Degree at Georgetown, where I wrote a thesis on the role of fairy tales in the thinly-veiled autobiographical writing of Jazz Age icon Zelda Fitzgerald. I

had a great time, got a dog, lived by myself for the first time, wrote a scattering of poems, and generally was a happy grownup who got to work with ideas every day. After graduating I took a year to work, doing legal research-ish tasks at a law firm in Austin, where my entire family—from grandparents to cousins—still lived. I completed my third unpublished book (first novel) while working at the law firm, and then I applied to University of Texas to get a Ph.D. in English. I applied to four MFAs too, got into none. I was bummed but not discouraged. I had been in the writing world long enough to know that writers, unlike lawyers, professors, and the other careers I'd considered, can be made in more ways than one.

The Ph.D. was fun the way that the Master's Degree was fun, and by this point I knew that I was, even in the academic world, a creative writer. I found a few friends who were also closet creative writers and we banded together and wrote our term papers sitting at patio tables around the Gregory Gymnasium hot tub (unexpected perk of attending a Division I athletic school). UT-Austin provided an incubator for my life as a professional writer in surprising ways. It was in those four years (2005-2009) that I tried on all of the public writerly roles that I would later play professionally—and as a consequence I started to own the role of writer within my community and not just in my heart.

First, I started a literary journal with my best friend—a quarterly that published the work of Austin-area artists and writers. We called it *Farfelu* (French for nonsense) and were helped generously by the literary community: bookstore owners, radio DJs, retired copywriters, a whole community of gurus who wished to see a young magazine succeed. We succeeded by publishing 13 issues, but always were in the red financially. In the end, my co-editor and I parted ways with entirely different certainties: I knew that being around writing and writers energized me, I loved the making of books, and my experience as editor deepened my resolve; my co-editor knew she was done with the writing business, found it boring and not 3D enough, and went onto become a professional dog-walker.

Also, the September I started graduate school at UT, I applied and was hired to teach composition as an adjunct at Austin Community College, which set the template for the kind of professor I would become. The community college demographic had all sorts of life experience and varied in age from 18 to over 65. I loved teaching there. I loved the fact that every single class, no matter how I planned it, became a discussion, a singular medley of the questions, beliefs, and skills of the writers in the room. I loved the diversity of our collective wisdom: I knew more about writing and reading than my students did, but my students knew more than I did about everything else. Each class was a lovely organic beast, and I felt like I had found my home in the classroom. I taught a class every semester in the four years it took for me to graduate and become Dr. McKetta.

Staying a writer in graduate school had been relatively easy. I wrote one fairly shaky novel entitled *The Diary of Prince Charming* (my 4th book - unpublished) and I continued writing poems—which, unlike novels, fit easily into a spare hour, rather than taking years, and seemed an easy genre for grad students to practice. Bolstered by the 'behind the scenes' editorial knowledge of *Farfelu*, and also because at last I felt certain that rejection would not un-make me a writer, I began sending my poems out to literary journals. I made an excel spreadsheet to keep track of them all, color-coding which poems were rejected, under consideration, or accepted (I am happy to share the chart if anyone wants.) Most poems were rejected, but at last a tiny press called Monkey Puzzle Press accepted one called "Sanctuary." I was pretty shy (am still) about sharing my successes, so I celebrated solo; but the first publication felt significant.

Several lasting writing lessons came from graduate school. One was the idea that each piece of writing, however long or short, had an “invisible center of gravity” (a claim, stance, or question) from which all imagery and other parts should stem. I understood this as an academic writer and I was starting to see it as a creative writer. If I could locate it, I could figure out what writing to keep in a draft, and what to leave out. Second, I discovered the idea of compost. I was told by a professor to write efficiently: to use classes as a way to write chapters of a dissertation, so I could finish the program more quickly. I took each opportunity I could to write about either A) Zelda Fitzgerald or B) fairy tales or C) life writing/autobiography. My dissertation combined these three areas, as well as the bulk of my Master’s thesis and the “compost” of my term papers, and I wrote the thing in about six months, which my advisors pronounced record time. This was helped along by my husband, who I married in 2008. We were impatient to start our own life on neutral soil outside the city where I had grown up, so he stood by the door in our ant-and-roach-infested apartment (remember, this is Texas) while I hopped on the 9:19am bus each morning to campus, where I wrote for four hours each weekday at Gregory Gym. I bribed myself with a half-price student massage for every seven days I held to my schedule, not to mention hot tub dips after a day’s writing. Hence lessons #3 and #4: writers need treats, and a book needs its own time and place.

When the dissertation was done, I dedicated it to Hope Hale Davis, defended it, and was done.

But before I could leave Texas, something came up: my old high school called. An English teacher had left unexpectedly, and would I teach four sections of sophomore English? I said yes. I began the week of preterm teacher in-service the day following my dissertation defense. My former teachers were now my colleagues, and it took a while before I felt comfortable calling Mr. Fenton “Alan,” and Dr. Hines “Jenny.” I started a lunchtime creative writing club and advised the student literary journal. I had some rock star students who I still keep in touch with, some apathetic students, and many in the middle. In the middle of the year, I took two days off, partially funded by the school, to attend an Amherst Writers & Artist teacher training to learn how to facilitate writing workshops—like my early ones with Hope. At the end of the academic year, I moved with my husband, our two dogs, and a gestating baby girl, to Boise, Idaho. This was summer 2010.

Parenthood and writing-as-career came at the same time for me: I think for this reason, discipline came easier than ever before, because if I had an hour while the baby slept, I used that hour. I also started waking up early, and I never developed much of a procrastination habit—I didn’t have time. We invested in building a backyard writing studio with sleeping loft, a tiny house we called “The Shed.” This would be the place for writing and for guests to stay. I had no official job (neither did my husband—we were both inventing as we went), but I knew for certain that I wanted to spend my days writing, teaching, and hanging out with babies, in just proportions.

In Idaho I applied for a bunch of college adjunct teaching jobs, to no avail. So I set up writing workshops in “The Shed”. I taught writing using prompts: 8 minutes on the prompt, “Here is a map to where I live.” 6 minutes on “Something I inherited that I won’t pass on.” That sort of thing. The prompts worked for the writers, and I found that—in my own projects—they worked for me. This ability to write a lot in a very few minutes proved a vital skill during the first year of my daughter’s life. She was born early in January 2011, and my husband and I ambitiously, lovingly, and obviously decided we would share childcare 50/50 and each work half days. What it meant, of course, was that we were both on-duty all day, and for a year nobody worked.

And while the benefit of our equitable sharing of domestic labor and insistence on DIY careers, of course, was that we both knew intimately the deep challenges and deeper love of parenting, as well as the resourcefulness that comes from trying to start a business, the disadvantage was that by the time we had a 6-month old, we had dipped far into our savings and were feeling desperate. We rented out my backyard writing studio to a college couple for a little extra income. My husband got a real estate license. When the Boise house market fell and interest rates were low, we bought a huge house in a downtown neighborhood and rented out rooms on Airbnb, which kept us fed and housed as we sorted out our weird, uncharted careers. Once again, as in the year I graduated college, I could not name my job for which my degree had prepared me, but I knew it involved writing.

That first year of my daughter's life, I sent out writing frantically, during my daughter's naps, in my constantly interrupted "off-duty" time, and in the early, early morning, to magazines and contests. Increasingly, my short work got accepted—the two most exciting for me were a *Real Simple Magazine* blog contest (I wrote on Hope) and a Boise short fiction contest (I wrote on life in our roachy, anty Austin apartment). These small successes buoyed me. I told a story on stage at Story Story Night, Boise's version of The Moth—it was my first experience presenting my writing to an audience. It was the nicest audience possible, and I told a ridiculous (and true!) story about being addicted to chapstick. I signed up for a Monday afternoon writing class taught by a Boise friend who, like me, ran workshops out of her home. In these quiet weekly sessions, I wrote about an 18-year old girl in a fictional place called Dragon Island. Over several months, without ever measuring or rereading my work, I generated 200 pages of compost on this girl and this world.

Then by the time my daughter turned one, I was about to lose my mind. I had a novel in my head, the Dragon Island one, and no time to write it. So my husband and I enrolled our tiny, not-yet walking girl in a half-day Montessori-based school, and each day I dropped her at 7:30 and picked her up at 12:30, and for the middle four hours I holed up in a borrowed office and wrote my novel. Like the dissertation: a book needs a time (8-12) and a place (1414 Hays St.) I finished the novel in an exhilarated rush and titled it *Fear of the Deep*.

That spring, I received a call from my first employer after college, one of the generous adults who hired me to do research for the Harvard Expository Writing Program. She wanted to hire me for a brief research project. She was interested to hear in my writing workshops, my Ph.D. and four years of community college teaching, and she suggested I apply to teach a course at Harvard Summer School. I did; I was accepted; I spent a summer in Cambridge, sharing an apartment with my mother and my 1.5-year old girl, and I loved it entirely. The following summer I spent a second summer teaching at Harvard. I asked the head of the writing program if I could teach more classes. She offered me a section of Expo E-15 online in the fall of 2013. Hungrily I took it.

During this time, I had begun sending out my novel—by this point I had written five full-length books of fiction and memoir, in addition to several children's books, and I had published none. From 2013 onward, I set a goal to write and publish a book a year, a naïvely ambitious goal in one sense, but I recognized that some books get written quickly, some slowly, and I also felt interested and willing, in the changing publishing world, to publish with small presses, large presses, and also on my own. My first book of poetry was accepted by Monkey Puzzle Press, the same press that accepted my first poem: after dozens of rejections from contests, I sent an email to the magazine's editor and attached the manuscript. He said yes, and within a year, we had a chapbook entitled *The Fairy Tales Mammals Tell*.

But my novel was rejected again and again—30, 50, 70 rejections. This discouraged me deeply, as it discourages many writers. I stopped writing fiction for a few years as a result of this discouragement. I did not give up on the novel—rather, I reconsidered whether I could deepen the world into a second novel, a third—but I accepted that I would need to become a better craftsperson at novels, and that I needed to keep myself from the paralysis of getting discouraged. To do this, I knew I needed to find a reliable audience, even if it was not for that novel yet.

The solitude of a writer's life can make a writer feel invisible, and writers (by my and most people's estimation) need readers, so to keep myself going I started a blog called The Tuesday Writer that shared writing tips; then a second blog called Poetry for Strangers, in which every week I asked a stranger for a word and wrote a poem using that word. Using the graduate school compost method of repurposing material, I turned both of these blogs into short books (respectively *The Creative Year: 52 Workshops for Writers* and *Poetry for Strangers*). I decided to set up a small press and publish both myself, and both sold about as many copies as my first book, which is to say modestly. But both books were picked up by writing teachers for use in their classroom, which felt like a great honor.

Also during this time when I had a young child and a part-time teaching job for Harvard, I was asked to write two books in new genres: one a poetry/art collaboration with a visual artist who I admire named Troy Passey (formerly a stranger for the Poetry for Strangers blog: he had enjoyed the poems and we had become friends); and the other a biography of my grandfather, a former coal miner who went on to become a world-famous chemical engineer. I said yes and yes. Both of these books gave me a respite from my fiction-writing, which seemed at a standstill. It felt like a relief to research a nonfiction project again, and to compile poetic lines to give to a brilliant artist to illustrate. These felt—not easy—but straightforward, clear, achievable. The collaboration we published on our own in 2016. The biography took me from 2013-2016 (during its writing, I had another child, a son). This pushed me into becoming a 5am writer, which I still am.

The primary highlights of writing the biography (called *Energy: The Life of John J. McKetta Jr.*, and published in 2017 by Univ. Texas Press) were threefold: one, my grandfather (now age 102!) got to read it. He has read it at least five times. He actually caught the first typos that all of my other first readers missed. Two, because he is a great role model of mine, a writer/professor/parent/traveler, I learned A TON about how he modeled his life and sustained his energy over a century. The ability to study his life in my mid-30s and internalize these lessons, even if I am still figuring out how to adapt them, has been incredible. (Also, it got me researching centenarians, which I am now obsessed with—if you start reading about them, I bet you will be too.) A third highlight of this book was that it was published by my first big press: University of Texas Press, a university publisher that was dreamy to work with and also that gave me a glimpse into a different kind of publishing beyond independent press and solo-publishing (*Farfelu* and my own books).

Looking back on this rattling, shaky era, the unstable years between Harvard College in 2001 and teaching at Harvard Extension a decade and a half later, from wanting to be a writer but having no idea how, to having writing be a certainty, a backbone to my days, one thing I did well is that I said yes. Over and over and over, to any writing-related job anyone asked me to do. I taught workshops to 5th graders, kindergarteners, senior centers. I said yes to research positions, magazine journalism jobs that paid in pizza coupons, and anyone who asked to publish anything I had written. As I get older and busier with responsibilities, I say no more than I used to, but I try always to keep yes as my default. Because I have found that one experience leads to another; one book gives the

confidence to write another book; one person from the past may show up again, years later, and offer a new avenue into the future; old compost, in a later season, blooms.

Also, I believe I was wise in my willingness to forge my own path, to compromise on things that, in the end, weren't necessary to my life as a writer. My needs were clear and simple: I just wanted to find a balance between writing and teaching and parenting. I didn't want to do any of them to the exclusion of the others, so I needed to be flexible. When I wasn't getting hired to teach in colleges, I taught my own backyard workshops. When I was hitting my head against fiction, I changed course and wrote in other genres. Where I have never uncompromised is in my insistence that writing requires an uninterrupted time and a place. I built a backyard office after having exactly one poem published. I guard 5-7:30am as my protected writing hours (not to say many others in my house are vying for it). I protect my solitude, my need to write. Early on, I relegated writing to the category of 'need,' not 'want'—even before I had anything to show for it.

On this subject of compromise, after five years living in our big Boise house and renting out rooms, doing laundry and serving breakfast to interesting guests, feeling sometimes heavy with house and fretful that we had become messy big house people, in the fall of 2017 my family leased our whole house and now live (oh irony!) in my backyard writing studio, a tiny house (250 sq. ft.) that appeals to our sense of minimalism and allows us to spend more time doing the things we love: for me, writing and teaching, hiking and cooking, hanging out with our kids (now 7 and 3), and traveling a lot (I write this in January 2018 from Hawaii, where we have spent a month between semesters; after spring semester ends, I'll meet my dad in London to hike the Thames path.) I keep a small office a few blocks away.

Many people come to writing, but those of us who chose to stay writers must keep chipping away, often humbly and for a long time invisibly, until writing finds a place in our days and weeks. Sometimes the fit is funny and for that reason, every writer's path looks different and it often feels tricky to find connective tissue between them. Those of us who stay with writing will usually write for a long time before anybody sees what we've written. We will say yes, we will set boundaries, we will compromise, and we will keep writing. In the end, I believe that creative people will always end up leading creative lives.

So today, now what? I am working on fiction again—this time a novel based on a fairy tale (will tell you more in class, if you wish). My artist-collaborator friend has asked to do a second book, and I said yes. I still continue the blog PoetryforStrangers.com. I still teach occasionally in my community, in schools or senior centers or organizations, and I would like to start offering workshops when I travel. I teach 2-3 classes each fall and spring for Harvard Extension School, and I travel to Cambridge to teach 2 classes each summer. I love teaching at Harvard, with its small classes of brilliant students, and its acceptance that all involved have full lives. I admire, learn from, and stay in touch with my students. To those of you who have read this far, I thank you for your curiosity and interest, and to all of you, I feel lucky to get to meet you this semester or next, and to hear your own stories of why you came to writing and how you have chosen to stay.

Warmly,

Elisabeth Sharp McKetta
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Lanikai, Hawaii

