

English Literature Portfolio

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Preface

Since I was very young, I have always loved jigsaw puzzles. As a child, I loved to look at all of the different colored pieces in front of me and try to imagine ways I could connect them all into one picture. I loved doing this, but I always hated when the puzzle was finished. I hated the fact that there were no other ways to put that puzzle together; I had already found the one possible answer. One of the main reasons I became a literature major is because there are always more than one answer when it comes to interpreting a piece of literature. One of the goals of the English Literature major I value most is the “ability to produce detailed, sophisticated readings of literary works by studying and practicing a rich repertoire of critical strategies.” I exhibit this skill in my first portfolio essay, “Feminist Revision of Tradition in Eavan Boland’s ‘Daphne with Her Thighs in Bark.’” This paper was written for my Literary Criticism class in the fall of my junior year. The original assignment was to write a critical response to the poem “Daphne with her Thighs in Bark,” using the formalist approach to criticism. Through the portfolio process, I was able to look at this poem from a completely different perspective using feminist criticism, which resulted in a clearer and more rounded understanding of Boland’s work.

The second portfolio essay I chose was “What We Talk About When We Talk About Him.” This was a voiced research paper I wrote for my Writers for the 21st Century class in the spring of my Junior year, in which I examined the poetry of Raymond Carver. I had never written a voiced research paper before, so this assignment was a great challenge to me. I had studied Carver’s short stories in the past, which led to my decision to write the paper as a “story” in the style of Raymond Carver’s early

fiction. Through the revision process I was able to focus more on mimicking Carver's unique, and sometimes grammatically incorrect style, and include a poem of my own as a reflection upon the research I had done. This paper fulfills one of the goals of a literature major in that it demonstrates my "writing skills that include the ability to synthesize ideas and concepts, to convey these ideas with clarity and creativity, and to master techniques and conventions of literary research."

The pieces I have chosen were both great challenges for me to write and revise, and I believe they best demonstrate my skill as a literature major. Both of these papers reveal my "understanding of the central theoretical issues concerning the creation and criticism of literature," as well as my appreciation for both Eavan Boland and Raymond Carver.

Feminist Revision of Tradition in Eavan Boland's "Daphne with Her Thighs in Bark"

Apollo had been too proud. He taunted Cupid, saying he was not worthy of using the arrow for his deeds. To humble him, Cupid shot Apollo with a golden arrow of love for the nymph Daphne, and in malice, shot Daphne with a lead arrow that made her despise love. Daphne was swift. She ran quickly through trunks and leaves, a huntress being hunted. Apollo followed close, grabbing for her hair as he gained. When she felt his breath upon her neck, Daphne pleaded for her father, Peneus the river god, to change her form so Apollo would not desire her any longer. Upon her request, she was transformed into a Laurel tree. Apollo fell against her bows, and even after her skin had been hardened into bark, Daphne shrank from him.

Woman in traditional male poetry is the tool or catalyst that brings man to a higher understanding of himself, or beats him down into self loathing. She is the supporting actress who works without any mention of her own fulfillment outside of making or breaking a man. In the mythical story of Daphne and Apollo, Cupid uses Daphne to rid Apollo of his pride, and because of this Daphne eventually loses herself. Many poets have revisited this myth without focus on Daphne's lost identity, but on Apollo's lost love. In John Keats' poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn," an allusion to the myth is made in the description of two young lovers eternally frozen in chase. The speaker in Keats' poem tells the young man that although he will never receive the girl's kiss, at least the object of his love will never fade; this connects with Apollo's vow to wear Daphne's never fading Laurel leaves all the days of his life. Although "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a beautiful poem, it is just another example of the revisited myth overlooking Daphne's personal plight. In "We Dead Awaken," Adrienne Rich explains that literary traditions ignore the female experience, leaving no tradition for female writers to identify with. She calls for a dramatic revision of tradition that penetrates "an old text from a new

critical direction” (Rich 35). “We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (35). Helene Cixous strengthens this theory in “The Laugh of the Medusa” by adding that women need to write out of their own bodily experiences which can be far more fluid, open, and groundbreaking than those of man and mind. Cixous requests that women writers create works that will make women readers say “I too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of-songs” (Cixous 2040). Eavan Boland, in her poem “Daphne with her Thighs in Bark,”¹ revises the Daphne and Apollo myth utilizing a new critical direction Adrienne Rich spoke of, as well as succeeding in writing out of her female bodily experience, as Cixous advocates. She achieves these goals so well in this poem that not only does she radically revise the myth of Daphne from a female perspective, but it also works as an extended metaphor for breaking the bonds of literary tradition.

In the traditional myth, Daphne gives up her humanity in order to protect her virtue. In the beginning of “Daphne with her Thighs in Bark,” Boland plainly seeks to revise the myth for future generations:

so that,
in the next myth,
my sister will be wiser.
(Boland 123)

Boland clearly states her purpose as revising the myth, the act Adrienne Rich’s called for. The speaker addresses her “sister,” uniting herself with the female reader. This makes her everywoman-- inviting the reader to revise her knowledge of the female experience. Boland’s speaker takes on the myth of Daphne as her own experience and persona,

¹ See appendix A.

allowing the female reader to read “Daphne’s” bodily experiences as her own. Boland sets out to write the collective female experience, one which has gone unwritten in literature.

In the original myth, Daphne runs from Apollo out of fear and distaste for him; however, in Boland’s version, “Daphne” wishes that she hadn’t.

Let her learn from me:

The opposite of passion
Is not virtue
but routine.
(123)

In this radical revision the speaker presents the opposite of passion and lust, as routine, not virtue, and therefore does not advocate protection from that passion, but requests that passion’s pleasant disruptiveness. She encourages the reader to “Fall. Stumble. Rut with him (124).” In other words, the revised myth she creates will encourage her “sister” to embrace her passions and experience them, even if they are impulsive and without reason.

Unlike the myth, the “Daphne” in Boland’s poem has not transformed into the virtuous and beautiful Laurel tree, who crowned poets and warriors. “Daphne” is a housewife. The speaker discusses her everyday routine in the home, and how it can bring her to recall the passion she shied away from.

I can be cooking,
making coffee,
scrubbing wood, perhaps,
and back it comes:
the crystalline, the elsewhere,
the wood
(123)

This stanza is particularly interesting in its construction. While scanning it, one can see that the feet of the lines are largely iambic, except for the second and third lines. The iambic rhythm is disrupted with the strong sounds of the trochees “making,” “scrubbing,” and “wood, perhaps.” Boland asks the reader to acknowledge an importance in these lines by setting them apart from the others. In the third line, the caesura following the word “wood” causes it to stand out, connecting it to the transitional “wood” at the end of the stanza. This reference to wood alludes to the Daphne myth and what she wishes she *would* have done, as well as bringing a phallic connotation. It may seem that in using phallic images to illustrate the speaker’s desire Boland fails to succeed in meeting Cixous’ criteria of creating a new language that breaks free of “speech which has been governed by the phallus” (Cixous 2044). However, this is the way that Boland writes from her bodily experience of sexual desire. She uses domestic language and buried metaphors rather than blatant and explicit details. This round about way of discussing female sexuality in reference to the male is appropriate in the context of the poem and can be very powerful because it alludes to the speaker’s sexual repression as a house wife, the female in a male society, and the female experience in literary tradition. Boland is depicting the process of breaking free of those barriers and calling on other women to achieve that goal, just as Cixous did.

Boland also uses this technique within the domestic language of the eleventh stanza.

I shall be here forever,
setting out the tea,
among the coppers and the branching alloys and
the tin shine of this kitchen;
laying saucers on the pine table.
(124)

In this stanza, the speaker laments her household duties, emphasizing that lament with metallic images. Unlike the excitement elicited from the hard wood image in the 6th stanza, metal seems to bring despair. “Coppers,” “branching alloys,” and “tin” relate to the speaker’s routine inside her home. She feels she will remain in her kitchen forever, among her pots, pans, and silverware— symbols of her place in the household. Interestingly, Boland chose “copper” and “tin,” two very common metals which are known for being malleable, as contrasts to the wood that the speaker is excited by and desires. The hardness of the wood is symbolic of passion and the sexual freedom that she wishes she had chosen, while the soft and common metals show the tedium of the speaker’s household routine that she chose instead. The word “pine” in the last line of the stanza, read literally, is the wooden table beneath everything, but looked at figuratively, “pine” is symbolic of her aching desire that she hides beneath the monotony of her daily routine.

These wooden and metallic images are used similarly in the ninth stanza.

The trees reached out to me.
I silvered and
I quivered. I shook out
my foil of quick leaves.
(123)

The trees reach out to the speaker and out of fear she “silvered.” Boland’s revision of the myth has “Daphne” turn to metal, as she shakes out her “foil of quick leaves.” This is a significant revision to the original Daphne myth, in which Daphne becomes a tree and is eternally chained in wood in order to protect herself from Apollo’s advances. “Foil” is used literally as a disguise to outwit, but it also implies the sterile metal foil used for

preservation in the kitchen, once again connecting Boland's new Daphne myth to the female in a male society and to the collective female experience.

The bodily experience that Boland writes about in "Daphne with her Thighs in Bark" is sexual desire. The title of the poem alludes to this, with the words "thighs in bark." Maintaining the sexual connotations of wood, the image that comes from the title is one of sexual arousal and desire. The speaker experiences this yet feels she has lost her chance to fulfill that desire, or at least has not succeeded in doing so as of yet, thus she enlists her "sister" to fulfill her own sexual desires. This relates again to Boland's connection with Cixous, and her call for women to write of their own bodily experience.

Save face, sister.
Fall. Stumble.
Rut with him.
His rough heat will keep you warm and

you will be better off than me,
with your memories
down the garden,
at the start of March,

The sounds Boland uses in these lines are strong, forceful, and even guttural. The three accented sounds of "Save face, sister" call the reader to attention. "Fall. Stumble. Rut with him." The direction the speaker gives her "sister" with these spondaic syllables is forceful and potent. Also, Boland does something interesting with sound in the thirteenth stanza involving the words "garden," "start," and "March," and again in the fifteenth stanza. "Hardens" brings the obvious phallic image to mind, and the growling "ar" assonance links the words of the fifteenth stanza to that image as well. These simple, delicate looking words sound surprisingly sexual. The eroticism of the words is hidden, just as the speaker finds her sexual desire hidden within her daily routine.

Boland's revision of the Daphne myth not only revises it in a dramatically fresh way that breaks free of tradition, but it also depicts the struggle to write as a woman through one's own bodily experience in the face of tradition.

I have written this

So that,
In the next myth
My sister will be wiser.
(123)

Boland wrote this poem with the same intentions Helene Cixous had in "The Laugh of the Medusa." She is calling on her female reader to revise myths, embrace the collective experience of women, and write of her own body. "Daphne with her Thighs in Bark" works as an extended metaphor on breaking free of poetic tradition. The metal images in the poem symbolize the non-natural, man-made literary traditions involving women. When she tells her reader to "Save face, sister. Fall. Stumble. Rut with him," she is requesting that her female readers enter traditional male texts, and through their bodily experiences, revise.

unable to keep your eyes
off the chestnut tree—

just the way
it thrusts and hardens.
(124)

The ending of the poem depicts the "sister" enthralled with a "phallic" symbol, but the reader should not be discouraged. The chestnut tree is not purely phallic; it is bisexual. The chestnut tree blooms both male and female flowers, and interestingly does not require an insect or bird for pollination. It relies upon the wind. Cixous describes the female as bisexual in nature because of her ability to carry the other within her during

pregnancy and because of the duality in the structure of her genitals (2053). Boland's "sister" is not enthralled by a phallus, but by something else that encompasses the female, possibly herself. Boland wills her "sister," the female reader of the revised myth "Daphne with her Thighs in Bark," to seek out and embrace her own femininity and her place in literary tradition. "Daphne with her Thighs in Bark" is an exciting revision of a traditional myth which ensures that in the next myth, our sisters *will* be wiser.

Appendix A

“Daphne With Her Thighs In Bark
Eavan Boland”

I have written this

so that,
in the next myth,
my sister will be wiser.

Let her learn from me:

the opposite of passion
is not virtue
but routine.

I can be cooking,
making coffee,
scrubbing wood, perhaps,
and back it comes:
the crystalline, the elsewhere,
the wood

where I was
when he began the chase.
And how I ran from him!

Pan-thighed,
satyr-faced he was.

The trees reached out to me.
I silvered and I quivered. I shook out
My foil of quick leaves.

He snouted past.
What a fool I was!

I shall be here forever,
setting out the tea,
among the coppers and the branching alloys and
the tin shine of this kitchen;
laying saucers on the pine table.

Save face, sister.
Fall. Stumble.

Rut with him.
His rough heat will keep you warm and

you will be better off than me,
with your memories
down the garden,
at the start of March,

unable to keep your eyes
off the chestnut tree -

just the way
it thrusts and hardens.

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What We Talk About When We Talk About Him²

I don't want to go, but I know she'll never let up about it, so I go.³ Colleen has been going to this women's group for months, and all I hear about is how great it is. They call themselves W.I.L.L., and it's something about women, and loss and love, or living. I think because she's getting married soon, she's getting sentimental and missing Dad. She keeps bringing him up on the phone, trying to get me to talk about him. So I finally say I'll go with her because I know it means more to her that I go, than it does for me to avoid it.

They hold it in the basement of a church, but Colleen promises it isn't a religious thing. There's an old yellow coffee dispenser on a table with white Styrofoam cups and a plate of sugar cookies. We sit in a circle and everyone knows each other. I have to stand up and say who I am and why I'm here. I'm Colleen's little sister, I say.⁴ She made me come. They all laugh.

Maryann⁵ asks me what kind of loss I've experienced. Death, divorce, a break-up?

Death I say. Same as Colleen, I say, and sit down. They want me to say more so I tell them I'm a student. Colleen tells them I'm a writer.

² The title alludes to Raymond Carver's short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" in which the characters, particularly Mel, have a hard time articulating their feelings on the subject of love.

³ My sister and I are characters in a short "story" I wrote in the style of Raymond Carver's early stories. Carver writes sparingly, "with just enough description to set the scene, and just enough interpretations of motivation to clarify the action" (McCaffery 66). This is what I am trying to do in my short "story" in which I examine some of his poetry.

⁴ Here I am imitating a style that Carver uses often in his short stories, like many in his books *Put Yourself in My Shoes* and *Will You be Quiet Please?*, where dialog is either described rather than directly stated, or it is directly stated but quotation marks are never used. I also imitate his language style in that it is very simple incorporating short, often incomplete sentences with longer sentences (McCaffery 67).

⁵ Maryann is Raymond Carver's first wife. When he was 19 and she 16, Maryann became pregnant and the two married June 7, 1957. They separated and reunited several times, until they ended the relationship in 1978. They finally divorced in 1985 (Nordgren 67-69).

Maryann tells me her husband was a writer. She tells us how he used their lives for his work. I think he left me when he ran out of material, she says. That jerk. Then she laughs. No he'd just take a little bit, as the seed. I could always find it, though, in everything he ever wrote, even after he was married to someone else.⁶

Maryann has brought in a poem for us about loss. My husband wrote it she says. Before it all turned to crap. She laughs. But yeah, it's a perfect poem for us because it's about loss.

Drifting outside in a pall of smoke,
I follow a snail's streaked path down
the garden to the garden's stone wall.
Alone at last I squat on my heels, see

what needs to be done, and suddenly
affix myself to the damp stone.
I begin to look around me slowly
and listen, employing

my entire body as the snail
employs its body, relaxed but alert.
Amazing! Tonight is a milestone
in my life. After tonight

how can I ever go back to that
other life? I keep my eyes
on the stars, wave to them
with my feelers. I hold on

for hours, just nesting.
Still after, grief begins to settle
around my heart in tiny drops.
I remember my father is dead,

And I am going away from this
town soon. Forever.
Goodbye, son, my father says.
Toward morning, I climb down

⁶ Maryann said in an interview that Ray would consistently write about incidents in their lives exactly six years after they occurred and remember them exactly in his poetry and short stories (Halpert 90).

and wander back into the house.
They are still waiting,
fright splashed on their faces,
as they meet my new eyes for the first time.⁷

I really like the poem, but I stay quiet. I stay quiet and think about the poem and play with the chain of my necklace, spinning it through the cross hanging in front while they all tell about their weeks.⁸ Some of them are having good weeks, some bad. Some of the women are veterans who try to support the new inconsolable ones, but some of them still cry for themselves. I'm uncomfortable. I think about how I could write about it.

Colleen starts talking about trying on a wedding dress. I feel bad he's going to miss this she says. It made her think of her first communion, how he rented out a banquet hall and invited everyone to see her dressed in white. I remember that, too. She looked so pretty, and I couldn't wait for my communion. There was never a party for me, though, for everyone to see. She starts telling a story about an eight mile hike we took to see a natural waterfall. She's talking about him like he was a wise prophet, and I laugh inside because I remember him so differently. I remember my little seven year old feet had blisters and I wanted to go home, but he made me keep going. He told me I never got enough exercise anyway. I get up and fill one of the Styrofoam cups with coffee. I don't ever drink coffee, but I do it anyway. These strangers are listening to her and keep

⁷ This is Raymond Carver's poem "Forever" (Heyen 29). He wrote this poem about the night his father died. The speaker escapes his family to mourn alone, by engaging in his environment. The speaker seeks to "affix" himself to the stone wall and emulate the snail, which shows his discontent with the speed and change in his life. His father passed away and he will be moving away forever, so he puts his life on pause and stays outside on the wall all night. The image of the speaker lying on the stone wall around the garden brings to mind the phrase "still on the fence" about something. It is possible that the speaker is contemplating his own death, because he thinks he cannot go "back to that other life." This is supported by the fear his family clearly exhibits, upon his return. His "new eyes" tell the reader that the speaker has looked at death, and he is *forever* changed.

⁸ Raymond Carver often used religious principles, references, and symbolism in his work, for instance in the poem "Wes Hardin: From a Photograph" or the short story "A Small Good Thing" (Bethea 176).

glancing at me and I feel uncomfortable. I know I have to sit down so I glaze over, and think about a poem I read, while pretending to listen.

Suddenly, I find a new path
to the waterfall.

I begin to hurry.
Wake up,

my wife says,
you're dreaming.⁹

I hear Colleen say alcohol, and I'm back listening. I really do not want to be talking about this. Then she starts talking about waking up at 4 AM to go fishing in the rain.

We found our own worms when it rained I say. Colleen is surprised that I'm talking. So am I.

Yes we did she says. I don't say anything else. She's looking at me now. I sip the black coffee I hate, and everyone's quiet. They stay quiet for a good long time.

Maryann breaks the silence. It reminds me of my husband she says. She shakes her head. The alcohol she says.¹⁰ And fishing. My husband liked to write about fishing.¹¹

I don't like how Maryann keeps making everything about her, and I want to leave.¹² I don't like anything about this place, and I don't know why I said anything. I

⁹ From Carver's poem "Looking for Work" (Carver *New*, 19). In this poem Carver examines his alcoholism and how it interfered with finding work to support his family. In the text of the poem, he exists more comfortably in his dreams than in reality, which parallels the struggle of many of his fictional characters, like Mel in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." Mel can articulate his ideal desire to be a knight, yet he cannot express clearly how he feels about the situations in reality he has with his wife and ex-wife.

¹⁰ Around 1968, Raymond Carver began a long term battle with alcoholism, for which he was hospitalized four times until he quit drinking on June 2, 1977 (Nordgren 69).

¹¹ His poems "Bobber" (Heyen 26), "The Sturgeon" (Carver *New*, 44) "The Painter and the Fish" (Carver *New*, 54), and "For Tess" (Carver *Where*, 130) all involve fish, one of Carver's religious symbols.

get up and walk around the room again then say I need to get something from the car. I don't care that I'm rude, I don't care that there's nothing to get. I go up the stairs and out the door and into the passenger side of my car. It's my car, not Colleen's because we had to drop hers off to get an oil change on the way. Maybe that's why she wanted me to come I think. To drive. I laugh at my joke and stare out the tinted window at a squirrel on a tree in front of the church. He starts to bore me so I grab my notebook from the back. It's full of poems. Sometimes I find them in magazines, or books from classes, and sometimes I write them myself. I read one that I found called "Sunday Night."¹³

Make use of the things around you.

This light rain
Outside the window, for one.
This cigarette between my fingers,
These feet on the couch.
The faint sound of rock-and-roll,
The red Ferrari in my head.
The woman bumping
Drunkenly around the kitchen...
Put it all in,
Make use.

I read it again, and roll it around on my tongue. I like how he does two things at once, yet so simply. He describes an evening, a drunk and relaxed dreaming evening, and yet also talks about the technique of writing the poem with imagery. I like the imagery in it because it hints at emotions and makes me create my own story of what is going on. I like this poem by Raymond Carver. I have a whole section of my notebook dedicated to him.

¹² Maryann admits to being a very domineering person (Halpert 92).

¹³ "Sunday Night" was published in Carver's book *A New Path to the Waterfall*.

I start to read another one when I see someone standing by the window. I am scared at first, but then I recognize her. She had been inside with the group. Her name is Tess.¹⁴ I roll down my window and stare at her, wondering what she's doing out here. I don't like to talk here either, she says. I still sit there staring at her, and she says she's a writer too. I smile at her and move over to the driver's seat so she can sit down with me.

When did he die she asks me. I was 15 I say. I say that I'm over it, I just don't like talking about it with a bunch of strangers. Do you talk to your sister about it? Sometimes I say. She remembers him a lot differently than I do, I say. I say how she wants me to talk, but she never likes to hear what I remember. Tess says it's funny how one person can be remembered so differently after they die. She says it's too bad that we can't talk though. Yeah I say. I am playing with the spiral ring on my notebook and thinking of something to ask her. She takes my notebook out of my hands and flips through, asking if these are my poems. I say no, only some. I start to explain to her how I also just find ones I like, and she stops. She has on a sad smile and stares down at the page.

It's my husband's she says. This is Ray's poem. I realize who I am talking to. She is Tess Gallagher and she was married to Raymond Carver when he died. I remember because his poems for her had so much emotion and sadness when he knew he was going to die. She starts reading one called "No Need."¹⁵

I see an empty place at the table.

¹⁴ Raymond Carver met Tess Gallagher at a writer's conference in November 1977. They began living together in 1979, and both ended up teaching at Syracuse. During their romance, Carver and Gallagher advised one another in their writings. They married shortly before his death on August 2, 1988 (Nordgren 71).

¹⁵ "No Need" was published in Raymond Carver's last book, *A New Path to the Waterfall*. This poem falls in the last section that focuses on his disease and his coming death. "No Need" is one of the most powerful because of the intimacy he shares with his subject, Tess. This is his rehearsal of their final goodbye (Carver, *New* 119).

Whose? Who else's? Who am I kidding?
The boat's waiting. No need for oars
Or a wind. I've left the key
In the same place. You know where.
Remember me and all we did together.
Now, hold me tight. That's it. Kiss me
Hard on the lips. There. Now
Let me go, my dearest. Let me go.
We shall not meet again in this life,
So kiss me goodbye now. Here, kiss me again.
Once more. There. That's enough.
Now my dearest, let me go.
It's time to be on the way.

It is so powerful hearing her say the words. We both have tears in our eyes when she's finished. I tell her I wrote that one down because I could almost hear them crying when I read it. She tells me the story of how he died, and she kissed him four times, just like in the poem. She told him not to be afraid. They said I love you, and he told her to get some sleep now.¹⁶ She says that Ray was a good man. He worked so hard at what he did, but he wouldn't allow himself to get too proud. And he was romantic. If he didn't tell her he loved her enough, he said it enough in his poetry.

That makes me think about my dad, and how he didn't always say that he loved me. I tell Tess, how when I was 19, my grandmother told me that my dad had talked about me like I was the most amazing thing he'd ever done. I said to her that you wouldn't see that if you saw us together. My grandma said that yes you could, that's why he pushed me. I say to Tess that it's hard though because I don't get to see it for myself now.

¹⁶ In Tess's introduction to *A New Path to the Waterfall* she recalls kissing Raymond four times before he said "get some sleep now." Then he passed away (Carver, *New zzvi*).

Tess asks me if I write about him. I say I have tried, but it's never any good. She wants to read something. I am nervous but I open my notebook to a poem I can't finish.

it's a work in progress I say. She reads it out loud.

Do you remember when I was eight years old
and you fell down in grandma's basement
off the metal ladder you were on
trying to fix the light?

Grandma had let me take the ice cream
down and watch you with the wires.
It was vanilla and you were a strong dad.
I thought you were a good man
for doing her the favor.

You shook before I saw the sparks.
Your tools hit the ground first
then you followed fast and awkward
looking at me blankly and at the time
I was sure I lost you then.

You were ok.
You got up, but
I should have lost you then.

She stops reading and she is quiet. My heart is beating hard and I am mad that I wanted to show it to her. I wish I had shown her the version where I use the light and the ladder as metaphors, but I don't know if that one is any better. I say how it still needs work, how I have three other versions of it. It's hard for me to write about the way he did die, I say. I just don't know how to make it as real as anything I felt. I say how I can't find the words. How I don't like the words.

Tess says that she thinks Ray would have liked me as a character in one of his stories.¹⁷ She says it's all a process. The words go for awhile, but eventually they come. But they are never right she says. That's why you keep writing.

I am grateful for her.

She says she writes about Ray all the time, but it will never be right because she will never know what Ray thinks. She says there's a part in her poem "Meeting beyond Meeting," though, that she knows he would like.¹⁸

I could still believe the door will open
And you will be standing there,
A little surprised I'm not with
Anyone yet.

She smiles. I think he would like it too I say. She asks me which one of Ray's poems I like the best. I tell Tess how I liked Ray's poem "Bobber" because I can relate to his relationship with his dad.¹⁹

On the Columbia River near Vantage,
Washington, we fished for whitefish
in the winter months; my dad, Swede—
Mr. Lindgren— and me. They used belly-reels,
pencil-length sinkers, red, yellow, or brown
flies baited with maggots.
They wanted distance and went clear out there
to the edge of the riffle.
I fished near shore with a quill bobber and a cane pole.

My dad kept his maggots alive and warm
under his lower lip. Mr. Lindgren didn't drink.
I liked him better than my dad for a time.
He let me steer his car, teased me
about my name "Junior," and said
one day I'd grow into a fine man, remember

¹⁷A calling card of a Raymond Carver story is the presence of inarticulate characters. Although their silences could be destructive to relationships, sometimes they were medicinal (Nesset 309).

¹⁸From Tess Gallagher's book, *Moon Crossing Bridge* (43). This poem is one of several about the possible outcome of a reunion with Ray.

¹⁹Carver's poem "Bobber" (Heyen 26). Originally published in *Fires*.

all this, and fish with my own son.
But my dad was right. I mean
He kept silent and looked into the river,
Worked his tongue, like a thought, behind the bait.²⁰

At times I wanted someone else for my dad too I say. I picture myself “bobbing” between my father and his friend just like Ray did. I wanted someone who didn’t drink and would praise me all the time, but maybe like Ray, my dad was right I say. He was real I say. He pushed me silently, and praised me in a way I couldn’t understand. But even if I never figure out what he was doing, at least he gives me something to write about.

I’m really glad you came she says. She says that even though I can’t talk to my sister, and I can’t talk to the group— at least I figured that out. That my dad was doing something right. I tell Tess I’m going to go back inside. I’m thinking about what I just realized about my dad, and I want to tell Colleen. I want to look at her, and have her know that I am happy.

Inside the women are in a group hug, saying their goodbyes. My stomach feels sick from the black coffee, but I am still happy. It is such a small discovery, but it is important to me. I find Colleen on the outside of the ring, the smallest woman there.²¹ She pulls me into the hug, and I am about to tell her what I realized. But Maryann is talking again. She wants to read another one of her husband’s poems. He wrote it long

²⁰ This poem depicts the conflicts that Ray had with his father, in a very distant way. He just simply says he wished that Mr. Lindgren was his father, but he doesn’t say why. He wanted something more from his father, but after growing older and his father passed away, he grew a respect for his father that he didn’t have before.

²¹ The “small discovery” and Colleen being “the smallest woman there” are connections to Raymond Carver’s story “A Small Good Thing.”

after they split up. It's about death, she says, but it's happy. It's about success. It's called "Late Fragment."²²

And did you get what
You wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, and to feel myself
Beloved on earth.

I look at Tess quick and say, that's Ray's. He was her husband too she says. Before me she says. I tell her that I don't think Maryann's husband could possibly be the same person that Tess talked about in the car.

He is, she says. We both love him and remember him in different ways. I am surprised so I smile a little, and Colleen says, just like us.

²² This is the last poem that Raymond Caver wrote before he died. It shows that despite the pain he experienced, he was satisfied with his life and the love that he received.

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Reflective Essay

I thought I wanted to be a communication major, in my first year at Loras. During my first two semesters I took four communication classes, all the while thinking to myself that I was ahead of everyone else. I already knew what I wanted to major in, and the classes were disgustingly easy- I learned the same communication model in four classes. I could go out and party every night and I never had to read a word from a book. I felt like I was cheating the system, and I loved it. Then, three weeks before the fall semester of my sophomore year began I had a revelation while cleaning my room. I realized I had seven notebooks filled with short stories and poems, and I had saved three text books from English classes. I had always loved reading and writing, but I thought a communication major would be easy. As I flipped through my notebooks, I got tears in my eyes. Even though most of the stuff I had written down was crap, I missed it. I realized I had been cheating myself. I had been cheating myself out of an actual education, and I was cheating myself out of the opportunity to learn more about something I had always loved. Within an hour of having my revelation, I went online, looked at the fall schedule, spoke to the registrar, and faxed them a letter requesting course changes. I became an English major.

When I made that decision to commit to my education as an English literature and creative writing major, I made the best decision I have made as of yet regarding my future. Through my years in the English department I have definitely mastered the goals of a literature major. I have an appreciation for all literature, which I can respond to critically. I have an understanding of the central theoretical issues concerning the creation and criticism of literature, and I have developed my skill in writing with clarity and

creativity. This literature portfolio is the capstone of my education here at Loras because in writing and revising these essays I have truly pushed myself to achieve these goals.

The first essay, “Feminist Revision of Tradition in Eavan Boland’s ‘Daphne with her Thighs in Bark’” was at first extremely challenging for me to revise. The interpretation of the poem I derived from my original reading and response was geared towards formalist criticism, and did not coincide at all with the feminist criticism by which I had to analyze the poem. It was very hard for me to move from analyzing the unity in the context of the poem, to analyzing the poem through the female experience and comparisons with tradition. Through my old reading, I did not think Eavan Boland lived up to the feminist criteria that Rich and Cixous advocated. I thought I had picked the worst poem possible to revise using feminist criticism, and I almost changed my mind about using this essay in the portfolio. I didn’t give up, though, and one very late night, I read the poem as if I had never read it before and noticed in the 9th stanza, “Daphne” turns to metal. I had always read through “I silvered” and “I shook out my foil of quick leaves” still picturing Boland’s “Daphne” turning to wood as in the myth. Reading that line as metal, finally, transformed the entire poem for me, leading into my discussion of metals as symbols of the male dominated society, and wood as the natural female. I stayed up that night writing my revision, because I was so excited to have finally gotten it. Through this process of revision, I reminded myself of my love for puzzles I wrote of in the preface of this portfolio. I learned that I can read a poem over and over again, and I still may be able to find something fresh and surprising.

Although, I am extremely proud of myself for figuring out another answer to the puzzle of the Boland poem, I am most proud of my second essay, “What We Talk About

When We Talk About Him,” because I feel that I have combined several of my skills into one piece of writing. I was able to present factual research, analyze poetry, and show off my own creative writing skills. The creative aspect of this piece was definitely my favorite task, but also the hardest. Raymond Carver is a minimalist and a realist writer, and he says that a writer should use “no tricks.” How was I supposed to avoid tricks while mimicking his style, blending fact with fiction, and interjecting discussions on poetry into a short “story?” This was an extremely hard task that took several revisions to come as close to that ideal as I could. In mimicking his early style, I use punctuation freely for dramatic effect rather than consistently and grammatically, and I use conversational language. I made sure that all of the elements of a true piece of short fiction were present, and luckily in revising I was allowed to put less emphasis on factual research and expand the story line creatively. I am proud of this piece because I was able to do these things, yet, mostly I am proud because I was also able to write about my own life. The characters of my sister Colleen and me, and the feelings we both have about the life and death of our father, are completely true to life. She has never taken me to a women’s group for loss where I have met the wives of a famous writer and discussed poetry, but the conflict between us about the memory of our father is real. I am proud of myself for finding connections between my own life and Raymond Carver’s as those connections helped me to put into words the things I could never express clearly to my sister.

There is one goal I have had for myself throughout my studies that is not on the list of goals required of a literature major, and I believe my willingness to attempt this goal is my greatest strength as a scholar of literature. It is my desire to write my own

works based on what I have read. Whenever I have studied a particular writer, literary movement, or a type of criticism, those influences are clearly seen in my own creative works. In my voiced research paper about Raymond Carver, I studied Carver's life and read several poems about his experiences with the life and death of his father. Reading these urged me to write poetry about my own father, which was a task I had always found very difficult before. After reading Eavan Boland's "Daphne with her Thighs in Bark" as a feminist piece, I practiced writing my own poetry which includes revisions of the Daphne myth. One of these poems titled "Daphne on the Stairs" will appear in the upcoming Alpha magazine. My educational career as an English major at Loras College is something I will look back upon in years to come as an extremely formative experience that has shaped me as a scholar, a writer, and an individual.