

After the Essay

written by Ashley P. Taylor | October 26, 2016



To learn the toxicity of a drug, it is necessary to kill a rat. Scientists have many identical rats. Four years ago, I tested the boundaries of a relationship, and in so experimenting, I killed it. There will not be another like it, for it was its own thing.

I.

I stood in the hallway before a closed door holding a paper plate of absinthe-colored champagne grapes, just washed in the student kitchen. I knocked. The door opened, and there was the professor. This was how she looked alone. She had a face. And hair.

The dialogue was underwhelming. How was my semester was going, the professor asked. It was September and the start of my last term at the journalism school, where I was getting a master's in a somewhat technical field, like business writing, but not that. I was afraid of my classes, I said. But I didn't want to talk about it. The professor and the literary cloud I imagined she lived on were my escape. I changed the subject to the essay I'd written for her class, the essay elective, that spring and how I was thinking of sending it to literary journals.

That essay was about my relationship with my then-landlady/roommate. I rented the older woman's basement room, but we shared a bathroom and sort-of-shared a kitchen upstairs; the ambiguity of my kitchen privileges threw us into conflict. The true source of confusion, though, was that I tried to turn the landlady into a friend. The professor had given the essay a glowing A.

She had a deadline, but it was nice to see me, the professor said. "Nice to see you, too," I replied, trying to pack paragraphs of enthusiasm.

I didn't offer my former professor any grapes, but that was certainly part of the imagined scenario. The professor encouraged originality and boundary pushing in writing. She urged students to find the forms that worked for the stories they were telling. In her own work, she often discussed people who created unconventional family structures and romantic relationships. Overall, it seemed to me, she thought people should feel free to test the limits of their lives, or at least not let the bounds of convention hold them back. In that doorway, the idea that you could make a life of your own—you could buy

funny grapes at the fruit stand instead of cantaloupe in a clamshell container, you could knock on a door and the person you daydreamed about would answer and be glad to see you—was realized. You could “create the taste by which your work [and your life] would be judged,” as the professor would say.[\[1\]](#) And she liked me.

A friend once read a version of this description and took something else from it: It was telling, she thought, that the professor cut the conversation short.

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By now we all knew how to write an “A paper,” the professor had told us on the first day of the essay elective. She wasn’t interested in that. She’d rather have us produce “noble failures” than work that was just sort of boring. She urged us to explore subjects that made us slightly uncomfortable, as those subjects tended to spur interesting thinking, and writing.

As an exercise, she asked us to describe someone else in the room. One student described the professor. In his description, he connected her distinctive hair to what he presumed to be her religion. It was hard not to flinch. There was something ostentatious about describing the professor at all.

These two scenes became omens. A few weeks after knocking on the professor’s door, I myself would describe her, in an essay, and it would end our relationship. That moment with the grapes, which to me had seemed a gateway to something, would in fact be the closest we ever became. The head of my journalism program, whom the professor would ask to speak with me in her place, would tell me that I had “boundary issues.”

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The ceiling of the bunkbed in my basement rental was covered in glow-in-the-dark stars, and I stretched my legs against it as I lay there listening to a novel by Virginia Woolf on my iPod. It was actually *Night and Day*, but imagine it was *To the Lighthouse*, which I also read because of the professor. We’d read “A Room of One’s Own” for class. One of the professor’s points about Woolf’s nonfiction was how it often made use of vivid hypothetical scenes.

“Since he belonged, even at the age of six, to that great clan which cannot keep this feeling separate from that, but must let future prospects, with their joys and sorrows, cloud what is actually at hand,” the iPod intoned, [\[2\]](#) “since to such people even in earliest childhood any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallise or transfix the moment upon which its gloom or radiance rests, James Ramsay, sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy stores, endowed the picture of the refrigerator, as his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss.” I didn’t know if the professor had read *To the Lighthouse*, but Woolf and the professor were linked in my mind. It was as if I had them both with me.

I was beginning to know the professor the way I knew Woolf—that is, from her books. On the back cover of professor's first was a black-and-white image of the author's smiling, young face, a photo I effectively carried around with me as I read the book. It was as if the professor existed inside it, ready to have a mental conversation in which I simultaneously felt understood and alone. I felt a connection to her written words, and I imagined that she would understand the thoughts I had in response. She did seem to understand my writing.

On the bookshelf, they were equivalent, the professor and Woolf. But Woolf was dead.

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After class ended, I kept in touch with the professor, to say the least. I constantly noticed things that reminded me of her and kept her apprised of the coincidences. The professor's aura spilled over everything and made it wonderful the way the prospect of a trip to the lighthouse had turned a catalogue refrigerator into a marvel for James Ramsay. The professor didn't seem to mind, though she sometimes didn't answer the email messages that were question-free.

That summer, I wrote a personal essay on my own, which explored a significant aspect of my life that I'd previously cordoned off, and the professor agreed to read it. When I sent her the essay, "Public Art," published last year, the information it revealed about me and the medical condition (hydrocephalus) that I was born with was much more private than it is now. I wanted her to read "Public Art" as a piece of writing. But I also wanted her to know me better, and sending her my personal essay was one way to achieve that. There was an element of exhibitionism there, the white flash of a Word doc.

These instances of what, in retrospect, were boundary crossings were not all bad. I could be brash and affectionate and flattering and zany all at the same time. I mentioned, for example, when sending her "Public Art" just after midnight, that it was now my birthday and that maybe, to celebrate, I would have some "Kettle One" after my internship. This was meant as a humorous reference to a misspelling from a letter written in a hotel bar, then typed and emailed to the professor the following day, in which I had tried to write with awareness of my own naiveté about ordering my first Manhattan and observing another woman request a vodka and tonic. That in noting in my letter the brand of vodka—Ketel One—my neighbor ordered, I wrote "Kettle," with its iron and tea associations, in place of "Ketel," which to me evokes striped turrets and the cold air of Russia, [3] proved to my great and enduring amusement just how little aware I was. It was silly, but was it so terrible? I'm sure that these tiny interactions all contributed to the camel's burden. The professor replied quickly with a birthday greeting, as she was in Europe, where it was already morning. It was the best way to start a birthday, to go to sleep knowing that the person you were thinking about was thinking about you, too, even just for a second.

I knew these correspondences were non-standard, but I thought we were developing a taste for them. Especially since the professor championed

unconventional relationships, I thought that we might, despite differences of age, education, and professional status, become friends,

But did the professor ever initiate interactions? my more critical friend asked. No, she didn't. I imagined that if the professor replied to an email, it must have been okay, and that if it ever wasn't, she would tell me. But here I sound like a perpetrator of sexual assault claiming that the victim never said no.

II.

When I've tried to write this story before, I've always left out the damning essay altogether. In terms of what I did wrong, its content hardly matters: Any essay based on a student's personal interactions with the professor and identifying her by name would have the same consequences. Yet the content of the essay does matter if I'm trying to explain why I wrote it.

Though I'd gotten her novel from the library the semester of the essay course, in the spring, it was only at the end of the summer that I bought and read the books for which the professor was best known. Her work had been controversial to an extent I hadn't realized. I read and I Googled. During our interactions I began to have, in addition to the person in front of me, this giant cache of information about the professor as an author and public figure. Trying to reconcile the two impressions made me uncomfortable, and curious.

And so I wrote, about the professor, the same kind of essay I'd written about the landlady, a piece about a relationship that confused me. Unlike in the essay for class, however, where the characters had abstract names, I referred to the professor as First-Name Last-Name. I also referenced her writing.

"I don't want this essay to replace you in my life," I wrote to the professor in a letter prefacing the essay and asking her permission to try to publish it. "If me sending out the essay ruins our relationship (mentor-student), I won't do it," I continued, closing the letter, "Thanks for giving me so much to lose."

It had three sections. In the first, I bragged about how, although people criticized the professor and her ideas, I liked her. How I was attracted to her in part because she claimed to be tough. I described her critical voice in my head, and the appeal of that voice, as a sadomasochistic fantasy. I boasted that despite her supposed severity, she liked my work. I also described her physically and—because the comment had made me uncomfortable—quoted the student's unsettling description of her hair. In the second section, I wondered why she dressed as she did and how it might relate to her writing. In the third section, I talked about how little I felt I knew about her despite all the supposedly personal writing she'd done. I wondered if she kept her innermost self out of her work to protect it. People could criticize what they knew about her, but she didn't give them much to go on. I didn't know enough about her to love her, either, I wrote, but then, that

wasn't how love worked. I meant love as in affection, admiration.

Though the essay, in my mythology, represents my act of aggression against the professor, it was also a love letter. "It is clear that you adore her," commented a trusted cousin to whom I confided at Thanksgiving, just after the falling out. I really did. But unwelcome adoration is aggressive.

"Not sure what to say about this piece..." the professor replied the Wednesday after I sent her the essay. She suggested that I talk to the head of my program—she taught in a different department—if I wanted advice. I felt all the foreboding I could feel, yet pretended to be aloof, uninterested in talking to the head of my program about what the professor thought about my essay. That weekend, I added a fourth section describing how the essay had come about and implying that the professor had condoned it, though I didn't really know what she thought about it at all.

I hated that the professor had said no by saying nothing. So it was for the most part out of spite, but also out of sadness and the fear that I'd already lost her, that I proceeded as if she had yes. I submitted the revised essay to an editor of hers. I also sent the professor the new draft in the wild hope that she might like the changes I had made.

And that's when she got mad. Or so I remembered, though in fact, her emails were remarkably calm. She made it explicit that she was not okay with the essay and that I needed to talk about it with someone other than her. I retracted the piece and promised the professor that I would not publish it, but the damage was done.

My program head, in his office the following Tuesday, told me that the professor had been upset because she felt that I'd used her name, that of an established writer, to publish an essay. She also felt—and I don't remember the exact word he used—betrayed that I'd written about our personal interactions.

The program head said I could write her a note—short! (imagine wisely raised finger)—and I did write her an apology. She replied, expressing regret at what had happened and saying in so many words that though she maintained relationships with many former students, I couldn't be one of them. She wished me luck with my writing, comma, and with everything. It was goodbye.

The essay was a shallow attempt to write about an uncomfortable subject, in this case, the professor herself, the way I thought she would. But although I wrote about things that made me uncomfortable, I didn't spend nearly enough time trying to understand why they were unsettling. I later learned, for example, that the student who described the professor on day one of class was not so innocent. There was a reason his words came off as creepy, and it was reckless of me to repeat them. It's one thing to try to understand how dynamite works and another to stockpile explosives. Worst of all, I missed the chance to think about the unanswered question at the center of my piece.

III.

It all started with Marcia. She was my favorite nursery-school teacher. I always wanted to hold her hand and asked my mom to make up bedtime stories in which I saved Marcia from near-death situations. Later my crush was the freshman-English teacher, who gave me my first B on a paper. I wrote her letters, and the teacher left handwritten responses, sometimes along with books to borrow, as "messages in the office." Next I adored the French teacher; in college, it was the biology prof, always working in her corner office. And let's not forget the dance teacher, the violin teacher, all those camp counselors, and, of course, the landlady. I tried to turn one kind of relationship into another, and it never quite worked.

I fixated on teachers, always women, who challenged me and made me feel like I had to earn their praise. Perhaps I wanted someone who seemed more objective than my ever-positive parents...to love me. Yes, to love me. Though I wanted the standards for approval to be high, I also wanted to meet them.

Also, I didn't have many friends as a kid; I did not feel as if people my age liked me as much as these teachers seemed to. I thought it a sign of maturity that I gravitated toward adult company, but it was actually the opposite, indicative of my poor social skills. While I thought my teachers liked me as a person, I suspect that their attentions were more akin to fulfilling professional obligations toward a smart and somewhat lonely young student.

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The professor was not just another in a long line, however. Yes, I liked having a favorite teacher; I liked infatuation in itself. But she was unique.

One day during the professor's office hours, I asked about her career path, and she told me that it had been "sui generis." I wasn't familiar with the expression, but I could translate it from Latin, one of my favorite subjects, to mean "of its own kind." Both understanding those two words and the idea of such a career thrilled me. Here was a professor who lived and wrote not in a mold but in her own shape. That was also what she taught us to do as writers. During workshops, she asked us to think not about how we would choose to write another student's essay, but rather about how the student could improve the piece using his or her own approach. The professor made me want to be more thoroughly myself, clichéd as it sounds. Sadly, it was through being myself, my flawed self, and daring to write down the essay forming in my head that I lost my connection to her.

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This story, for me, is one of great personal loss. The professor had made my world sparkle. After the essay, it became a dreary, guilty place, and books and writing were no escape; on the contrary, they were at the center of it. There she was on my shelf, disapproving. Her exacting but encouraging voice in my head was replaced by that of a naysayer who told me that "things" would never "work out" for me and that I was pernicious for wanting to write about my life. That voice wasn't really hers, of course; it was my own. Self-identified masochist that I was, I punished myself.

In "After Henry," Joan Didion wrote that the only person she wanted to talk with after her editor, Henry, died was Henry. I felt the same way about the professor, and I wasn't kidding. I was grieving. I wanted her to teach me how to write without screwing everything up; I needed her more than ever, and she was the one person off limits to me. Of course it was because of the professor that I read "After Henry."

Beyond my emotional world, what happened between me and the professor matters as an example of a student-professor relationship that, although purely intellectual ended up being inappropriate and going sour in part for the same reasons sexual relations between professors and students often do: power imbalances and the conflicts of interest between academic interactions and any others. And it's not only the professor who wields power.

IV.

The professor's power is obvious: she grades. On the other hand, the student pays the university to pay the professor to teach him or her. Further, in course evaluations, the student rates the teacher. Does the professor then feel compelled to try to please the student? If I ask her out to coffee or send a rambling email, does she feel professionally obligated to reply? The conflict of interest is there. Thinking about the situation this way, it seems that, unlike in the standard story of a student-professor fling, I abused her.

But after the essay, the professor called the shots, and it became clear that we weren't friends. If we had been friends, we could have fought and made up. In reality, we didn't talk at all because she was my professor and had decided against it.

One of the professor's main objections to the essay was that with it I had "traded on" her name.

It took time for me to realize it, but I was guilty as charged. Any essay that depends, for news-worthiness, on the writer's self-proclaimed connection to a public figure trades on that figure's—that person's—name, no matter the writer's intentions, no matter the quality of the writing. I had intended to write a thoughtful essay, but had I written "Having Coffee With First-Name Last-Name," I would have used her name just the same way. And in both cases I would have become known (if at all) not as "writer Ashley P. Taylor" but as "the student who wrote a thing about First-Name Last-Name." The professor saved me from that.

And say she wanted to tell her side of the story, or even to describe me. I'd like to think that she could. It's only fair. But the situation wasn't fair. We weren't equals. "First-Name Last-Name Retaliates Against Student" headlines might have read. Even a brilliant evisceration would have reflected badly on her because in the public eye, she would have been picking on someone clearly not her own size. That she had a name and I didn't was yet another power imbalance between us.

V.

These are the morals of the story, the lessons of the fable. As I tell it, the falling out was in the cards, foretold the first day of the elective course. But one could also see what happened as a series of wrong turns that one student took one November, four years ago. If I had done one thing differently, if I had just spoken to the head of my journalism program when the professor first suggested it, would I even be telling this story now? I'll never know.

Soon after I graduated from journalism school, I spotted Virginia Woolf's book-length essay "Three Guineas" on a bookstore table. A few pages in, I came across a line that reminded me of the professor. It was about ellipses. "But...those three dots mark a precipice, a gulf so deeply cut between us that for three years and more I have been sitting on my side of it wondering whether it is any use to try to speak across it," Woolf had written.

Ellipses and uncertainty were hallmarks of both the falling out ("Not sure what to say about this piece...") and my general view of the professor as a figure in my head whose silences I filled. She was elliptical to me, and after the essay, her ellipses became a gulf the width of infinite possible meanings.

I was always hurt that she wouldn't tell me what she thought about the essay itself, but instead, left me to punish myself. I've also wondered, though, whether the ellipses and the absence of an invitation to her office were in fact meant to spare me from what she was really thinking at the time, something that might have hurt worse than silence.

VI.

Yes, I think that student-teacher relationships outside of school violate boundaries. Non-academic interactions between profs and students breach the student-professor boundary almost by definition. And yet I don't see those relationships as categorically bad. Maybe there are actually two boundaries: one, the obvious line separating professors from students and academic interactions from others, and then another, fuzzier line separating interactions—of any kind—that are consensual and mutually comfortable from those that are not. The position of that second, more important line depends on each individual relationship and situation. It may be possible for a student to cross the first boundary and become almost-friends with a professor while respecting the second and maintaining a distance agreeable to both parties. But with the essay and with all of my extracurricular advances toward the professor, I pushed that second limit, and the original student-professor boundary snapped back into place, a wall.

Once I graduated, the professor and I had no relationship, academic or otherwise. Yet the *feeling* of connection to the professor remained. She's

always there, alongside Didion and Woolf. Last year, I conceived of an essay about a particular uncomfortable subject and then, a few days later, learned that the professor had written an entire book on the topic. We were thinking about the same thing.

After the book came out, I went to a reading of hers—two, in fact. The professor in my mind would have resented my presence there, so I asked her permission to go, and the real person said yes. At her book launch, the first time we'd seen each other in four years, she signed my book, in a nice way. Then I went to a second reading after which I knew that she and some of her former students were going out for drinks. I couldn't help hoping, in the spirit of champagne grapes, that she would invite me along. She didn't. As she said in her response to my apology, which I always thought of as her "goodbye letter," she has relationships with ex-students, just not with me. Between us, a barrier remains, though its quality changes.

VII.

Now as I write this I face another boundary and also the same old question: that of what's possible and/or permissible to write. I want to write about what happened, but I worry that I'll repeat my mistakes. Do I ask her permission? What if she says no, or says nothing? Will I write it anyway? The possibility will be there in the silence. At what point does a question become a threat? There are boundary issues here.

From the moment I considered writing this essay, I planned to keep the professor anonymous. I would not be able to quote from her writing, and I was sorry about that, since her books are part of her. But it's actually better this way.

The person I want to tell you about is not the public figure. She's the person who taught me, believed in me, and still inspires me to read books because I know she loves them and I want to see for myself why. I want you to see her that way. The last thing I want is for my tribute to a person I admire to become an exposé. I can describe the professor better if I don't tell you who she is.

VIII.

When I write to her now, which I rarely do, as to write and receive no reply is painful, I always begin, "Dear First-Name." It's symbolic formality and also a nod to our shared appreciation for letter writing. There's a lot of emotion that one can cram between the lines of an email, even a reserved email, like the one I wrote a few weekends ago asking the professor's permission to write—under a pseudonym and giving the characters abstract names—a meta-essay about "what happened between us." My excitement to formulate a piece of writing came through as I described the parts of her character that I planned to include and, especially, to leave out. It would

be more about me than about her, I said, and in that way would also be “less superficial” than the original essay, perhaps my first admission that, ethical issues aside, I had found fault with that old piece. “Please reply.”

I wanted to include something to the effect of “this is not a threat,” but without that word. “I care about you,” I began; too insinuating. “I care about your well-being.” Then I added “and about what you think of me.”

I needed to know if it was okay with her. The only way to know that was to ask and give her veto power. “Caring about what she thought of me” meant respecting her veto, or even taking silence as a ‘no.’

“Dear Ashley,” her response began. “I think you should write under your own name.” There was no hesitation about my writing the essay. She jumped right into discussion of the main question: how to do it well. She wished me luck writing it.

One of the things that used to thrill me about her emails was that she would sign them with her first name typed in lowercase. Her bare name. Gmail automatically cut off the signature at the bottom of her latest reply so that I couldn’t see it without clicking on an ellipses symbol. I was so happy to hear from her that I was afraid to look at the signature and be disappointed by a stiff uppercase, or no signature at all. But later, I did indeed look..

Four years ago, after the first essay, she signed her goodbye letter First-Name, uppercase. It was stark and sad. I wonder if she knows I care about this stuff. The professor in my head knows, and I like to think that she does, too.

[1] Might say. The above is the phrase in my memory, but the quotation we encountered in the essay course, from Wordsworth, who may have been paraphrasing or quoting someone else, is that a great and original writer “has the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed.” So memory transforms information.

[2] Or would have, had I been listening to *To the Lighthouse* and not repeatedly falling asleep to the same section of *Night and Day*.

[3] It should actually make me think of the Netherlands.