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Fiction
University of Southern Maine
Stonecoast MFA Winter 2005
Graduation Speech

Provost Wood, Dr. Finch, distinguished faculty, friends, family, and of course, the class that rocks, USM Stonecoast MFA Winter '05. Greetings.

The Stonecoast residencies are such intense experiences that we tend to screen out events that occur away from the stretch of Maine coast between Portland and Brunswick, but I want to remember all of the lives lost and affected by the recent tsunami in the Indian Ocean. May many of us allow our art to help the world process a phenomenon that is both terrific, in the sense of exciting terror, and awful, that is, inspiring awe.

In the introduction to selections from African-American autobiography, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes that, "These stories endure as chronicles not merely of personal achievement, but of the impulse *to bear witness*." Tonight is a celebration of the personal achievements of the second class ever to graduate from this program. It is also a salute to each and every Stonecoast student, past, present, and future, and to all writers who have the courage to bear witness, to tell the truth, in all genres and forms.

Writers aren't the only people who tell stories. As Joan Connor, our esteemed faculty member, reminds us, all humans construct their own narratives. I'd like to take a moment to reflect on the nascent narrative entitled the USM Stonecoast MFA program. This class had the good fortune to be early co-authors of it, before it follows a natural course of human organization and solidifies into a predictable form. Although we occasionally whine about the chaos inherent in birthing a new entity, on the whole we rejoice in and take seriously the opportunity to steward this young and hopeful enterprise.

In our class, I know that the fiction writers have been telling truths about topics such as the magnetic qualities of sexuality, the eternal complexities inherent in identity, the dark comedy of the human condition, and above all, the white and black medicine of love. These narratives can be smart, poignant, funny, and true. And when the work falls short of its potential, we don't belittle the author. It's simply not done in this program. Nor do we slash up the work. In five short semesters under the direction of B. Lee Hope and now Annie Finch, we have established a tradition of respect for the writer and his or her work which entails a gentle but relentless rigor.

Some days I wondered why I ever thought it was a good idea to subject myself to the equivalent of a marathon run at the pace of a 200-meter sprint. But now that we're at the end of it, I know that we are all stronger and more compassionate writers. It's hard to overstate the amount of courage, psychic energy, and brutal self-knowledge one needs to get the most out of this training. In fact, one could substitute the words "Stonecoast students" for "marines" in the following introduction to Parris Island, the marine training center: "Marines are forged in a furnace of shared hardship and tough training. This shared, intense experience creates bonds of comradeship and standards of conduct so strong that marines will let nothing stand in their way."

I am humble in this comparison of artists to marines because the profound sacrifices made by servicemen and women for our freedom should not be referenced lightly. However, it's also true that writers around the world have lost their freedom and even their lives because they dared to bear witness to injustices. Even when the consequences are not as dire physically, the pursuit of truth-telling can be a hazardous undertaking. In a short story entitled "Wild Geese" by Louise Erdrich, a character named

Nector Kashpaw describes having to kill wounded birds that he finds in his traps. He reminds me of this writing life when he says, “When I do what I have to do, my throat swells closed sometimes. I touch the suffering bodies like they were killed saints I should handle with gentle reverence.”

I am most thankful to have family and friends who support my efforts, and to have found a program that encouraged me to stand as a writer. Each of you will always be an indelible part of my work. Together, we will continue to construct the narrative of Stonecoast and its alumni, and we will produce meaningful work which reflects well on our education. And hopefully, it will also sell. (That last line is for my husband).

At the end of a day of writing, sometimes we stand as tall and fierce as the marines. Other times, as Nector Kashpaw puts it, we are “killed saints” in need of “gentle reverence.” One beauty of the writing life is that on any given day, you never know which one you will be until you sit down and write.

That’s my version of this narrative. *Semper Fi*, Stonecoast.

Write like the wind.