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Title: Cantilevered

I want to tell you a story of a thousand rainy days since we first met.

There’s nothing like a classroom full of teenagers, filling every desk, and you at the front, slightly off-kilter, clapping your hands or waving or speaking or reading -- and definitely not making eye contact because you’re so afraid that they’re looking or not looking because either way, you lose. It’s crowded although sometimes it’s not crowded enough. A class of 12 can be as life-sucking as a class of 28. There is no magic number but if there were it would be between 15 and 21. Like a good hand at Blackjack. I mean, you might have a 16 and not tap the table or you could take a chance (cue Kenny Rogers: You got to know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold).

Occasionally someone enters the room. This is always viewed as an intrusion. By an intruder. Not part of the tribe. Even if the class of kids isn’t on your side, the person is an intruder, unless it’s someone they like, then all hell breaks loose to make sure you know that this person -- this person whom you feel just does not belong -- is someone they choose over you. Make no mistake, my cooperating teacher told me, us against them. And he was right. As much as you want to be a family -- maybe even a dysfunctional family with all the fecund familiarity that comes with -- they will turn, gravitate towards each other, pull out their phones, lie to their parents, whatever it takes, to save themselves.

Today I wrote a poem:

The dumb rabbit hides under the sage
Afraid and so still I believe he is dead
So I ask my husband to cut it all back
They need to move, I say, out of the yard.
The dog, I say.

He cuts it back and they multiply
There was more than one, he says.
But they came back anyway
And the dog is, after all, what he is
And the rabbit is dumb

The next day a shovel leans against the wall
And the sage is mostly shallow vines
No longer a safe haven

It’s not finished.

And I also wrote these lines to save for another time:
We move in chess piece directionality
Away afront across

My first year teaching I met two boys who would later kill themselves. They were in the same class, Zachary and Matthew. Biblical names (Zachary means “remembered by God” and Matthew means “gift from God”) when said in full, but I always called them Zak and Matt. Zak was an insolent brat and Matt had Tourette’s. Matt’s obituary can still be found at tributes.com and the messages from 2010 still live on under a digital candle. I imagine his mother going on the Internet once in a while reading those tributes and wondering how they can still exist but not her son. There’s nothing on the page to indicate that he threw himself off of the Commodore Barry Bridge\(^1\), which is only what I heard (and read) later. Even as I attended the funeral I had no idea what happened. I had a breakdown in class the morning of the funeral. I had not intended to go -- but something in me snapped. I was later written up for insubordination because I left the building without telling an administrator. I only had a secretary -- the secretary who is more important than anyone else in the building but paid the least -- make sure I was covered. That wasn’t enough and I accepted the consequences of a “letter in my file.”

**Man jumps from Commodore Barry Bridge\(^2\)**

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CHESTER -- Police recovered the body of an unidentified man who jumped from the Commodore Barry Bridge Saturday afternoon, Delaware River Port Authority spokesman Ed Kasuba said.

The man, between the ages of 25 and 35, was seen walking onto the bridge from the Chester ramps around 11:30 a.m., Kasuba said. The body was found near a dock on the Chester riverbank and taken to the Delaware County Medical Examiner, Kasuba said.

The cantilevered\(^3\) Commodore Barry Bridge is 2.6 miles long and rises several hundred feet above the Delaware River.

This wasn’t the first funeral that my husband accompanied me to. It wouldn’t be the first time he would see a parent wrap themselves around me. We don’t have our own kids; we don’t have kids of our own. Maybe I suck up all the oxygen around parents and they lose their breath. *At least you had a child to lose.* I think in my broken brain and know I am disgusting. Matt’s mother Cecilia was a tall woman. She towered over me - ready to shake my hand, perfunctory shake, head nod, weak smile, absorb my “sorry for your loss” -- there was zero recognition in her face -- except I told her who I was instead of just wincing back at her, feeling a need to explain my

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\(^1\) About 1,000 people a year in the United States commit suicide by jumping from buildings, bridges, overpasses or other structures. (I found this on Google; it’s from 2007.)


\(^3\) **Can·ti·le·ver** *n.* A projecting structure, such as a beam, that is supported at one end and carries a load at the other end or along its length.
intrusion. “I was Matt’s English teacher…” And when I told her she collapsed into me. I mattered. See? It was a good thing I left school that day. I did the right thing.

But Zak died before Matt. And his casket was closed. That first year, Zak and Matt were in a class together called “Forms of Literature” in a track called “Level 3” -- not even a euphemism for the bottom level -- there is no Level 4. Transcendentalism must have been in the curriculum which led me to show Dead Poets Society -- a film where Robin Williams becomes the perfect movie teacher, one Mr. Keating, pronounced Keat-ting – with two hard beats. Mr. Keat-ting is lifted up by his man-child students during a fantastic musical montage and carried across a soccer field -- bearing whistle and clipboard -- to Wagner or something like Beethoven’s Eroica. In this film, Keating’s protégé, Neil, discovers through the reading of brief excerpts of Thoreau, Whitman, and Emerson – the Transcendentalists -- that “if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. . . . In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness.” However, Neil’s father ultimately rejects Neil’s dream of becoming an actor and in an uncommon hour Neil shoots himself with his father’s gun kept locked in a study. Houses don’t have studies anymore, do they? The cinematography was classic: slo mo on the turning of the doorknob then the turning of the key to the drawer that housed the gun then more slo mo of the opening of the drawer; an abrupt cut to the father jarred out of bed by a noise only he could hear. Peter Weir genius. His other best known scene probably from Witness where the Amish boy, Elijah, stands in front of a glass case at the police station and points out the killer in a photograph displayed there -- but the photograph is of a policeman, and Harrison Ford has to clutch the boy’s hand closed. Discordant sound, no words.

Imagine how I felt when I made the connection. I showed that film to two boys who sat in the same room -- rows apart -- and now they were both dead. By their own hands and one in an eerily similar fashion. A teacher should not have a special place for the mass cards of her students.

My first year there was also a car accident in January. The driver had only had his license for 17 days when he decided to drive 74 mph on a hilly back road. He would survive the crash and later die of cancer. My student at the time, Eddie, also survived, although he was paralyzed like Christopher Reeve. My own little dark-haired Superman with skin like mica, flaky from stillness. Literally nothing moved except that air pump that hissed and coiled to the part of him that was machine, twice his size or more, a black metal dozer. And what was it I was doing at his house? Tutoring him. He would never graduate. He would die. And his mother would die a decade later of cancer. You can listen to her obituary on legacy.com. A robot reads it, pronouncing the abbreviation for Pennsylvania (PA) as “PAH” and saying her first name “Diane” as if she knew her.

Since Zak, Matt, and Eddie, there have been others: Meghan, Katarina, Kristen -- each one more distant than the next. Meghan still has an active Facebook page. Her status is “in a relationship” and she’s “self-employed.” I wonder how many of her 1,800 “friends” gave her
drugs. I feel like those pictures of her in bikini tops are disgraceful now. Mouth agape, tongue out. Can you be dead and still dancing -- a ‘raving thing’ as Norman Bates would say.

The act of scrolling creates movement. Or is a digital photograph just more alive? More pixels = more real? The computer screen at eye level rather than the downward glance at a book? What would Susan Sontag say?

Maybe teachers are like cantilevers. Like the cantilevered bridge where Matthew, Gift from God, fell from the sky into the river.