

*talk given at Fairfield University MFA Commencement, July 2011*

First of all, congratulations to the graduates and to everyone who has helped make this day possible, particularly to those partners and family members who suffered the slings and arrows of living with a writer trying to meet a packet deadline. Today is the proof that you have not suffered in vain.

Our graduates are writers and they are commencing. They have done good work and they have learned the truth of what James Baldwin once said, namely that “a real writer is always shifting and changing and searching.” The imagination, which is what all these graduates traffic in, deals with that which does not yet exist. In daily life we attest to that which is—the car in the garage, the bread in the toaster, the algae in the swimming pool. Real writers, to use Baldwin’s designation, do much more than that, however—much more. They are people who possess, one way or another, vision and they are not afraid to use it. Indeed they are eager to use it. The phrase “Listen to this” is probably not an unfamiliar phrase to some of the audience here today. To use another phrase, our graduates are people who are stoked and it is imagination that is stoking them.

They are also people who know something of the terribly hard work that goes into writing. They know what the word revision literally means—to see again, to see more deeply into the matter at hand and to keep reimagining how something could go. The sheer amount of caring about sentences that our graduates have shown is at once something beautiful in its pursuit of the perfect sentence, paragraph, line, stanza and finally the whole of it—the poem, the essay, the screenplay, the story, the memoir, the novel—and something near-crazy, as in “It’s only a sentence. Isn’t it good enough already? What does it matter?” The imp of nihilism is always at a writer’s elbow.

The good news is that others have trod this path before us. We aren’t alone in this endeavor and one of the precious qualities of a program such as Fairfield’s is the camaraderie it brings to both students and faculty, the sense of sharing an endeavor, that—let’s face it—the rest of the world may be indifferent to. Every writer has had the experience of having his or her fervent “Listen to this” met with a remark of dazzling acumen such as “That’s really nice” or “I guess so” or “I don’t know what to say but could you lend me five dollars?”

None of these remarks matters to the writer who understands his or her worth and that is part of what I am talking about this evening. The worth is not something the world can bestow on you. Though this flies in the face of the obvious—publications, awards, fellowships, gigs, etc.—writers are people who foremost honor the worth that comes from the process. If “process” is a word that writers may seem to unconscionably favor, it’s understandable because writing and the life that goes with being a writer is all about process, about the doing it and how dodgy and demanding and exhilarating that doing it is, and about what I like to call the pursuit. For if I had to pick one word to summarize the endeavor that our graduates have chosen and that they will, I hope, continue to follow, it is the pursuit.

My favorite literary biography is a book about the great English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and is entitled, not coincidentally, *Shelley: The Pursuit*. Written by Richard Holmes and first published in 1974 it emanates from the era I emanate from—the unbelievable 1960s. It is a book that bestows the fullest possible consideration upon a life that ended too early—Shelley died before turning thirty—and that was a life complicated by a vast number of difficulties, most of which were self-inflicted and that included the suicide of his first wife, exile, endless money troubles, family estrangements, vilification from every quarter—church, school, literary organs, polite society—and sheer heartbreak. At the same time it was a life that shone with joy and that was engaged at the deepest levels with the great question every one of our graduates is in some form wrestling with—what is it to be human? Shelley was above all human, which is to say a mass of contradictions: ethereal and earthy, scholarly and freebooting, whimsical and radical. He didn't think anything had to be the way it was and he wrote accordingly. To some this made him a fool; to others—and they are many in what is now over two hundred years—it made him—to hearken again to Baldwin's phrase—a real writer.

I want to parse the word “pursuit” a bit. It means on one hand that one is pursuing something. This ‘something’ is not easily defined because it varies from writer to writer. Part of it is at once quite actual—those perfected sentences and lines—but that is fantastical too because perfection is always relative because we are human. Yet it lures us on and this lure is crucial to what we do as writers. The best sentence is always in front of us. Whether this is delusion or not doesn't matter. We need that lure to define and connect us to the language that we treasure.

Part of the pursuit lies in finding out what is inside of the writer. When people query me as a writer, they often say that I must know a lot to be a writer. I tell them that it's the opposite: I don't know anything. That's why I write—to try and find out what's inside of me and bring it to some fitful light. If I knew everything already I wouldn't bother to write. Instead I'd be doing something important like making lots of money. But I don't know, so I write. This unknowingness isn't ignorance, however. Our graduates are smart people. They are possessed however of a passion for going further, for not accepting the humdrum answers about the human condition. And they are willing to admit in the most basic fashion—by putting words to paper (or electronic screen)—that they are implicated in that condition. So the pursuit is in part about locating one's self in the entire drama of human endeavor, which is a tall task but for a writer a necessary one. To shirk it is to give up on one's self in some crucial ways, to abandon one's essential ardor. “Ardent” is a word that almost goes without saying about a poet such as Shelley who lived life with an almost unbelievable intensity. Yet the word is both just and honorable too. There is the duty the writer feels to write but the duty the writer feels to live too, for without the experienced life there is no writing.

Part of the pursuit is the belief, however obscure, that writing can make a difference. This is notoriously difficult to define and yet I imagine that every one of our graduates has had moments where there has been a strong sense of connecting to another person through writing. This connection is not something visible like a building or a road. It won't be noted in the evening news but it will be felt on the pulse and in the heart of another person and surely that matters as

much as anything that can happen. The annals of writing deliver up a few names for posterity for a generation. That is daunting but also beside the fact. What matters is the commerce that goes on between writers and readers and that never ends and that makes more differences than we can ever describe. Even those writers who wrote for the desk drawer, who lived in regimes that bitterly contested each honest word, were testifying to the faith that writing eventually can make a difference in people's lives. Truth can set people free. There are writers at this very moment who languish in jails all over this planet because they believe that. Certainly in his way the poet Shelley believed that and was willing, along with his publisher, to bear whatever censure he might face. It was Shelley who wrote after the riots and violent suppression of working class people in England the lines: "I met Murder on the way / He had a mask like Castlereagh / Very smooth he looked, yet grim / Seven blood-hounds followed him / All were fat and well they might / Be in admirable plight / For one by one, and two by two / He tossed them human hearts to chew / Which from his wide cloak he drew." The British authorities were not delighted by these lines, but as the Nobel Prize winning novelist Nadine Gordimer has written, nations are collectives and not possessed of imagination in the sense that writers, who are so staunchly individual, do possess.

I have spoken of the pursuit as something in front of the writer, something that draws the writer on but part of the pursuit is what is pursuing the writer, what is chasing him or her. Our age is fond of identifying various debilities pursuing writers. Somewhere someone had a happy childhood but that person isn't getting a lot of talk show appearances at the moment. I began my memoir about our family's life in the Maine woods with the words "What brought me to the woods was grief." And indeed a great deal of my life as a writer has been the feeling of being pursued by the grief of the death of my mother when she was forty-eight years old and I was twenty-one. What the writer faces in being pursued is a delicate balancing act of owning the actuality of the wound or sensitivity or awareness that impels him or her while at the same time recognizing that such wounds, sensitivities and awareness are nothing special in regards to being human. The sad thing is that many people for many reasons—not least of which is the pain of recognition—push them aside. Writers don't. Though sometimes it may seem that certain writers revel in the dark clouds behind them (and certain writers do), by and large the clouds submit to the cathartic work of doing the writing, of taking one thing and turning it into something else. Certainly, the writing doesn't make the pursuers disappear but the writing sheds light on what otherwise would be unwieldy and possibly crippling. There are no guarantees in this business but recognition of what is pursuing the writer is a matter of no little importance. One thing that one respects in a writer is an honesty about the pursuers. This isn't easy. The poet Shelley was pursued by all manner of troubles, not the least of which was the wreckage of his first marriage. He wasn't a model citizen and it is important for the writer to recognize that no matter what his or her intentions are goodness only goes so far down the road. What pursues the writer can at once elevate and degrade the writer. One needs to look no further than such American writers as Poe and Hemingway to understand this.

What pursues the writer however isn't all dark—far from it. What pursues the writer, however obscurely, is a joy that emanates from childhood in which the magic of being alive and the

marvelous potency of conjuring things with words, of saying “cat” and “bird” and “girl” and “boy” never leaves the writer. What eggs the writer on in this sense is a root pleasure in the transformations that language is rooted in, the power of taking words and putting them in combinations to make something new, the power of making the dictionary one’s own, the power of discovering one’s own knack for using words in ways no one else will quite use them. What pursues the writer is the great pleasure of individual language, of taking something that we share and making it one’s own. If at moments these graduates have displayed to those in the audience a somewhat infantile side, I want to speak in favor of that. They are in touch with their inner language child. As the American poet Theodore Roethke once put it, “I am! Says the lamb.” We should never forget that.

There is one more aspect of the pursuit and that is the noun, the overall sense of what the writer is doing. We speak of someone’s occupation as a pursuit and I very much like this term for writers because it entails all that I have been speaking about. Writing, in the sense that I have spent my lifetime doing, isn’t an avocation or hobby however much the IRS may think so when it looks at what I have earned in royalties in a typical year from writing a dozen books. Writing is something that the writer has to do. It has the offhand dignity of something that may be done well and yet looks to the casual onlooker, which is to say reader or listener, to be something quite natural and unself-conscious. That is the crucial trick of it. And that is the pride of it too. It’s not something everyone can do. We don’t have to indulge in superstitious reverence for writers, however much our graduates might savor a whiff or two of that, but we should respect them for they offer something that is not up everyone’s alley. They are following a pursuit where it takes them and that takes a certain amount of courage. Fiction writers are fond of saying that they don’t know what a character is going to do in a certain situation because the character takes on a life of his or her own. That’s charming in one way but unnerving in another. Generally, when one eats breakfast with the person across the table, one wants to feel that it is the same person who was there yesterday and the day before. But it isn’t always like that. Life is terribly contingent and the writer as he or she engages the pursuit of writing comes to feel that firsthand. It’s humbling but gratifying too because one feels as a writer how open life can be. One of the great challenges of being a writer is retaining that openness when one sits down to write. It’s terribly easy to go down a path that already seems to be there. But the path is never there. The writer creates the path.

We always want to get to the end of the story or the biography or the commencement speech to find out what happens. That’s understandable but isn’t really the way to honor the writers we are graduating here today. However much we may enjoy the finished products, the achievement of what our graduates have done doesn’t lie in any finality, however remarkable the poem or essay or novel or story or screenplay may seem. The achievement lies in the path, in the pursuit, in the pursuing. Every writer faces the indifference of the blank page or blank screen, the misery of feeling that what one wants to get down on the page isn’t getting there, that there is an infernal gap between the writer’s head and the page. As they say, it goes with the territory. What our graduates know something of is precisely that territory and how their powers can transform that

domain. We can expect to hear from them again and again. They are only beginning the pursuit and that is something worth proclaiming. Congratulations again to all of them. Thanks.