

LAYOFF

Craig Morgan Teicher

In my twenty-ninth year, and in the two-
thousand and ninth since the birth of Christ,
I was laid off from my job. I worked
as a book reviews editor and news
reporter for the major industry
magazine of the publishing business.
Hardly anyone advertises now,
certainly not to other businesses,
so I was let go. I can't take it
too personally—who isn't being laid off
these days? I get more time with my young son,
can freelance, teach poetry, write about books,
plus there's unemployment for now and work
as a secretary for an old artist friend.
And my wife is still working; we're OK.
But, still, I have more time, the very thing
I took a nine-to-five job to get rid of, and time
brings things to mind: how's and why's and what's
that make the day like a sleepless night.
What did I do wrong? And how will I get
healthcare for my son once my severance is done?
My brain spilleth over and gets on everything.
I need to carefully pick my inner words.
I need to write—it's the only way to tell
my thoughts what to think, and a poem's the place
to talk to thoughts. It's not what you say, but
how you say it and why, whom you address
that makes a poem go. Let me write my stress.

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Cal has just gone to sleep. It's eight o'clock,
Sunday night, and tomorrow might as well
be Saturday. Lately Cal's been resisting
bed, crying for hours till he just can't anymore
and begins to quietly snore, as if sleep
were one more submission forced upon him.
Or is that an adult's idea? An adult sprung
suddenly free—he just wants this not that,
like me, and sleep is that for now.
What's to be gleaned from what a child

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does and why? He's simply not given to interpretation, mine or his own. That's the lesson: some things aren't anything else. Then, later, all things are other things, their meanings trumping how they be. A day job affords distraction from this kind of ruminating. What Auden said about poetry, that it makes nothing happen, is also true of thinking, though what good does that thought do? Tomorrow, how will the impossible problems of each succeeding moment make any more sense than they do today? What will my son become and what can I do for or about it now? I'm being vague, I know, but that's part of the problem, isn't it—not saying what I won't know I think till it's said. How do I learn to love Brenda right, and learn to get her to love me how I want to be loved. What's love look like in the midst of a fight? Where does being good meet being right? I'm trying to purge a feeling now. Why have I been so mad at Brenda? My therapist says I won't linger on my hardest feelings. Line them in silver, turn them downside-up—so I can say I'm OK all the time. What does it feel like to linger on a feeling? Stand patiently in mud and suffer its thick stink and suck. Know thyself by thine unwashed smell, thine crust. I need to be good, that's how my mother made me, but she's dead and I'm grown and you can't be a man and be good all the time. At work, someone would have come by to ask my help by now with a dumb, blessed task.

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I'm looking at a reproduction of a painting by Dorothea Tanning of a lapdog, man-size, dancing with a corpse-like naked woman. The dog turns his face toward the viewer, serious gaze, judging eyes, adorable jowls, paws. Something about this picture makes me think anything is possible, and reminds me most things aren't. Those who can bear the grim

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facts of their lives, face them without recasting
 them in rosier terms, impress me. I talk
 a lot about my choices, facing my share
 of bad turns, but I ride on a gloss
 of sunshine. I love phrases like “all shall
 be well and all manner of thing shall be well,”
 as if the irony they clearly belie
 were a figment of a cynic’s inner grimace.
 For four years now I’ve been
 taking an anti-depression, anti-
 anxiety drug, and I’ll never know
 to what extent my capacity to sometimes
 clean my mental slate, to move away
 from worries—that’s what it feels like now, I can
 move on, pass by, think about something
 else—I owe to the drug, and what’s due to
 therapy and trying hard at my life.
 I don’t want to be so mad at my wife.

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Listening to an online stream of an album
 by Richard Buckner, his plain, almost flat
 voice and lush musical arrangements. I like
 unmusical elements in music—
 with a voice like his, he shouldn’t sing,
 but he does and so his voice aspires
 to, and attains, beauty and music’s other
 wordless quirks, making it more
 than organized sound. I like the unpoetic stuff
 that crops up in poetry too: casual speech
 amidst sonorous language, ugly words,
 avoidance of the transcendent. The un-
 beautiful in both mediums points to
 the notion that art is at least fifty
 percent choice, that beauty is indeed
 in cahoots with its beholder and maker,
 just as the mirror can only reflect
 the one who chooses to stand before it.
 Most of this poem comes straight
 from my life, a record of events set
 in rhythmic words. But life’s unpoetic,
 and how will Brenda be hurt, and Cal,
 by being my excuse to dredge my brain?
 Did Lowell’s loved ones ever get over

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For Lizzie and Harriet? Plath's son
just killed himself. As I check my
Twitter feed for mentions of an article
I wrote that came out today,
my son gets speech and feeding therapy
while Brenda watches and I sit in my
home office living my online life. Real life,
not Auden's stale suffering and "its
human position," is a bunch of things
that don't add up to much, happening
at the same time, a series of tries.
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," but isn't life
as it is beautiful and full of lies,
and life as written true and made to revise?

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Brenda brought home a coat rack from Ikea.
Of course, it comes in a flat brown box
full of rods and hooks and screws, assembly
required, and, of course, I dropped the small
middle rod into the bottom one—got it stuck—
while we were giggling and putting it
together, and an explosion followed.
I have so little patience for her
temper, how it beckons mine from
nearby where it waits to pounce.
I shouldn't blame her, though. There's not nearly
enough—of what? some basic energy?—
to go around, to share, to sustain we two
and Cal and a house and the work we do.
I'm afraid of what will happen when
too much of this anger starts to accrue.
But aren't anger and resentment two of
the things a marriage is meant to contain,
that couples take to graves, that bloom after rain?

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For a living I still write about books, and
recently, I profiled the author of a novel
called *You Or Someone Like You*—it comes out
next month—in which the heroine, named Anne
Rosenbaum, can only communicate
with her husband, a Hollywood exec
named Harold, who is pulling away,
through these book clubs she runs for film big wigs

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who gossip her pronouncements on love
and literature back to Harold, who
finally comes around. I will show this
poem to Brenda before anyone else,
and I can't help but think I want her
to take its implicit apologies
seriously, store them, a first aid kit
against all that makes our love delicate.

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Everything now depends on progression,
or, as the truth may be, pretends to it.
Being laid off thwarts or spurs progress, but
Cal must learn new ways to compensate for
what his injury took, and we,
Brenda and I, must talk more and listen
better, or else. All of it gets measured
on a continuum plotted between
imaginary points placed at the worst
we were, or imagine we were, and now
—the worst and best we are—and as good
as we'll get before time's up, our losses cut
and our gains written down in The Big Book
no one gets to read. Do people progress?
Can I change? If so, how do I know? I guess
happiness is the benchmark, the vague way
it has of being remembered, as if
the past was always better or worse
than now, rather than the same. It makes me ache
for my favorite line by Frost, from "Directive":
"Drink and be whole again beyond confusion,"
he says, the happiest of fantasies,
as if we were whole once, or aren't now
but could be again, no longer confused—
I'm so often so confused and frustrated.
Can anyone reach that far point before being dead,
relax, stretch out, hum, read, just bask,
and not regret what was and wasn't said?

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What I liked best about work was structure,
a place to go where I knew I should be,
the sense that my time had already been bought,
that to use it for myself broke a rule—

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I like rules, was raised by them, doing a dance
with my mother whose steps involved committing
minor sins she didn't like, drowning in guilt,
apologizing till I wore her down,
mellowing out in her warm forgiveness,
then doing it all again and again.
It's cheap, I know, to blame her, but fair.
She died, as my poems say, just before
I could grow up and out of childhood,
and so I never really did. I've looked
for her everywhere since and found her most
when I could recreate our sad ballet:
easy enough occasions to find: marriage, job,
anywhere anyone, especially
a woman, expects anything of me.
The world is overripe with surrogate moms,
it turns out, and I'm a willing son. It's
pathetic. I'm a child wrapped in the life
of a man. Of course, who isn't?
Understanding has just so much to give.
Psychology can take us only so far.
To go the rest of the way we have to—what?
Wait? hope? forget? forgive? talk? just live?

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It's a funny word, layoff, what I wish
everyone, everything would do more of:
lay off me, give me a break, let me be:
less pressure, fewer appointments, less need,
not so much to worry about, no more
doctor's visits and therapy sessions
for Cal, no more books for me to read,
no arguments to have, no dishes to do, no more
blame to assign, no more Even
Stevens, and no more syllabi to write,
no more student poems to comment on,
no more diapers to change, no more sleep lost,
no more hours passed, no more compromises,
no more messages to check, no more e-mails
to which to reply, no more self-states
to navigate and synthesize, no more
about myself I didn't know till now,
no more coat racks to assemble, no more
hopes I should have already outgrown,
no more incomplete mourning to trick me

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into feeling like someone's not dead,
no more anxiety attacks or fear of
fear itself, no more Paxil pills chopped in two,
no more endless nights or sleep without rest,
no more dreams about building towers
of colored blocks on islands that float away
too soon, no more dead dogs to mourn,
no more fathers blamed, no more mothers lost,
no more in-laws, mine or yours, no more step-
sisters or brothers whose Evites need answers,
no more lost ways or ways nearly found,
no more mp3s to crave, no more wavy
red lines hashed by spellcheck, no more friends'
manuscripts to exchange, no more blog posts,
no more teaching opportunities, no more
nights facing your back or you facing mine,
no more free time, no more busy days,
no more beers or bottles of wine, no more
30 Rock on Thursday nights, just some space
and time that no one needs, some extra air,
new names, a face no one could recognize,
a small world, a view exactly the size of my eyes.

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How can I propose to write a poem
about being laid off during the Great Recession
and avoid money, which, if it doesn't
make the world go round, can surely stop it
from chilling out, which, after all, may
well be the real reason man was put on earth.
Give me an eternity of ease,
he seems to say, and I'll suffer whatever
you throw my way in the lifetime before
forever starts, though don't expect me
not to complain. I'm speaking in generalities
rather than talk about money and Brenda
and me. For a couple of years now,
she's made much more than I have, teaching
and working from home and taking care of Cal.
I was out of the house most of the time
at my nine-to-fiver, not making much
more than I spent, often less, but bringing
steady checks and health insurance.
No end of argument ensued about who
provided what, on whose shoulders burdens

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belonged. Neither of us knows what counts
 for more once it's thrown into the family cup.
 How like a company is a family?
 Is money its reason and its root,
 what brings it together, breaks it apart?
 Harder to say with families who's in charge,
 but to keep love going the cost is large.

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Keats calls for Negative Capability:
 "when a man is capable of being
 in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without
 any irritable reaching after fact
 and reason." If only he meant
 being capable while being negative,
 a useful quality, too, I suppose,
 in these uncertain times. He means,
 of course, imagining against the backdrop
 of reality and all the ways it opposes
 our little dreams, this business
 of truth and beauty being the same.
 But could a man who died childless
 at 26, even a doctor, have known
 all that much about how ugly
 truth can be, how far toward good
 lies can carry us? Very far, I've learned,
 though a time for reckoning always comes,
 many times for many lies, and, I think,
 we go on that way, leaping from hope
 to hope across the ample evidence
 that what we hope can't come to pass.
 Life is off the page, and bearing
 down, being here, means being in one
 place right now, much harder, it seems,
 than being in two—our bed, my thoughts.
 The days are so far from ideal, but
 the ideal is merely a thought away
 from anywhere, anywhen. How to pick
 now, this, us, as it is, when there's
 so much else right here in my head?
 I'm not very brave. I would be much
 braver could I wake and not need to say
 —I don't think I can—it will be OK.

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I've got too much thought and nowhere
 to think it. I need to stop, to move on,
 to choose, to act to lay off myself and you.
 If poetry and thinking both do nothing
 then the longer I write the less I choose
 to do. Is that what I want, who I hope
 to be, someone who sits before a sprawling page,
 a ream, if you will, as thick as the sky
 is deep, with room enough for all the words
 but for none of what they signify?
 I said what matters is who I address
 and how and why, not what is said,
 but, really, if I'm to make anything
 of this column I've spun like a droning
 A/C, which cools the room while it's on
 then invites the sweat back in, what matters
 is *that* I address—and not in poetry,
 which maybe lasts forever, but, as Auden said,
 only “survives in the valley of its making,”
 a place, I fear, with a peerless, immortal view,
 but merely a mirage in our actual lives—
 what matters, all that matters, is *that* I say
 something, anything, aloud to Brenda.
 We fight not to say what we can't or won't,
 to say anything but what we know we need
 to hear. I'm sorry, Brenda, I haven't been
 listening—I've hardly been awake, avidly
 drilling down toward an imaginary center.
 How selfish to go on like this for pages
 without even a pause for a word, an inkling
 from you. Tell me, what are you thinking?

Craig Morgan Teicher's first book, *Brenda Is in The Room and Other Poems*, won the 2007 Colorado Prize for Poetry. His second, a collection of fiction and fables called *Cradle Book*, will be published by BOA Editions in May 2010. He is a Vice President of the board of the National Book Critics Circle and lives in Brooklyn with his wife and son.