

One day, amidst the grammar and vocabulary quizzes, the analytical paragraphs and plentiful reading responses, Mr. Marshall, my seventh-grade English teacher at Friends Academy, assigned my classmates and me a creative assignment: to write and illustrate our own children's books.

Mischief in his eyes, he stood lankily in front of the class, his tie flung over his shoulder, his sleeves rolled up his furred forearms. From the crown of his head brown hair bristled, hedgehog-like. "Good children's literature," he said, clasping his hands in front of him, "speaks to the soul. It's sheer playful and deadly serious, absurd and urgent. It rouses us from our habitual ways of being in the world."

I felt charged by his provocation. I immediately set to work on a story I titled "The Drape." I don't know where the title came from. I didn't know what a drape was. Something curtains did? The Drape, I decided, would be the hero of my tale, and he'd look like Bullwinkle, the cartoon moose, only he'd be microscopic. I put a disclaimer on the cover of my book: "The Drape," I wrote, "is invisible to the naked eye but has been enlarged 2000x in these illustrations to make him perceivable." I came up with Bullwinkle because my dad had bought a bunch of VHS tapes of old episodes, favorites from his childhood, that now, three years after his death, sat collecting dust on a shelf in our family room. I also thought it would just be fun to draw Bullwinkle.

My story was simple, but I spent hours upon hours perfecting it and refining my drawings. The Drape lived in a carrot—a carrot with which he was smitten. He spent his days tending to his carrot-home: sweeping, mopping, buffing, Windexing, and Softscrubbing it. He treated his friend, The Crump, who looked like Rocky the squirrel, to carrot muffins and carrot fritters, and he sighed with pleasure each evening when the sun descended in an orange-and-violet sky. Then one day a Dudley-Do-Right-looking farmer came and ripped The Drape's carrot-home from the ground. He popped it into his pocket. The Drape spilled to the soil, a miniscule, antlered Job cast into the wilderness. Dispirited and disillusioned, The Drape moped about, wondering why bad things happen to good Drapes for no good reason. The Crump tried to cheer him up, to no avail. At last, though, after a spell of time, when he was least looking for it, The Drape stumbled upon a new love: a radish. Passion was reignited, bearing the imprint of past root-vegetable passion, in a similar but different key.

Writing the story let loose things in me, things I'd been avoiding since my dad's death. At the time, I didn't know another nine-year-old whose dad had died. But, somehow, at Mr. Marshall's prompting, writing about The Drape helped me feel, at least momentarily, less like an alien. I didn't, and couldn't have, put it in these words, but it helped me come to terms with corners of my

experience I didn't know existed because, largely successfully, I had been so busy presenting to others—and to myself—a false self: The kid who, despite having suffered trauma, was in control and could take care of himself.

Writing "The Drape" helped me begin sublimating and working through my feelings. For, like The Drape, I, too, knew what it was like to be thrown into an indifferent world one didn't ask for. I, too, knew what it was like to feel homeless, unrooted, a refugee. And I, too, was fumbling for solutions to insoluble questions.

"Language speaks man," Heidegger famously wrote, suggesting that we as humans rely on clichés and pre-formulated expressions; that we unconsciously, inevitably, are channelers of the places and times and communities to which we belong, willingly or not; that we never quite know what we feel or want in life because the words at our disposal are someone else's words and don't represent who *we* are and what *we* want. We don't and can't know ourselves. We don't and can't know the world.

But I believe Heidegger only got part of the story right. Yes, we, as humans, are thoroughly conditioned by the words in which we swim. But we also have an incredible capacity to shape words. We're not just used by words; we use words. As Mark Edmundson writes, "We bend them and trope them and inflect them with irony and hyperbole. We don't merely represent the world as it is and was. We use language to *interpret* the world," and to *change* it.

"The Drape" was the ungainly story of a seventh-grader, but it helped me find my voice. It helped me not only to borrow words from others but to use words to make a world and feel more alive.

Why do I teach?

I teach because, in indirect ways, I want to create soul-shaking moments and opportunities for students, like the one Mr. Marshall and many other teachers at F.A. provided for me. Not from a pulpit, but through writing and reading experiences, projects, and discussions, I want to rattle my students from their complacencies and comfort them in their loneliness and distress. And I want my students not merely to accept being thrown into the world and into language. I want them to throw back. I want them to speak their desires. And I want them to wield words deliberately, powerfully, and idiosyncratically, to expand the limits of their and our worlds.