The End of Term

"In the summer," Wendy began her final paper for my class on nature writers, “I wake up at seven, eat oatmeal with blueberries, and leave the house on my purple bicycle, wearing a sweatshirt to protect myself from the cold morning air. I ride past tobacco barns and through tobacco fields, sometimes taking my hands off the handlebars to clap and scare a flock of crows into flight. I climb to the top of a giant green hill that was once the city dump but is now covered in wildflowers. I bike fast and get to work before the blueberry farm opens, so I can pin up the bird nets before customers arrive. Everyone talks to me. Old men give me advice about the future. Children talk about how many berries they’ve picked. Everybody describes their families, their dogs, and their vacations to Maine. For some reason in the middle of the dewy grass and steadily rising July sun, people want to know their neighbors.”

The end of the semester is melancholy. Just as I begin to know the students in my classes, they vanish: Wendy amid the blueberries, the boy who paid for his schooling by teaching yoga in New Haven, a professional skateboarder, the two fishing guides, and a girl who had “always” wanted to be a lawyer but who suddenly was unsure and asked plaintively, “What should I do with the rest of my life?” “Talk to your parents,” I suggested. “Mother doesn’t care what I do,” the girl replied, “and I haven’t seen my father since I was eight.” I’ve taught for forty years, and the girl’s response was more expected than surprising. I looked out my office window. Lilac and autumn olive were sweet in the air. Azaleas were red with horns; and chimes of silverbells shook, then fell silently to the ground. A larch glowed, its limbs the baselines of diagrammed sentences, its new needles flusters of spiky adjectives and adverbs. In distant yards violets wavered fragile and pale, while bugle rose in single blue notes. In the damp leafy woods beyond Horsebarn Hill, ferns thrust into unravelings, and jacks preached from scores of hooded green pulpits.
Along the banks of granite streams, red trillium curtsied demure and humble, while in quiet eddies marsh marigolds burst into bright youthful yellow.

After two girls handed in their last papers at the same time, one lingered in my office. “That girl lives near me,” the student said, describing the girl who left. “She’s nice, and she eats lots of beets.” “My word,” I said. “Yes,” the girl added as she, too, turned to leave the room, “lots of beets. You can’t imagine how many beets.” I started reading an essay written by a boy majoring in biology. In the paper the boy traced the life spans of endoparasites infesting cats. Cats, he wrote, for example, excreted the eggs of *Toxoplasma gondii*. The parasite changed the behavior of rodents who fed on the feces of infected cats, making them less wary, even drawing them toward cat urine, increasing the likelihood of their being eaten by cats. Once inside a cat the *Toxoplasma* spawned, the animal eventually excreting the parasite’s eggs, continuing, as the boy phrased it, “the happy cycle of life.” “Heavens,” I said aloud, pausing to open a box on my desk.

The last book students read for my course was *Walden*. The reading coincided with the opening of a restaurant near campus, one specializing in breakfasts and hamburgers, supplemented by a menu of sweet asides, the most striking being deep-fried Oreo cookies. Thoreau wrote that he was determined to know beans, though one day he spiced up a meal with fricasseed woodchuck. The Oreos provided an occasion for me to bounce from Thoreau’s “simplicity” into a sermon dragging the shallows of the streams in which we went “a-fishing” and eating. In a fashion my preaching took. To the final class meeting Jessica brought forty deep-fried Oreos. “Perhaps you should try one,” she suggested. “Thank you,” I said, then demurred, pleading cholesterol. The box atop my desk contained three cookies left over from class. “Just the medication to purge *Toxoplasma gondii*,” I thought, seizing an Oreo. I saved the other two cookies for Vicki. “Very good,” she said at tea that afternoon. “What was Jessica’s grade before she brought these to class?” “B,” I said. “Well,” Vicki said finishing the second Oreo, “I trust you will give her an A in the course.” “Certainly,” I said, paraphrasing Thoreau, “she learned that a person should not play at life but should ‘earnestly live it.’” “Good,” Vicki said, “now get on your bicycle and ride over to Storrs Hall and look at the big horse chestnut. The tree is incandescent with spires of white flowers.”

For me the annual spring horse auction, held during the last week in April, signals the beginning of the end of term, the heady aroma of
manure and hay always making me dream of roaming, if not bounding along astride a quarter horse, at least ambling beside Vicki listening to red-winged blackbirds and anticipating the arrival of warblers. As each new spring differs slightly from every past spring, so each horse auction is unique. This year thirty-eight “lots” were for sale, two mules and a range of horses, Cashmere and Cody, Geronimo, Isis, Airborne, Brandy and Nellie, Jake and Jazz—quarter horses, registered Morgans, paints, an Arabian, an Appaloosa, and a miniature colt that, the auctioneer said, “has a fantastic temperament and gets along well with other farm animals and even likes dogs.” The youngest horse on the block was a two-year-old filly, the oldest a thirty-two-year-old gelding. The horses’ vaccinations were “current,” and all came stapled with microchips for identification. A trio of Connecticut Animal Control officers scrutinized the paperwork of each sale. Attached to the front of the table at which they sat was a notice reading, “If you are acting as a third party to purchase an animal for anyone who is a party to an animal cruelty investigation, there is a potential that you could be violating state law and you could be charged for such violation.”

The Connecticut Department of Agriculture’s Equine Rescue Program contributed twenty-four lots to the auction, animals not maintained by their previous owners, the number a sign of hard monetary times. The economy affected the auction. Several years back horses sold for $6,000 or $7,000. The top price paid this year was $2,600 for Ovation, a twenty-year-old registered Morgan mare. Ovation probably went to a riding school, one that taught children, for she was “a very honest mare” and, the program stated, “a great lesson horse, both English and Western.” Almost half the horses did not sell or meet the minimum, initially $300 for rescue horses although during the sale the man in charge of the horses dropped the price to $200, saying it cost that much to ship a horse back to the state farm. “Take this horse home and put it on your lawn,” the auctioneer said while trying to sell a five-year-old paint gelding, “you can’t buy a lawn mower for $200.” Most university horses that sold brought between $500 (the minimum) and $800. The few horses that went for more than $1,000 were easy riders. Endeavor, a seventeen-year-old registered Morgan gelding, for example, brought $1,500. “Endeavor,” the program stated, “is not only adorable, but he is an easy mount. He goes English, Western and loves the trails. Currently, he is doing all of the above, plus he is a star on the Morgan Drill Team. Endeavor is most definitely smart and sensible.” The mules sold for $400 apiece. “I don’t know what I will do with them,” the man who purchased
them told me. “I bought them for memory’s sake. My grandfather had mules, and I loved him.” The sale put a quirt to my imagination. Not only did I dream of buying a horse, but imagination affected my sight, the women most active at the auction, all seeming to have long, horsey hair, not pony tails, but manes, chestnut, palomino, buckskin, and dun with “tiger stripes.”

Edward and Eliza accompanied Vicki and me to the auction. Afterward we walked to the university’s dairy bar and had ice cream, Vicki, maple walnut, Eliza, cookies and cream, and Edward, chocolate-chip cookie dough. For my part I am “sensitive on mouth” like Nikko, a twenty-six-year-old gelding who sold for $300, and I had good, honest, registered chocolate, a child’s cone only a hand high. In the dairy bar was a farmer we had seen at the sale. He had tossed the dietary bit and was also eating chocolate, a massive cup that towered over my cone. He wore a T-shirt on the front of which appeared a picture of four lank-haired Apache braves, all carrying rifles. Stamped above the picture was “Homeland Security,” below was the phrase, “Fighting Terrorism Since 1492.”

Before leaving the dairy bar, the farmer bought a small cup of vanilla, which he took outside to his truck and fed to an aged Jack Russell perched on the passenger’s side of the front seat. Imaginary ties are often real. “He is old and weak like Penny,” Vicki said, noticing the dog. Six days later Penny, our Jack Russell, died. Penny was fifteen, the runt and last of a puppy-mill litter when Vicki purchased her. At the time I was out of censorious sight, in Houston mucking out the house of a senile uncle. Vicki had long thought George, our dachshund, needed a canine companion. On the morning I left for Texas, she promised that she would not look at a dog while I was gone. The next day she bought Penny. Five days later, the night before I flew home, Vicki telephoned and said Eliza, who was ten, wanted to speak to me. “Daddy,” Eliza said, “we have a surprise for you.” What I thought differed from what I said. “That’s wonderful, Eliza. Don’t tell me what it is, but I’ll bet it barks,” I said, “I can’t wait to see it.” Penny was tiny and white, a heartthrob that fell asleep in my lap almost as soon as I walked into the house. Fifteen years is a long time in a person’s life. Eliza is no longer a little girl, and nowadays all my surprises are medical and expected rather than suspected.

For a year Penny had staggered toward death, losing sight, hearing, and balance. Yet, three weeks before she died, she accompanied Vicki and me on a walk across the field and into woods below the red barn on the university farm. I carried her through high grass and lifted her over logs
and across streams, but she was a trooper, flagging but never stopping. Penny’s last fortnight was hard. For a year I had awakened her at six every morning and carried her outside. Once in the yard she walked, even frisked. At the beginning of her last week, however, she broke down and couldn’t stand, and whenever I took her out, I supported her. Afterward I brought her inside and, covering her, placed her back in her bed where she stayed until I took her out again. Three days before she died, she became comatose and quit eating. I stopped carrying her out, and four times a day Vicki sponged her off and washed the towels in which she slept. Vicki wanted Penny to die at home, saying that putting her to sleep in a strange place “would be terrible, even though Penny wouldn’t know where she was.” I wasn’t sure, and the morning Penny died, I almost said that kindness was often cruelty. I am glad I said nothing. Four hours later, at 12:36, Penny made a clicking sound and died at home in her bed under the kitchen table, her human family nearby, Vicki five feet away washing a blue bowl in the sink, and I in the study eating peach yogurt, having just returned from jogging.

After finishing the yogurt, I put on work clothes and, going outside, dug Penny’s grave in the dell below the study window. The day was dank, and the digging was difficult, the ground being mostly till—gravely rocks and big stones, roots wrapping through and about them like rope. Once the hole was deep and broad, I shoveled up compost from the woods behind the house. Later I used the compost as fill to replace the stones I removed from the hole, Vicki having said that she “couldn’t stand to think of Penny’s being crushed by rocks.” At four-thirty we buried Penny. We left her collar on, all three children e-mailing Vicki and saying that burying Penny “naked would be awful.” Vicki lined the bottom of the grave with an old undershirt, one “familiar with my scent,” she said. The burial was pagan but satisfying. Vicki put a chewy toy between Penny’s paws, a cross between a squirrel and mouse, slow moving so it could be caught easily but hairy, helping it to endure shaking and tossing. Beside Penny’s muzzle, Vicki placed three small dog biscuits shaped like bones and two hunks of Waggin’ Train Wholesome Chicken Jerky Tenders. Penny had lost so many teeth she hadn’t been able to eat hard food for months. “She’ll get new teeth where she is going, and she’ll enjoy the jerky,” Vicki said. Next we covered Penny with flowers, rose petals from flowers in the house and from outside, daffodils, tulips, streamers of periwinkle, and a carpet of tiny Quaker ladies. Finally I filled the grave with dirt and compost, shaping a mound, into the head of which Vicki stuck a small jar filled with water and containing a bouquet of violets.
The next morning we drove to Ledgecrest and bought perennials. That afternoon we planted them around the grave, Jacob’s ladder, forget-me-nots, a deep purple oxalis, and, at the top and bottom, small rose bushes thick with red blossoms.

Not simply season but also the personal links moments and defines a span of time. For me the end of term was in part dog days. Examinations began two days after I buried Penny. That evening when I entered the university library, a sign greeted me. “Paws to Relax,” the sign suggested. On the sign appeared a colored picture of a golden retriever sitting in patch of ox-eyed daisies. Under the picture was “Pet therapy dogs to help de-stress during exams” and a list of hours when dogs would be available on level I or level B of the library. Most of the hours were in the afternoon, but some were at night or in the morning. Among the dogs participating in the sessions were Dooley, Jester, Quinn, Luna, Mia, and Savannah. “Darn, this takes all dog,” I thought, initially not sure whether to chuckle or sneer. My ambivalence was short lived. I smiled and thought about Penny, the horse auction, and trees blooming on campus, black cherries along the North Eagleville Road, and daphne beside the dairy bar sweeter than any ice cream.

I wanted the end of term to continue into a start. I didn’t want to forget the names and faces of my students, so I pondered writing a second book about teaching. Letters to a Teacher, my first book on the subject, was gentle and soft, in horse terms “easy to work with” and stood for the farrier. “I’ll lay out my final thoughts on teaching,” I told Edward. “Good. You’ll have to be tough and iconoclastic. How will you begin?” Edward said. “How about, ‘When I first started to teach, boys were smarter and girls better looking,’” he continued, answering his own question. “You’ll also need a clever title.” That night I read a humorous essay by Jerome K. Jerome entitled, “On the Care and Management of Women.” A slight emendation gave me a title, “On the Care and Management of Students.” “Wonderful,” my friend Josh exclaimed, adding that differences between the two groups were slight. “Neither should be allowed to munch wild oats.” I smiled, but as I listened to Josh, the end of term ended.

I could have produced a snappy manuscript. But I knew the click and jump of wit would have distorted the delights of deep-fried Oreos as well as of experiences outside the schoolroom, moments that accompanied me to class and shaped my courses. I didn’t want to, as Thoreau put it, “suck out all the marrow of life.” I was too old for that. But neither did I want to restrict myself to nibbling at the bony edges of existence in
order to turn out a book. “I often bike these farm roads again at sunset,”
Wendy wrote, “when most of the tractors have returned to the barns
and the sky is streaked with orange and filled with puffy pink clouds.
The silos become dark silhouettes towering over empty fields. The air
starts to fill with the sounds of crickets and the twanging calls of bull-
frogs that hide in the damp along the road. If I am with a friend, we
often get off our bikes and run into a strawberry patch, pick one straw-
berry, then race away.” I suspect Wendy ate more than a single berry. No
matter, nothing I wrote about teaching could do justice to a student's
pedaling under an orange sky, bullfrogs twanging an accompaniment,
maybe a cat howling in the distance, parasites giving it a bellyache, and
then perhaps cantering across a shadowy green hill, Maddy, a twenty-
year-old paint mare, bought at auction, an “easy to ride” present from
a mother to a daughter.