A language in which fresh truth
is almost impossible to express.

ENGFISH

Macrorie, Ken. "Engfish." *Uptaught.* New York: Hayden Book Co, 1970. 9-18.

(September, 1947)

MY STUDENTS WERE ALIVE

The students in the first class I ever taught were World War II veterans. The room was never filled, usually a half dozen or so absentees, who I feared were wandering around Chapel Hill enjoying themselves. One day I ran into one of them on campus ten minutes after my class. He walked alongside unabashed, talking of the weather, then said, "*I hope you'll excuse my absences. I like the class, but I flew fighter planes in combat and still get the shakes. Every once in a while I have to bust loose. Usually I jump on a bus and ride anywhere for a few days.*"

(October, 1947)

AND HUMOROUS

Two weeks later, I opened the classroom door—every seat occupied. Place looked bursting. I assumed mock surprise and said, "There must be some mistake. Do you realize this is English 1, the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina?"

From the back row, hurried and loud, came the words, "Oh, *North* Carolina!"

A book cover popped shut, and a young man rushed out the door and slammed it. When the laughter subsided, he came back in and returned to his seat, wearing his triumph modestly.

(January, 1948)

BUT THEY WROTE DEAD

Like this:

I found the characters in this story very interesting. The plot was exciting and an outstanding aspect of the story was its description.

Except for one boy, McDonald. After writing a few miserable, pretentious, academic papers, he went away for a while. He returned with a paper written in red ink. On the last page the words became indistinguishable, the letters more and more uncertain until they finally squiggled off in a wavy line. I was incensed. The red was so hard to read, and the carelessness insulting.

But as I puzzled out the paper, I found McDonald had produced a zany story of his adventures as exciting and humorous as Holden Caulfield's. Twice more McDonald turned in live, squirming papers. After the final exam he took me aside and explained he had written those papers while he was drunk.

I should have realized that a cataclysmic event was needed to break a student away from the dead language of the schools—some severe displacement or removal from the unreal world of the university, like drunkenness. But I didn't. I was beginning my teaching, and, naturally enough, developing a protective blindness.

(February, 1948)

MY EGO WAS BEING FULFILLED

I had a captive audience but thought I was freeing their minds. Surely they were learning great things from me. I was only a part-time instructor but felt the weight of the trappings of academic prestige and rank. When I walked through the campus carrying my briefcase—an object few students owned in those days—or authoritatively removed a drawer from the card catalog in the library to look up a book, I imagined all the students were looking at me and saying with awe, "He's an instructor."

But the troops weren't performing their job, which was to write clearly and powerfully in my classes. I thought that was their fault.

(March, 1948)

WHAT TEACHER WANTED

In the columns of *The Daily Tarheel*, the student newspaper, appeared many swinging, ironic letters to the editor written by undergraduates. They carried the rhythms of human voices, the tension of anger, the dry sound of understatement. Good models of writing for my freshmen.

I tried to get my students to write like that—as if they were on fire about something—but they kept turning out phony paragraphs. Like blacks who know the white man's attitude toward them better than he does himself, they knew what Teacher really wanted, although I didn't. And they gave it to me.

(September, 1948)

I LEARNED HOW TO CORRECT PAPERS, NOT READ THEM

Got a job at Michigan State and settled down to full-time teaching. I bought some red ink for my fountain pen and began writing in the margins of what we called *themes*—

too gen'l
awk
punct
agr
sp
need specific examples

One day I climbed on the table in the classroom and took a beseeching attitude. "Won't you please put down something specific in your next theme?"

No, students turned in empty paragraphs like this:

I went downtown for the first time. When I got there I was completely astonished by the hustle and the bustle that was going on. My first impression of the downtown area was quite impressive.

(October, 1948)

I SAID, "THEY CAN'T WRITE THIS DEAD."

A colleague showed me a book by a University of Minnesota professor designed to cure students who "bandy about vague uninteresting generalizations with no specific examples to back them up."

Off to the Snack Bar with my students to follow the man's prescription—make a chart for the Observation and Recording of Sensory Detail . Columns for (1) Form or Outline, (2) Motion or Position, (3) Shade or Color. Shorter columns for Sound, Smell, Touch, and Taste. Now fill the columns, combine words or phrases into sentences, construct paragraphs. Choose an Overall Impression.

In they came—papers full of bland, trite phrases like those the Minnesota man said were "by and large successful"—

Spreading elm tree,
huge gray skyscrapers,
huge gray glacial rocks. . .

I had forced the arms, guided the fingers—to a huge gray result.

(September, 1951)

I TRIED EVERYTHING, INCLUDING NON-DIRECTION

I would get those kids to write live. Tried general semantics, logic, tape-recorded conversations, ancient rhetoric.

Nothing worked.

I flipped all the way over from the Snack Bar guided exercises to Group Dynamics non-directed style. Got permission to teach sort of Carl Rogers' way. I sat in the back of the room, talked only about five or ten minutes of the fifty, and asked the students to run the class. They chose what to write on, decided what they thought was good writing, and graded each other's papers.

Grading bugged them. At first they wanted to give everyone A and I said no. Slipped a little into direction there. Then they discovered that spelling and other mechanics would give them a standard, and almost all the grades went down to C.

In the first weeks they didn't believe I was going to let them run the class. Halfway through the course many began to enjoy their freedom.

But nobody wrote live. Same old academic stuff—no conviction, no redblooded sentences.

(June, 1957)

I BEGAN WRITING A TEXTBOOK

I tried to play down grammar and mechanics and get the students to write naturally of things that interested them. This book was going to reform the teaching of writing in America.

One thing wrong—it carried no extended examples of good student writing. But I didn't see the implications of that fact. If I could not provide a bunch of lively papers written by students using the program I espoused in my book, then I had nothing to give students and teachers substantially different from what they had been given before.

The book was published by a reputable house—Harcourt, Brace. Its editors insisted I call it *The Perceptive Writer, Reader, and Speaker*. Good title for a book by an author absolutely blind to what he was doing.

(September, 1960)

SAN FRANCISCO STATE

In 1960 I left Michigan State for San Francisco State, a school then rated among the top four in the country for teaching creative writing. Although I was hired as a "communication expert" rather than a man who would teach the writing of novels, short stories, and poems, I thought the atmosphere by the beautiful bridge probably made students flower into writers even in composition courses.

I expected exotic real flowers in Golden Gate Park and found them. I expected sophisticated students (the year before, many at State and Berkeley had had their backbones bounced against the hard edges of the steps of City Hall by the police in the most publicized student rebellion up to that time) and literary artists as colleagues. I found only the latter. I joined a staff of teachers

that included Walter Van Tilburg Clark (he was on leave but his influence was manifest), Mark Harris, Harvey Swados, and S. I. Hayakawa.

Indeed it was a writing place, and most of the professors I knew were three times as alive as most I had known at Michigan State. Caroline Shrodes, who had collected all the exciting writers, enchanted me. I had never before met a woman head of a department, and no professor who one day wore giant-sized blue earrings with high-heeled shoes to match, and the next day the same combination in shocking pink. She tapped her foot with a nervous energy that seemed to vibrate through that department, and I knew I had found the right place.

It was a wonder. Caroline told me that to teach one especially small class of students weak in writing, I would be given an assistant. I expected a pale, ineffectual boy and got a bright, deeply sensitive young woman who had just given up her job as the office boss for Kermit Bloomgarden on Broadway, where she helped him with the production of *The Music Man*. I began the semester with the highest of hopes.

The papers my students turned in were worse, if anything, than those I had received at Michigan State. I was down on my knees again pleading for sentences partially alive.

After a year, I left San Francisco State. I had met stimulating professors there, but not stimulating students. The city was dramatic and beautifully situated, as well as dirty in the Mission District and Walt Disneyish in the suburbs. I missed the white winters and green springs of Michigan; so I returned there to take a job in an unlikely sounding place called Kalamazoo.

(February, 1962)

I BECAME A LEADER OF COMPOSITION TEACHERS

I was appointed editor of *College Composition and Communication*, a journal published by the National Council of Teachers of English. In that job I read and edited hundreds of plans for saving the dying composition course.

I was determined to publish some bright student writing to show readers their students weren't hopeless. I looked hard for it, solicited the 3,500 teachers who subscribed to the journal, and turned up about three decent papers. I printed them and got this letter from a professor in Ohio:

> Why a new "arty" cover; and especially why undergraduate writing? . . . Why pretend that we are all undergraduates and want to read about each other's first impressions of college?

After that, I began to notice hundreds of signs suggesting that most English professors despised their students' work. They should have. It was usually terrible.

(February, 1963)

SIXTEEN YEARS NOW TEACHING BLIND

I had devoted most of my career to teaching Freshman Composition because I wanted every college student to write with clarity and pezazz. Sometimes attending my class, students became worse writers, their sentences infected with more and more phoniness, and eventually stiffening in *rigor mortis*. One of my freshmen at Western Michigan University turned in this paragraph:

> *I consider experience to be an important part in the process of learning. For example, in the case of an athlete, experience plays an important role. After each game, he tends to acquire more knowledge and proficiency, thereby making him a better athlete. An athlete could also gain more knowledge by studying up on the sport, but it is doubtful he could participate for the first time in sports with study alone and without experience and still do an adequate job.*

Such language could only have been learned in school; no one anywhere else would hear it in the bones of his ear. Key university words are there: *process, experience, role, tend, knowledge, proficiency, participate,* and *important* twice. But nothing is said worth listening to. I thought this paragraph acceptable—medium rotten, but all I could expect.

(October, 1963)

MAYBE OUTSIDE OF CLASS?

Maybe they're afraid to say what they feel. Maybe the assignments are too confining.

With the help of other professors in a communication program, I arranged a contest—$150 for the best essay on any subject touching university life, $150 to the judge of the contest. To encourage students to speak out, I asked Paul Goodman, author of *Growing Up Absurd*, to judge the essays. In a university then comprised of 11,000 students, we received eight essays in the competition. All dead. None seemed stirring enough to warrant a certification of life, much less a prize. But I sent them off to Mr. Goodman. He read them and wrote back:

> This isn't a very spirited group of essays, and I cannot award a prize to any. Nothing sends me—neither original idea, acute observation, accurate analysis, unique attitude, warm feeling, nor vivid expression. There is no sense in making a comparative judgment among the pieces. . .
> My impression is that the young people have been so brainwashed by their social background and their so-called education that even their dissent is stereotyped, griping rather than radical, snobbish rather than indignant, do-goodish rather than compassionate. There is little sign of careful, painful perception, personal suffering, or felt loyalty and disgust. On the other hand, the couple of positive estimates of university experiences are not ideal, or loving, enough to be moving. . .

(November, 1963)

NO NEED TO EXAMINE THE BODY

Paul Goodman was right. And the incontrovertible fact was that back in 1960 the profession had become so sick of spending more money and time on the Freshman Comp course than any other that the head of the English Department of the University of Michigan, Warner Rice, proposed in a lead article in *College English* that the freshman writing course be abolished because it wasn't producing competent writing from students.

Mr. Rice wasn't kidding; he's not a kidding man. Many professors who had given their lives to this effort felt insulted, but I didn't hear of one who came forward with a batch of lively student papers to prove Mr. Rice wrong.

(December, 1963)

A NAME FOR IT

A student stopped me in the hall and said, "*Do you think I should submit this to* The Review? *I have this terrible instructor who says I can't write. Therefore I shouldn't teach English. He really grinds me.*"

I looked at the first two lines:

He finks it humorous to act like the Grape God Almighty, only the stridents in his glass lisdyke him immersely.

and thought they seemed like overdone James Joyce. I said I had better take the paper home and give it several readings before reacting. But she pushed, and I read the next lines,

Day each that we tumble into the glass he sez to mee, "Eets too badly that you someday fright preach Engfish."

I wanted to hug that girl. She had been studying Joyce in another class and had used his tongue to indict all of us Engfish teachers. Didn't believe I had lisdyked my students all those years, but I had indeed tumbled them into a glass every day and fright preached Engfish at them. This girl had given me a name for the bloated, pretentious language I saw everywhere around me, in the students' themes, in the textbooks on writing, in the professors' and administrators' communications to each other. A feel-nothing, say-nothing language, dead like Latin, devoid of the rhythms of contemporary speech. A dialect in which words are almost never "attached to things," as Emerson said they should be.