

To Thine Own Crow be True

*A personal essay presented to the Admissions Committee
of the Master of Arts in Teaching Program at Bard College*

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Let's begin with a disclaimer: having worked passionately to hone my skills and voice as a writer (and so, reader) for nearly four decades, I am acutely aware that taking up precious literary "real estate" within this personal essay—the intent of which is to effectively communicate why I've chosen to study at Bard College as a means to foster a vital career in teaching—with a poem I wrote about a rooster, is a bold move.

Then again, as I am also acutely aware that Bard College in effect *stands for* innovation and considers imagination to be as critical a factor in fostering academic, personal, and professional achievement as it does discipline, acumen, and self-esteem, I trust that your accomplished mind's eyes will catch in a flash that my poem is not at all about a rooster. Lastly, as I trust above all that your primary interest is this essay be composed *honestly*, here goes:

SELF-DIRECTED STUDY

There is a prepubescent rooster
working hard beneath my window
to find the pure iambic pride
of his ironhearted crow.

Every day at eight a.m.,
and then again at ten,
I hear his lame-limp rhythms—
"Shaky, at best!" the reviews
would say. But who reviews
things born of homespun orchards?
The only audience: apples,
and even the attention
of cultivated fruit
sways in the instance
of October wind.

Still, he forges on, my
self-sequestered chum—
"This is no fly-by-night endeavor!"
his pretend-agent defends
against The Invisiblecritics.
And as the crackle of his doodle
grates against his cock-a-doo,
I shift, un-numb my leg
and lift my pen . . . again . . .

at the prospect of unearthing
this poem.

With that, along with a pledge that by this essay's end I will have connected the pivotal dots of my decision to include this poem and my confidence that the BardMAT Program is distinctly equipped to guide me towards my highest teaching potential and prepare me for a meaningful career serving students, I shall now cut to the critical-backstory chase.

The poem above is not semi, but 150% autobiographical. I cherished living in the perch from which I composed it for nearly the entirety of 2013, after having avidly replied "You betchya!" to two Midwestern friends/patrons of my pen (a noble-hearted married couple I first met in 2010, while touring the country as part of the many sacred years I spent following my bliss [read: *struggling*] as a performing songwriter) when they graciously, albeit unknowingly, presented me with the invitation of a lifetime: to leap west from my beloved home nest in the Big Apple and engage in a year of self-directed study and writerly retreat on a tranquil apple orchard outside America's great city of literature, Iowa City.

If that sounds romantically dreamlike, it could be because, it was. It was also bitingly real and profoundly fortuitous, as said invitation came not only at the three-month mark of a painstakingly fruitless job search intended to kick off a more sustainable but no less authentic "second act" of life—a search I'd begun in January of 2013, upon obtaining my B.A. in Writing with honors as a nontraditional student [read: *41 year-old traditional nonconformist*]—but a mere *two days* after the diploma for said degree alighted on my Brooklyn doorstep boasting the same postmark as an approval letter for food stamps.

I know. You can't write this stuff.

Apparently, though, you can live it. And so, live it, I did. Fiercely and gratefully. And in so doing, after six months of settling, exploring, restoring, reflecting, grieving (sadly, my Midwestern adventure also came on the wings of losing my father to cancer's swift, savage blow), and most of all *thriving* inside the writer's (and so, reader's) sanctuary that is Eastern Iowa, I was next presented by my new best pals, the stars, with what proved in an instant to be Invitation of a Lifetime #2: the chance to explore what I've always perceived to be my sister calling: to teach.

Which leads me to the most significant personal-essay-chase-cutting of all. By way of a "chance" introduction made by a gracious new Iowan friend to the director of adult-education programming at a prominent community college in Cedar Rapids, I conceptualized, created the curriculum for, presented, and was hired to teach a 10-week poetry appreciation course, the aim of which was to empower beguiled but bedazzled young lovers of verse with the critical skills and creative spirit to more readily and effectively interpret poems. In addition to the reverie I experienced while developing the content for the course, every Friday evening spent finalizing and organizing the next day's lesson felt not essentially but *precisely* like Christmas eve, and I, a parent gifted with the task of wrapping a bounty of presents that I knew held the power to fortify and elevate the hearts, minds, and souls of those eight sentient beings whose inner-children would in a matter of hours be eager to open them. Each gift was, of course, ultimately the same: the enhancing of an innate passion for language (read: *life*) by way of better understanding how artistry and craft unite to embody and animate any great work of literature.

To be sure, I treasured countless joyous, path-affirming moments across the full ten weeks of the course, each of which was ignited by student discovery and through the whole of which I came to realize that teaching was not merely a vocation I felt poised to pursue, but more so that ever-kindling “sister” calling that would allow me to at once serve others in that single most noble earthly pursuit of uncovering and pledging allegiance to one’s truest nature, while also, honoring my own.

And so, as the end of my year in Iowa drew to a close, I set my mental compass eastward and began plotting a transition back to my hometown of New York City, and the corner turn to an “encore” career in teaching. Little did I know, my ever-scheming celestial comrades were at it again, and by way of another (ultimately) benevolent yet gut-wrenching twist, I was instead commanded to race back east on a harrowing-phone-call dime to my native land of the Hudson River Valley, where I would spend the whole of 2014 entranced in a complex effort to support my mother’s recovery from an unforeseen, life-threatening illness, and, consequently, navigate my autistic brother’s long-overdue shift into a home of his peers and onto a path to reach his highest potential for independence.

To say the least, the benevolence to be found in moving through such an intensely burdensome life chapter did emerge in time as an expanding, evolved relationship with my healing mother, and the inner peace that comes from knowing my brother’s daily life would be at long last developmentally guided and his future practically secured. But to say the most, the one outcome of such an intensely taxing time that proved to be of immeasurable value was the chance I was given to allocate newfound freedoms of mind, energy, and time to honoring a relentless, inspiring hunch: that I should explore pursuing a Master of Arts in Teaching Literature from the BardMAT program—my awareness of which was sparked by “random” print ads for the program that kept catching my eye and courting my heart, whether by way of a beloved Hudson Valley arts and culture magazine, or walls of train cars I “happened” to sit in while voyaging south as often as possible to ye olde holy lands of Brooklyntown and Manhattan Isle.

Which bring us to the here and now—“here” being the conclusion of this personal essay, and “now” being the point of meaningful return to the poem I elected to begin with, and my as-promised connecting of its thematic dot to the two inquiries your application prompt aims to address: *Why pursue a career in teaching?* and *Why study at Bard College as a means to such pursuit?*

As the great writer and educator William Zinsser once noted (as per my best recollection from his series of essays for *The American Scholar*), a teacher is put on earth to help students grow into who they are supposed to be. As I’ve hopefully demonstrated here through the narrative weavings of my pen, I could have only identified with that burgeoning Iowan rooster after having myself been given the great fortune of a life equitably laced by immense challenges and rewards, all of which were meant to serve as divine portals to the unearthing and cultivating of my truest nature. To be sure, the fire in my soul is ignited above all else by language, and by the examining, celebrating, and championing of (not to mention *striving for*) its masterful use. As my greatest aspiration is that this fire might serve as fuel for others to forge and blaze their own trails of authenticity, I wouldn’t say that I’ve *chosen* to pursue a career in teaching, but instead,

that there echoes within me an ever-kindling call to teach, and that at this juncture I am poised to take to the hard work of fulfilling my highest potential in heeding it.

With respect to why I feel so wholly drawn to the BardMAT Program's approach to career preparation, I am frankly enlivened to discover myself that both my writing of the poem included here and the idea that it attempts to convey unite to reflect the degree to which I value innovation, authenticity, and the advanced study of language as both an art and a craft. However, beyond all that, I am compelled to propose that the most vivid illustration as to why I would value studying at Bard College emanates from that lone-protagonist who is most essential to my poem having been born at all, yet makes no appearance in it. That is to say, our faithful, fumbling fowl's esteemed teacher—his father. A sage rooster, who, by exhibiting his seasoned crow several times a day from far across the orchard, inherently knew that the only method of ensuring his pupil would achieve a call that was equal parts true and resolute—and would someday equip him with the skill and desire to lead others in achieving theirs—was to masterfully and devotedly balance instruction with empowerment.

And so, in seeing myself in that resilient, budding rooster, I see myself being called to intensively study under the leadership of consummate educators at an esteemed college named *Bard*. And as I scribe that “serendipitous” detail, I am moved to close this essay by connecting what is perhaps the most touching dot of all, no doubt a poetic piece of evidence that to be or not to be who you truly are in this life is indeed its most central and guiding question. While living in my charming heartland perch, a humble solitary space nestled atop my friends’ farmhouse, I was gifted with Invitation of a Lifetime #3: to name that diligent chicken whose tender feet I had watched emerge from an egg, and who in a matter of weeks had become my heroic, self-sequestered chum. Without missing a pure, iambic beat, I wholeheartedly replied, “Shakespeare.”