

THE DAY THE UNIVERSITY TESTED ITS TEXT-MESSAGE ALERT to every cell phone on campus, I assigned epitaphs to my “Introduction to Poetry Writing” class.

“Every morning when you get up, write an epitaph!” I watched them scribble something. “That’s good,” I encouraged them, “start right away!,” though I knew that what they were scribbling were not epitaphs, but “every morning when you get up write an epi . . . epi . . . epi . . . ”

“And while you’re at it, turn off your cell phones!” I always say this the first class of the semester, but I didn’t realize that now they would be unable to receive the text-message alert test. If a real wacko wired to a bomb tried shooting his way to fame inside this very door, we’d have been unwarned. I consoled myself with the fact that the Virginia Tech wacko who had killed fellow students had been *enrolled* in poetry class. If there was a wacko, he could be in *my* class, writing his epitaph.

“An epitaph a day is like an apple a day, but the opposite, actually, because an apple a day keeps the doctor away, but an epitaph is ready if you happen to die that day. The apple part is *rhymed poetry*, the dying part is *blank verse*.”

I gave them examples of famous epitaphs, by *blank verse poets* like Ted Berrigan, “See you later,” and “Have a nice

day,” and by *rhyming poets*, such as John Keats, who only wrote part of his own epitaph, either because he died too young, or because his executors found it too terse: “This grave contains all that was mortal of a young English poet who on his death bed in the bitterness of his heart at the malicious power of his enemies desired these words to be engraven on his tomb stone: ‘Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water,’” “which doesn’t rhyme,” I explained, “and not only doesn’t it rhyme, but the poet’s name is *entirely* missing. In this regard, at least, they respected his wish even as they choked it in prose.”

“It’s a good thing that when I visited the grave of John Keats in Rome in the Protestant cemetery where he is buried next to Gregory Corso, a cat who lives in the cemetery stole the *panino* with mortadella from my jacket pocket and made off with it in the direction of a pyramid built CE by a Roman senator during one of the periodic Egyptian crazes of the Romans. Too bad too, because I didn’t have any money and I’d gotten the sandwich from a nun in a charity-dispensing convent. Behind the grave of John Keats grows a lyre-shaped tree that is obviously pruned carefully, though the cemetery itself, at the time of my visit, was in a state of neglect. Next to John Keats is buried his friend Joseph Severn, whose epitaph notes that he is the friend of John Keats, the poet buried next to him. So that even though John Keats’s *name* is missing *from his own grave*, he is made present by his dead friend next to him, which is *a kind of rhyme*. What does this tell us?”

A skinny mop-styled redhead girl fingering what looked like a worry bead that was actually the earbud of her iPod said: “That if you don’t write your epigram you might have to rely on your friends?”

“Precisely. I now assign you in addition to an *epitaph* an

epigram. For this class, you must also write an *epigram* every day. An epigram is a very short poem with a *clever twist* at the end that shows off your *wit*. For example, ‘*In my next life I will make a lot of croaking noises / but I will live a long time / because in my next life / I will be a gold frog / like the one that sits on your desk, father.*’ This is an epigram I made up in the style of the *Roman poet Lucian*. Now, if I was in a hurry, I might combine my assignments into an *epitogram*, which is an *epitaph plus an epigram*, something like, ‘*I am a gold frog in this life / and I will leap at you / from behind this tombstone / when you are finished reading.*’ And then I would jump out and scare the shit out of the poor pilgrim to my grave, who happens to be an executive for a U.S. insurance company with a penchant for poetry, like *Wallace Stevens*, who is vacationing by visiting the graves of *important poets* around the world. Can you identify the *wit* in this *epitogram*?”

A boy with a crewcut spoke from the back: “The price of gold, like, from the time the poet died and the time when the business guy was visiting?”

“Very *astute*. The business guy maybe was amazed by how cheap gold used to be when those poets lived and how much it was now, and he couldn’t feel his amazement properly until he saw the poets’ graves. That was one weird cat, right, but I’m not sure *witty* is the word for him. Before going to visit *John Keats*, he visited the following poets: *Walt Whitman* in Camden, New Jersey, *Emily Dickinson* in Amherst, Massachusetts, *Edgar Allan Poe* in Baltimore, Maryland, *Tristan Tzara* at the Montparnasse cemetery in Paris, France, *Guillaume Apollinaire* in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, France, where he also stopped briefly to say hello to *Jim Morrison*. He saw *George Bacovia* in Bacău, Romania, *Boris Pasternak* in Moscow, Russia, before his tomb was

desecrated by vandals in 2006, and *César Vallejo* in Montrouge, the communist cemetery in Paris, France.”

I looked around the class to see if maybe Jim Morrison elicited recognition. A soft stirring. Nothing much.

“What does this *say* about this man?”

“That he’s rich?” tried the future jokester-in-chief of the class, a square-shouldered boy named Bennigan. Class laughed. “And that there are a lot of *poets* buried in Paris, France?” Another boy slapped him five. Villanelles for you, Bennigan.

“Yes, poets are buried in Paris to make it easier for tourists. Poets are one big family. Anyway, at each grave this man took pictures. A couple of years later when he was found shot dead in the small apartment he kept secretly in lower Manhattan, the police detective in charge of the case, Detective Emma Flores, took pictures of these photographs of the poets’ graves, framed along the walls. She believed that there was a connection. Frustrated by what she believed was her *ignorance of poetry*, she enrolled at the New School and took a beginner class in Writing Poetry with *poet and teacher Sharon Mesmer*. You would be right to ask, ‘Did she solve the case?’”

Nobody said anything.

“The answer is no. Professor Mesmer’s method of writing poetry at that time, in the early years of the twenty-first century, consisted of entering a number of blog postings into a Googlator, a program that mixes up words in *strange combinations* and returns them to you in *novel forms*.”

“I thought that this was supposed to be a *poetry* class,” said a disaffected voice from the back, with hair hanging over the mouth, a voice, I instantly thought, destined for greatness. It exuded intelligence from under all that hair, like an animal’s breath on a frosty morning.

“You must speak clearly in this class. You must *enunciate*. What did you say?”

“There is a *novel writing* class,” he enunciated.

“Yes, you could have taken that and yes, it’s true, there are *novel forms* in which to write *novels*, but when I speak of *novel forms*, I generally mean them to apply to *poetry* because *poetry generates novel forms more quickly and more easily than novels*, which are long. What is your name?”

“Matthew Borden.”

Matthew Borden, as I immediately found out by googling his family tree on my desktop computer, was the grandchild of the founder of the famous milk empire. For many years I’d seen his gleaming family trucks hurtling milk on the highways.

“Matt, your family business is pretty poetic. Do they approve of your interest in poetry?” I had no idea if Matthew was interested in poetry—maybe he was in it just for his English requirement—but I saw bursting udders on frosty mornings being milked by 4-H beauty queens and I became momentarily lost. I knew that machines did the milking now, and then there were details like penned animals and hormones, but there you have it. Poetry.

Matt said, “My side of the family is pretty artistic. We have a farm of super-cows, more like a showcase for kids. The animals live in heated stalls that are better than some public housing. Their names and genetic history are carved on wood over each stall. Some of them even have small televisions for entertainment. The best of them eat apples that are hand-fed to them by *German-speaking Wisconsin high school girls*.”

He couldn’t have enunciated more clearly. The face that was hidden before came out of its hairy nest, looking consumptive. He was not a mumblor, but had widespread ec-

zema, covering both cheeks. His eyes flashed. “There are some poets in the Borden family!”

“Lizzie?” asked Bennigan.

Matt Borden grinned. “My grandmother was a personal friend of Queen Marie of Romania. They exchanged *poetry*.”

I had to admit it. I’d been out-googled. This kid knew not only that I was from Romania, but that Queen Marie, his grandmother’s friend, wrote verses in the 1920s and made many friends in America, including a lumber baron in Washington in whose castle she spent the night, leaving in the morning for the next stop on her triumphal train tour. The baron transformed the castle into a museum dedicated to her memory. It was the most touching one-night stand in the history of poetry.

I asked him if he possessed any of his grandmother’s poems and whether he might read some in class.

Matt Borden shook his head sadly. “Her poetry was buried with her in the grave in North Dakota. She left in her will that all her books had to be buried in bookcases around her tomb. She only published one book and she has that with her inside the sculpture.”

“A *catfalque*?”

“Yeah, well, it’s a story. The family had to import a French sculptor, originally she wanted Rodin, but he was already dead, to make a life-size bronze of Diana the Huntress in my grandma’s likeness. She was buried standing inside of it . . .”

I was astonished, and the class was nervously fingering earbuds, doodling in their open notebooks, shifting in their seats, etc. I didn’t blame them. It was a wacky story. I knew it was true because Queen Marie’d been a flapper, friend of Isadora Duncan and Rodin, among others. If the Queen and

the Borden woman had palled about in Paris in the 1920s, they'd have surely posed naked before Rodin at one time or another.

“And the statue of Diana, the grave, stands in the family cemetery bearing a poetic inscription? What does it say?”

“Well, actually, no. Grandma died in the Eighties when they removed a bunch of intercontinental ballistic missiles from the Dakotas because of the SALT Treaty, and she bought a decommissioned nuclear silo. It's thirty stories deep. She stands in the center of what used to be the control room on the bottom.”

I didn't quite understand. If she was buried in the family cemetery, how could she be resting in a decommissioned silo . . . unless . . .?

Matt guessed my unspoken question. “Yeah. She also left in her will that the family cemetery had to be moved into the silo. Now we are all on different levels, buried into the walls between bookshelves. The place is pretty big, there is a lot more room. All of us have spaces in there already, me too, with my birthdate engraved, because I'm not dead.”

“Not yet!” said Bennigan. Nobody laughed. He knew that no matter how funny he was going to be in the future, he would not elicit such deeply emotional scent from a room full of people, such girlish sweat, such creepy-crawly terror in the armpits . . . Magnificent. The classroom was like a stall filled with excited mammals. They gave off pheromones. Terror. Desire. Matt Borden was Lord Byron.

“Matt, I'm not quite getting the picture, would you very much mind coming up here and drawing this unusual structure on the blackboard?”

“No problem.” Looking bored, he strolled to the blackboard. He was overweight and sloppy, his jeans hung low

and the plaid flannel shirt hung out of them in the back. He took his time, chalk in hand, eyes half-closed. Then he drew. The silo-cemetery looked like this:

Matt strolled back. He had the bored air of someone who



could do anything he might be asked, like solve a quantum equation, but he only did it as a personal favor. He himself was bored by all earthly things because he knew them well, though he knew that many other people, for reasons he didn't quite understand, didn't.

"And the *epitaph*? What is written on her sculpture-grave?" I was trying to get back to teaching *poetry* proper, which is what they paid me for.

"There are no *words*. She's Diana the Huntress, bronze by Louis Kleppner, Rodin imitator."

There are no words. More dreadful things were never spoken on the cold hillside. Not in Intro to Poetry Writing, anyway.

I took the deep breath customary in this sort of situation, unique as it was. Taking a deep breath can, if done right, take a thing out of uniqueness and place it in a genus. Matt's was a *family* story.

I got up and turned to the blackboard. "I'm going to write down for you *the tools of poetry*. Take note. By next week, you must have eight of them. There are two that have a purpose I'm not going to reveal to you until midterm." I wrote:

THE TOOLS OF POETRY

1. A goatskin notebook for writing down dreams
2. Mont Blanc fountain pen (extra credit if it belonged to Mme Blavatsky)
3. A Chinese coin or a stone in your pocket for rubbing
4. Frequenting places where you can overhear things
5. Tiny recorders, spyglasses, microscopic listening devices
6. A little man at the back of your head
7. The Ghost-Companion

8. Susceptibility to hypnosis
9. Large sheets of homemade paper, a stack a foot thick
10. A subscription to cable TV

“To number five, there is an exception,” I said. “You cannot record anything said in this class because I don’t want to go to prison for things I’ve said. Intro to Poetry Writing is like the confessional. Things said here are like things only your priest or your therapist is allowed to hear. Nobody in this class is permitted to repeat anything anybody in this class said or wrote. The reason for your goatskin notebook is so you can write an oath in blood in it, swearing never to whisper a word of what we say here.”

I looked around. “Only kidding,” I added, seeing some sincerely frightened faces, “there is no blood oath. But with the Internet these days it’s hard to keep things discreet. I realize that this is not why you’re here, that some of you may even want to be famous so that everybody in the world can read your poetry, but you must hold your horses until Poetry Writing 4007, which comes after Intro 2007, and is being taught by a terrible poet and execrable human being, even though he’s a colleague of mine.”

I waited out the chuckles, and continued. “The goatskin notebook is for you to write your dreams in. Every day without fail you must write down what you dreamt even if you haven’t slept in weeks, which is what I did when I was your age. In addition to dreams you must write down *poetic ideas*, which are these thoughts that come to you when you least expect them. Until now, you probably thought of these kinds of sudden thoughts as annoying, like involuntary twitches or muscle spasms, but they are actually *poetic ideas*. You are no longer allowed to dismiss them. You must write them down in your goatskin notebook. Also in your goatskin notebook

you must jot down *things that you are not supposed to hear*. Once you start frequenting places where you can overhear things, you must listen for *things that you are not supposed to hear*, even if, as it often happens, you *mishear* them. *Mishearing* is one of the *muses of poetry*. There are *ten muses of poetry*.”

I stood up and wrote on the blackboard, to the left of the Borden family cemetery:

THE TEN MUSES OF POETRY

1. Mishearing
2. Misunderstanding
3. Mistranslating
4. Mismanaging
5. Mislaying
6. Misreading
7. Misappropriating cliches
8. Misplacing objects belonging to roommates
or lovers
9. Misguided thoughts at inappropriate times,
funerals, etc.
10. Mississippi (the river)

“Are we clear on this? Be clear on this because all of it is part of your next week’s assignment. The *epitogram* is a permanent assignment, an everyday thing, but in addition you’ll get a *special* assignment every week. You have to forgive my handwriting, I was taught cursive in Europe by a German-trained teacher. ‘Madame Blavatsky’ is spelled with a ‘y’ at the end. Number two of your rules is to help place you within the family of poets. Every poet worth his or her salt, and, trust me, this is the only reward we get for the hard work we do, and in this sense we are still one with the an-

cient Romans who valued salt above all else, as does, I'm sure, the Borden family, whose cows, no matter what their level of culture, still require their salt licks, every salty poet, then, had a good fountain pen. The best of all fountain pens is the Mont Blanc, but it's terribly expensive because of its gold nib and reputation. A Mont Blanc that had belonged to Madame Blavatsky would be the instrument through which the disembodied voices of angels and demons would have traveled into the many volumes of books dictated to her by these otherworldly entities. In other words, you would be possessing an angelic instrument that, should it turn up on eBay, would fetch easily one to three hundred thousand dollars. Your extra credit for owning such a pen would amount to one fourth of your final grade. You wouldn't have one of *these*, Matthew?"

"We do, actually, but it's been buried with grandma."

"Let me explain number six in the context of Madame Blavatsky's fountain pen, before I get to number seven, which is the most important part of your assignment. Are we being funny, Mr. Borden? No? Good. Number six, *a little man at the back of your head*, was called that by *the poet Ted Berrigan*, in an interview. He meant, I believe, that there is a little man at the back of every poet's head who dictates things to the poet. The *poet Ted Berrigan* lived in chauvinistic days, in the Sixties of the last century. A decade later, he might have said *the little man/woman at the back of your head*, and a few months later *the little person at the back of your head*, and not long after that, *the person at the back of your head*, and maybe even later, in like 1981, he might have said just *a voice at the back of your head*, 'person' having meanwhile gone the way of 'man' and 'man/woman' and 'little man/woman,' discredited by poets who no longer believed in 'persons,' and not long after that, he might not have

said ‘voice,’ the idea of ‘voice,’ of ‘having a voice’ having been hurled down the garbage chute of poetry, to be soon followed by ‘the back of,’ a phrase implying something hierarchical and unsavory. He would have been left only with the word ‘head,’ which means so many things he’d have preferred to not speak at all. Which for *the poet Ted Berrigan* would have been impossible. On the other hand, *the poet Ted Berrigan* wouldn’t have paid the slightest attention to those shifts because when he discovered and named *a little man at the back of your head*, he had already used many terrific things that the little man had said, and once these things were written down, no revisionism could erase them. So I’m using number six, *a little man at the back of your head*, as a historical personage, like somebody out of Shakespeare, who whispers poetry to you and answers the questions you didn’t know you had. Let me amend that: the *little man at the back of your head* answers questions you don’t know the answer to, rather than asking the questions himself, though he’s not above it. When you write your next week’s assignment, use *whatever the little man at the back of your head says*, no matter how nonsensical, because in combination with number two and number seven, you might just be lucky enough to land a poem. If you employ, that is, *the ten muses of poetry*.”

I noticed that they had stopped taking notes. Students! Accursèd youth!

“I will now explain number seven, the most important part of your assignment, the Ghost-Companion. Please let me see your *Millennium* textbook.”

Eager hands lifted the textbook in the air: *Poems for the Millennium, Volume Two*, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris. Some of them used two hands—it was a big book.