

Nudge, Click

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It is 7:57 a.m. in room 836 of Bobst library. The only sound is the mechanical click of the DVD monitor as I gently nudge it closed. I press play and say a little prayer. Reluctantly, I turn to face the class. Six out of fifteen students are present. They are seated like mute cabbages at one end of the long narrow table that causes some classes to feel like awkward Thanksgiving dinners. These can be deadly mornings, full of a surface politesse that is worse than silence. *Pass the butter. Thank you. This is delicious. Lovely. Interesting. Snore.* To combat this problem I have come to seat myself not at the head of the table (utensils poised, ready to carve into the flesh of essay), but in the middle—with them. They have acknowledged this arrangement only because I have pointed it out. I tell them: *I am coming over to the middle because I want to be with you, I don't want to be over there . . . behind the invisible glass . . . at the head of the table like the unfortunate host of a bad Thanksgiving dinner.*

I got laughs with that one, and it made us all mock the glass as our ridiculous communal enemy, and so the glass disappeared. But that was weeks ago. The enemy-glass has resurfaced in a new form. It is following me it seems, surrounding me no matter where I sit. Disengagement. We watch each other chew. It is 8:02, and six more students enter. I am starting to feel somewhat optimistic because there is definitely a discussion going on now. Okay, so I'll admit that the discussion is around the question of whether or not it is flip-

flop weather yet, but the movement of mouths, and the beginnings of laughter (winter toes!), plus the added effect of the Michel Gondry music video playing in the DVD (Bjork discovers a book that writes itself and is transported via train to a mystery metropolis where she gets famous and exploited in various ways by a machine of representation only to be retrograded back by a sudden foresting, *yes foresting*, of her Broadway musical which is about her discovery of a book that writes itself) has given those students entering at 8:02 and 8:03 the sense that they have walked in on a happening scene. *Hey*, their eyes seem to say, *what's going on in Writing the Essay today?*

Though it may seem a little strange, given the many complex pedagogical strategies one could use, this is the look-of-the-eye I have begun to value in my classes. It also leads, I think, to good essays. It is the yeast that causes the dough to rise. It is curious, open, and attentive. It is engaged. I think classrooms need it the way we need oxygen. I know classes can't always be like that, but I desperately want them to be. So I find ways to demand, implicit and explicit ways. I give them work that doesn't feel like work but is: *Hey, by the way, what do you make of the retrograde foresting?* Nudge. And work that does feel like work but is the best part: *Make a claim about Michel Gondry's mind that marries his child-like love of bright colors and his strict adherence to complex musical structures.* We're not talking now, we're writing. Click. I will go to almost any length. *Okay, let's draw a picture of his brain with the colored chalk.* When they are in this zone their eyes dance. The room is filled with the sound of their pencils rushing across the page or with the sound of the chalk striking the board. They stare, but not like cabbages. They are lost in thought. *It's so good we must write it down . . . don't you think?*

Looking back at Lily Blau's essay I remember our exchanges. She read more voraciously than any student I have ever had. She was so hungry for reading that I gave her extra assignments, Foucault's "Of Other Spaces" and Bataille's "The Big Toe." Mostly, though, I remember the day we covered Benjamin's "Marseille." We tasted the phrase 'yellow studded maw' together. *It's too perfect!*, we exclaimed, so we said it out loud 'Yellowww SSStuudded Mawwww'. We get it. Marseille is animal. *Decaying yellow but breathing and living* she wrote in between carefully placed dashes. *Excellent dash clause—precise and poetic*, I reply. *What is the 'divining rod of melancholy' exactly? How does this help us think about museum space? What is the idea emanating from his intoxicating poetry?* I nudge her on. *If one can learn to take a place's sorrow—the deaths that must inevitably occur to make way for the new—if one can speak them fluently, without any sense of why they are or how they came to be, one can be a child there* she wrote, her fingers clicking away percussively on the keyboard. We pored

over her essay once in a conference, and once before she submitted it to *Mercer Street*. We were always in a state of total absorption. Sitting in the hallway after class, we considered again the light of the afternoon that she names as incongruously hopeful. We noticed the light of early March around us, bathing the crowded noisy hallway in a strange glow. *Your essay is full of images of dark and light, I say, can you tell me more about the light?* Heavy nudge this time. Like pushing against a glass box filled with ice. Her eyes shift to look out the window. Nothing. Then, golden silence. Then, *Crack, Click. It is the way the light is right now. Tense. Beautiful.* Say more! But as Lily reminds me, I shouldn't be too comforted by what appears beautiful *lest my enjoyment of the surface blind me to what is beneath.*

Our student-teacher conversation came at a price. Lily Blau and I lived in a glass bubble of our own creation. Once in a while other eager students like Laine Rettmer or Tobias-Squire Roper would join, but somehow it felt as if they were just visiting, and I didn't then have the vision or wisdom or foresight to ask everyone to the unexpected party that blossomed as if from nowhere. The problem was that bloody glass. I didn't even know it was there.

Now, when I sense the barrier that keeps the classroom from growing and breathing and thinking, when I feel its presence, I check in with my students. *What are we working on here? Why?* I am probably annoying, an aunt always prying into their thoughts. Sometimes, I get the dark repressed questions they are afraid to ask. Today's was: *What do you mean by evidence?* I almost fainted. Instead, I exhaled. *Important question Katy, I only wish you had asked that a bit earlier in the semester.* Still, maybe it's better to faint from standing up too fast and recover quickly than to pass out for hours from a slow but steady decrease of breathable air. I am also one who invites awkwardness if I sense that it is an engaged kind of awkwardness. Being awake to the moment does not always mean jumping up and down or writing boldly in italics. It can be a quiet and considered presence; fingers weaving around a raised knee like ivy growing on a wall, pencil inert on a blank page, eyes inward . . .

So, instead of marveling at the unique writing skill of a few of my students I make every effort to fuel the fire in each student's mind. And it is not because it hurts my feelings when they turn into cabbages (though it does a little), it is because they can't write anything from a catatonic state of passivity in which they eat but do not taste. But how can we teach the love of language? My yoga teacher says that another word for magic is repetition. I am willing to believe that when the writer is in an inspired state, texts may write themselves, but I think the magic has to be invited by a mind that is alive. And to this end I am willing to bet money on the following: my students do not

just learn how to write essays from reading and studying other essays. They absorb an attitude of engagement towards evidence from me, which I must model for them over and over with a rhythm that is striving towards nothing less than magic, and I have to do it by 8:07 a.m. at the latest. Also, the tenor of discourse and silence I engage in with my students shows up directly in their writing. I can feel the conversations Lily Blau and I shared in the white spaces and subtle vibrations of her essay. Students are to their evidence as I am to them. If I want them to attend to the wholeness of an essay, to take the pieces and make sense of them, I must attend as well as I can to the wholeness of the student and of the classroom.

I must see the glass and name it. *Nudge, Click*. If I have to, I do my own best magic; think Marcel Marceau. Nubile hands crawl across the invisible surface of a glass wall. For the 100th time, I ask of those on the other side: *Hey, what's going on in Writing the Essay today?*