

“EVERYTHING NAILED DOWN IS COMING LOOSE”

By MARSHALL W. FISHWICK, author and historian. This article is adapted from the annual Keese Lecture delivered recently at the University of Chattanooga.

NO LESS a figure than the Angel Gabriel said it. The line occurs in *Green Pastures*, a play by Marc Connelly that has found a permanent niche in the history of American drama. Looking down from heaven on earth's confusion and turmoil, Gabriel noted sadly: “Everything nailed down is coming loose.”

When the play appeared, in 1930, it *did* look as if the floorboard of American society were loose: economic collapse, mass unemployment, bank failures, bonus armies, mob violence. Millions in our present Affluent Society remember songs like “Can I Sleep in Your Barn Tonight, Mister?” and “Brother Can You Spare a Dime?” Yet, as they compare the problems of the 1930s with those of the 1960s, they tend to agree with the harassed executive in a recent *New Yorker* cartoon who gazed out of the window and murmured: “Ah, for the good old days, when we had nothing to fear except fear itself!”

Today we see problems that were once regional or at most national inflated to international proportions. Thirty years ago it was the American upper class that feared for its survival in a revolutionary-minded America. Now all of America looks out over an increasingly agitated and questioning world. Once the problem was merely in the

corn belt, or the First National Bank, or along Route 66. Now it engulfs six continents and involves the whole human race, two-thirds of which is colored.

Pick up any morning newspaper, and see how well Gabriel's line describes the world situation: “Everything nailed down is coming loose.” The “way of life” which historians sometimes called classical liberalism was one of the victims of our troubled times. The cosmology built on parliamentary debate, decent diplomacy, the open market place, and Newtonian physics no longer prevails. We still believe in individualism, but we fear for it in the age of mass media, mass communication, and massive retaliation. “Everybody knows that at some point in the twentieth century America went

through a cultural revolution,” Henry F. May writes in *The End of American Innocence*. “Glance at a family album, or pick up a book or magazine dated, say, 1907. You will find yourself in a completely vanished world.”

Robert Oppenheimer continues in the same vein, and attempts to tell us in what sense the new world has already taken shape and substance: “This world of ours is a new world, in which the unity of knowledge, the nature of human communities, the order of society, the order of ideas, the very notions of society and culture have changed, and will not return to what they have been in the past. What is new is new not because it has never been there before, but because it has changed in quality. One thing that is new is the prevalence of newness, the changing scale and scope of change itself, so that the world alters as we walk in it, so that the years of man's life measure not some small growth or rearrangement or moderation of what he learned in childhood, but a great upheaval.”

We are poised, in Secretary of State Dean Rusk's memorable phrase, eyeball to eyeball with our atomic adversaries, realizing that the blowup may occur at any moment. New terms are originated in the Pentagon—spasm response, second strike counterforce capability, counterforce collateral damage. Somehow they sound as unreal and academic as doctrines set forth by the medieval theologians. But we have every reason to know that they are anything but unreal. When a magazine like the *Saturday*



Evening Post can describe so realistic a man as Robert S. McNamara as advocating the following, we can be sure that we aren't dealing with imaginary crises: "McNamara wants to give the President a whole series of buttons on his nuclear console, from strictly limited tactical nuclear war at one end, through several shadings to Armageddon at the other end."

IN short, we must think about the unthinkable. In what era have so many men been so totally exposed so rapidly to such earthquakes of change? The very shaping of history outpaces our ability to absorb and interpret it. "Even when they do not panic," writes C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination*, "men often sense that older ways of thinking and feeling have collapsed. Newer beginnings are ambiguous to the point of moral stasis. Is it any wonder that ordinary men feel they cannot cope with the larger concepts of history?"

We have left the world of Descartes and Newton, with its closed boxes, and have entered the world of Einstein and John Glenn, with its open spaces. Once-static mind and matter are suddenly fluid. A thousand critical new tasks and challenges confront us—but alas, we have yet to develop a new toolbox of methods, or acceptable axioms of meaning. Until we do so, we can count on intellectual, political, and artistic crisis.

It would be not only immodest but outlandish to attempt to describe that new toolbox and state those new axioms in this brief space. Mine is a more humble, though I hope not insignificant, goal. To the question "Is everything nailed down really coming loose?" I hereby answer, "No." There are five things that seem well anchored, come what may.

The first of these is the nature of history. "The Past! The Past! The Past!" chants Walt Whitman, reminding us of the dark unfathomed retrospect and of:

Ages and ages returning at intervals,
Undestroy'd, wandering immortal.

Struggle as we do and must in the web of time, each of us realizes he is involved in the endless search for light on the nature and destiny of man; on the story of what men have experienced with bleeding and rejoicing hearts. Caught in already dying bodies, we look for keys that might unlock reality. The historian's angle of vision is only one among many. It is a vision, dim and partial; yet, as Arnold Toynbee reminds us, true to reality as far as it goes, "of God revealing Himself in action to souls which are sincerely seek-

ing Him." History, in Toynbee's view, is the Epiphany of God.

There are many other definitions. To Cicero history is "the witness of the ages, the mistress of life, the messenger of antiquity." John Seeley labeled history past politics; Carlyle the biography of great men; and Voltaire the propaganda of the victorious. For Bolingbroke history was philosophy teaching by example. Tolstoy held that the subject of history is "the life of peoples and of humanity"; George Curtis reminded us that while we *read* history, we *make* history. No one can sum it up in a few words. One of the pivotal twentieth-century historians, Benedetto Croce, says we must not look around us to see what history is, but return to ourselves. Reality is affirmed to be spirit, which is "an eternal solution and an eternal problem. Its self-consciousness is philosophy, which is its history—or history, which is its philosophy, each substantially identical with the other."

Boris Pasternak has Nikolai Nikolaievich say in *Doctor Zhivago*: "History is the systematic exploration of the riddle of death, with a view of overcoming death." Here is true wisdom. Underneath crises and cosmologies is the riddle; the enduring mystery; the unexplainable deviation and endless speculation. Like Old Man River, history keeps rollin' along. But the riverbed itself—the channel through which the water of life flows—stays on.

THIS suggests another fixed entity: the nature of man. "Human nature," noted Mark Twain, "is a commodity which seems to be widely distributed among the human race." Judging from his own disillusioned final books, Twain would have been happier had it been otherwise—but it could not and has not been so. The immutable, demonstrable fact is that mankind is chock-full of ideas and motives that are often disappointing, sometimes disgusting. He never throws off his burden of original sin. This must be what the ballad singer means when he wails, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." As an undergraduate recently put it, "All in all, we have to admit that man is a primordial stinker."

Just so—a primordial stinker, but also a fallen angel. Throughout history well-intentioned people want us to believe man is "basically good." How nice if it were true—and how obvious that it isn't. For centuries we have noted this unpleasant perversity inside ourselves. "The things I would do," admitted Saint Paul, "these things I do not. And the things I would not do, these things I do." To echo the Book of Common Prayer: there is no health in us. Here is a certainty on which you can count. Recently I talked with a harassed friend

who had just driven 1,000 miles in a small car with two little fellows of his own creation. "After a hundred miles," he reported, "I understood the meaning of original sin . . . and after a thousand, the meaning of total depravity!"

So constructed, man must face what I would consider not only a real but an unchanging reality: the nature of evil. The problem of evil is the most terrible and the most intractable one that vexes the human race. Literature, art, drama, philosophy all bear this out. Evil in and for itself is a universal principle. Wherever man is, there also is evil.

To deny or belittle this is to commit a crime which the Greeks called *hubris*. It is, of course, much easier to recognize it in others than ourselves. How incredible, for example, that the English historian Isaac Taylor could have written only a century ago in his *Ultimate Civilization*: "We are about to see the relics of barbarism—polygamy, infanticide, legalized prostitution, capricious divorce, sanguinary and immoral games, infliction of torture, slavery and caste—disappear from the advancing world."

One would have liked Professor Taylor to serve as a judge at the Nuremberg trials—or, for that matter, to read the history of the world since Queen Victoria's day. He would realize anew what Alexander Pope meant when he characterized man as:

Created half to rise and half to fall,
Great lord of all things, yet a prey
of all,
Sole judge of truth, in endless error
hurled,
The glory, jest, and riddle of the
world.

How can man be so bad, yet so good? So cruel, yet so kind? If no one has ever quenched the spark of evil inside our hearts, no one has ever destroyed the spark of good either. This is our destiny, our paradox.

Precisely on this paradox a fourth enduring pillar can be erected: the need for creative education. Education is a high word. We need intellectual eyes to see within, as well as physical eyes to see without. The best telescope does not dispense with eyes; the cleverest textbook cannot make a student think. We cannot legislate learning; we can only create the climate of opinion in which it may flourish. We can only urge students and colleagues to seek the eternal in the temporal, the enduring in the passing. If this be our goal, note at once how heavily we must draw upon the humanities and fine arts. It is here that we surrender the exactitudes for the elastic imagery of metaphor and myth. It is here that we go beyond

mere words to other levels of communication and meaning.

The true passion of creative people is to discover what life is really like. Their knack is distinguishing between appearance and reality. We can never "explain" creativity, any more than we can "explain" devotion, friendship, or a beautiful sunset. But we can say with Walt Whitman that every cubic inch of space is a miracle, and hope those who hear us understand what he meant.

In 1963 the educational front is a dark and bloody ground. Method, content, curricula, and objectives are hotly contested. "Today, though it is possible to get an education in an American university," observes Robert Hutchins wryly, "a man would have to be so bright and to know so much to get it that he wouldn't really need it." Admiral Rickover, that versatile gadfly, argues that the American education establishment has a standard procedure for dealing with critics—they are declared to be ill-intentioned trouble-makers and ax-grinders: "The party line reveals on the part of the people to whom we entrust the education of our children a truly appalling misunderstanding of the working of the democratic process."

OUR universities are really multiversities; students tend to know a little about a lot, but not very much about anything. No longer is the classroom the bailiwick of the absent-minded professor, with pipe, shabby tweed suit, and genial befuddlement. In his place is the "new" professor—consultant, coordinator, diplomat, TV personality. Like his industrial counterpart, he is geared to a cold war emergency psychology. "Should peace come," one critic observes, "turmoil on the campus would be as great as it would be in munitions."

If he is not about to dash off to "save" a wavering neutralist nation, the professor is off to a Washington committee, a foundation watermelon-cutting, or a professional meeting where he comes forth with a timely joke. He is, in short, the non-professor. Anyone left teaching is apt to be considered an ugly duckling not asked to go flying off around the world. Recently an eminent professor at the University of Chicago was quoted as saying, "The sight of an undergraduate makes me ill." What sort of intellectual rapport are people like *this* apt to create?

Education has, in a relatively few years, become a billion-dollar business in its own right: it is dizzy from success. Michel's iron law of oligarchy has started to work: every reform movement becomes bureaucratized and hierarchical. David Riesman warns us



to beware of the stalemate of success. "Like a mobile man who has shot to the top so fast as to arrive there with undissipated energies and time to look around, American intellectual and educational leadership often seems haunted by the question where to go from here."

All this ferment is healthy, of course; but it can be confusing and exasperating, too. There are fads in education, as in so many other things. How easy it is to become absorbed with the ticktacktoe of educational theory! But underneath this is the changeless core, so well perceived centuries ago by Plato. "Let those pieces of learning which explain life be brought together in one view," he wrote, "so that the relations of things will be clear." Our job is to ask significant questions about critical matters. We must enkindle understanding of the world of solitude and wonder; of guilt and temptation; of specks of gold in piles of ore. We must maintain a relentless, furious search for truth—no matter what this might show us, or how jolted we may be. Already our generation has murdered infinity and fused space and time into space-time. This does not mean that we have abandoned ritual, archetypes, and stereotypes. Instead, we have created new ones for our times. The type of education needed now must take these metamorphoses into its ken.

People live by the mythology of their time. Every age is credulous in its own way. How could our distant ancestors ever have believed that earth and heaven were made out of a severed egg, heaven being the shell, earth the yolk, the sea the surrounding fluid? That mountains were the bones of a mighty giant, the earth his festering flesh? That rain clouds were cows with

full udders, waiting to be milked by the winds of heaven? We wonder. Yet someday people may ask, "Did they *really* believe they were splitting atoms, and that *this* was what made their bombs explode?"

Myths are stories that describe and illustrate dramatically deep structures of reality. They use imagery to express other-worldliness in terms of this world, the divine in terms of the human. All religions depend heavily on myth. Any sentence with "God" as its subject automatically ends up with mythic overtones. The only non-symbolic thing we can say about God is that he is symbolic.

True places, Herman Melville noted, are not found on maps. They are reached not by roads but by intuition. We set sail on the *Pequod*, and soon are looking into the evil eye of the great white whale, Moby Dick. At the heart of literature and culture are myths, metaphor, archetypes, and folklore. They spring from the same deep pool as do fairy tales, sagas, romances, ballads, novels, and nursery rhymes. All these priceless fruits grow somehow on one golden bough. Even in a restless age, this ancient tree will not be uprooted.

The secular world, as well as the religious, has long understood this. Scholars have observed how mythology is transformed into history, history into folklore, and folklore into literature. The main intellectual constructions on which thought systems are built fuse concept and emotion into an image. Plato's Ideas. Kant's Categories, Goethe's Mothers, and Jung's Archetypes illustrate this well. Whenever philosophers get to the point where abstract ratiocination can go no further, they move over to myth. The history of ideas is

not simply the exposition of theoretical views, but also the history of the deformations undergone by these ideas when other men adopt them, the history of the half-conscious beliefs into which ideas conceived by the few promptly transform themselves. "I find it easier to believe in a myth of gods and demons than in one of hypostatized abstract nouns," C. S. Lewis admits in *The Problem of Pain*. "And after all, our mythology may be nearer to literal truth than we suppose."

Plato, Kant, Goethe, Jung, Lewis—indeed we have a goodly heritage. How fresh and relevant their words sound, after one or one hundred or one thousand years. To read and study them is to encounter another unchangeable factor in the ever-fluctuating formula of history: the need for hope. Our best weapon against today's doubt is human faith. Man has not come this far merely to annihilate himself. He has got too many glimpses of changeless things—the nature of history, the nature of man, the paradox of good and evil, the need for education, the need for hope—to surrender now. We cannot expect an *easy* victory; but we can hope for an *eventual* one if we retain our faith in human wisdom and ingenuity, and the world beyond reason and ingenuity. Belief for belief, our system has better chances for survival than those that threaten to destroy us.

The intellectual and moral response of the United States depends on the people who are studying and working in schools and universities across the land. How can we formulate and teach "nailed down truths" in the years ahead? How can we set in motion significant creative changes in our educational systems and individual investigations? How can we see that as many potentialities as possible are developed in our democracy? How shall we start and maintain bold intellectual ferment?

Here are questions and challenges for all sorts and conditions of men. Drawing from what William Faulkner called our "still unspent and yet unexhausted past," we move forward on what we know full well will be a perilous, grief-filled journey. No one put the whole matter more beautifully than Thomas Wolfe: "I think that we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found. I think the *true* discovery of America is before us. . . . the true fulfillment of our spirit, of our people, of our mighty and immortal land, is yet to come. These things are certain as the morning, as inevitable as noon. I speak for most men living when I say that our America is here, is now, and beckons on before us. This glorious assurance is not only our living hope but our greatest dream."

TEACHING STUDENTS TO WRITE

I Remember Eda Lou

By CLAIRE BURCH

FROM the mild custard that was my college education in the Forties remains a memory pungent as a clove. It is of Eda Lou Walton, a writer-teacher at New York University who gave fifty years to higher education.

Contradictory and complex, Eda Lou was never a teacher of the "enemy camp," using grades like bullets to plow down or advance the student soldier. She was no Mrs. Chips, no optimist, no evangelist out for converts; for she was no believer in numbers. The suggestion that there is no such thing as a bad boy would have sent her into a great rush of cynical laughter, for she believed—strongly—in the reality of evil.

She hated to fail a student. You could breeze through her creative writing courses and go on to be a CPA for all she cared; she didn't consider it any of her business.

But if you had—or developed—an esthetic urge, she was *your* teacher. Eda Lou simply attempted, from her hard core of brilliance, perception, and absolute pitch, to improve minds that sought improvement. All she needed was evidence of your desire to reach top level; when she had the evidence she would drain herself dry.

As a mentor of creative writing, Eda Lou was not infallible, but the help she gave was permanent. In leafing through *This Generation*, the anthology of American literature she put out with George Anderson of Brown, I am struck again by her unfailing taste. The old snap judgments made by the slender girl in batik were remarkably on the nose. At the lectern in silly hat and high heels, timid and tentative at the start of a lecture, she revealed little of her inner whiplash grasp of the literary scene. But she judged writing with the unsentimental accuracy of a meat grader.

In her exams, Eda Lou never asked a question that required a date in answer. Time was, to her, an amiable blur. She preferred our heads to siphon in ideas and intuitions rather than cram themselves with facts. Her questions were what, in academic argot, are known as the "essay" type. Her favorite, repeated with variations: "Rewrite Eliot's *The Waste Land* as Robert Frost

might have written it. Write Keats's *Ode to a Grecian Urn* as if it were written by Edna St. Vincent Millay." The brain-stretching required by these innocent tasks was more painful and more productive than memorizing dates and titles.

So frail that she was once knocked flat by a mild gust of wind in Washington Square, Eda Lou classified beginning writers in terms of quality and future status without a minor error in thirty-five years. Her anthology is a literary *Birds of America*. In it even species now extinct are given their exact due, for fashion was so much spinach to Eda Lou, and the best-seller list a vogue as ephemeral as this year's short skirts.

Eda Lou knew many writers personally. She fed them, encouraged them, kept them from suicide, and supplied them with typewriters borrowed from NYU, where she taught "Literature of This Generation" from 1924 to 1958. Hart Crane loved to drop in on her. William Troy, Leonie Adams, Thomas Wolfe, Frederick Prokosch, Vardis Fisher formed the hub of a literary wheel that spun through the Village in the 1920s and included nearly every major figure.

AS a teacher, Eda Lou had this gift: she was unalterably convinced that no one learns anything by just being told. She had a capacity to enlarge and restore a writer with praise—a praise extravagant and absurd—when she sensed his potential: "Why that's absolutely first rate. . . . Tremendous! You've got it all, the scene, the flow of real speech, the meaning below the surface. It's touching, it's extraordinary, you must do more."

Her grades were extraordinary. An "A-plus" was not unusual, and I remember one freshman theme honored with an encouraging "A-plus-plus-double-plus." But you couldn't fake it with Eda Lou; from my pile of freshman themes I remember some particularly ignominious papers.

Eda Lou Walton was a kind of method actor. In every lecture, she groped her way from her original Southwest girl's shyness to a whirlwind clarity of ideas; she was a crack lecturer, once she got rolling.

But I remember her more clearly *outside* the classroom, chicken-scratch-

ing all over our manuscripts, suggesting, correcting, questioning, and concluding after the scissors job: "Keep going. Maintain same tone. This is really topnotch." Depressed one day, I cut her class, only to meet her in Chock Full O'Nuts. "I'm cutting, too," she said understandingly. "Some days I just can't listen to myself."

Like many of her adopted waifs, my husband and I spent much time in the Forties in Eda Lou's Waverly Place apartment, where she lived with her husband, David Mandel. Unforgettable were the huge front room, lined and littered with books, the passageway kitchen in which Eda Lou would eat anything accessible to a can opener, and the bedroom cubicle in which hung a full-length portrait of Eda Lou, soulful, Edwardian, and nude. To Eda Lou, sex was as offhand as vacuum-cleaning, something to be discussed as casually as the weather.

Feminine and delicate in appearance, unconsciously masculine in approach, Eda Lou might have spent her declining years under someone's care if she hadn't so early shown an infernal ability to care for whoever happened along. She carried a pack of family responsibilities that demanded extra income, which she got from constant book reviews for the *Nation*, the *Dial*, the *American Mercury*, the *Tribune*, and the *Times*. Hardly anyone knew her as an original writer of distinction, despite the fact that she published poetry and anthologies.

Although by the Forties she had carved her niche in the underpaid, dusty, but well-regarded "little magazines," and in the review sections of the quality magazines, her academic possibilities diminished. Even with the success of *This Generation* she never received sufficient royalties to ease her burden. Most of her life she was a nervous petitioner for salary advances and loans, all of which she repaid, and all of which went into her bottomless well of responsibilities.

Sometimes she tried to escape these responsibilities, as in *Wreath for a Congressman*, written for her father, New Mexico's first U.S. Representative:

As if a hand upon the desk were
gone
tenure of office ended in the dusk
The pen's rust
closing the signature,
the worn chair empty
and no client on the stair.
Still listening for his step
I lock the door
Because I must
Knowing this verdict just. . . .
. . . For if he was my father,
I am
more than ever he bargained for

as are so many daughters now
pleading a calmed brow
not rightly.

She had little for herself, in wealth or recognition, because she spread herself thin. She was an employment agency for undergraduates and alumni. Armed with B.A.s, my husband and I crashed into her world in 1947 to join the hundreds floating around her like confetti. It was many weeks before we found work, but while we waited Eda Lou "needed us" to organize her library and she paid us for odd jobs. By coincidence, she decided that her library was organized enough on the day my husband got his first real job. Students, promising poets, writers down on their luck—she gave to all of us, freely, of her time, her thought, her money. Selfish little beasts, all of us; we thought we had years left, we were always going to repay her.

EDA LOU gave of herself totally. Unlike many writers of her caliber who taught, she never hoarded herself. If, in a bleak moment, she spoke of how wonderful it would be if she didn't "have to teach," it was a rueful wish that she never took seriously. But even though her own poetry never caught on, it was clearly first rate. It was sacrificed to her total commitment to teaching, and she always gave more than was required.

Eda Lou was outwardly a cool cookie. I remember her describing Hart Crane's suicide in her cold, unemotional voice. But without hearing a single

inflection of sorrow, I felt her compassion.

As a teacher of creative writing, Eda Lou advanced opinions not easily forgotten. She disapproved of writers who considered the short story intrinsically inferior to the novel. "The illumination of character possible in a short story," she said, "is so tremendous that this is the whole point."

IN evaluating a manuscript she underlined the sentimental, the redundant, and the muddy, but she never wearied of their recurrence, accepting them in us at our age as in the nature of the beast. She knew that our excesses of adolescence could not be destroyed without destroying our whole spirit. She had total confidence that the excesses would pass as we matured. "Keep reading," she'd say. "Keep making comparisons."

As our prose got purple and we imitated the worst of Thomas Wolfe, she stayed calm. I sometimes suspected her of encouraging our folly and once told her so. "Of course I do," she said smartly. "It's better to have German measles as a child than later. It does a writer no harm to go through periods of slavish imitation of someone's turgid or clipped style. If work continues, the boat will right itself."

Her advice to writers could be contained in one sentence: "Write it." Never mind the impediments or the soul-searching; get something down on paper. She had a pioneer faith in the ultimate effectiveness of effort. She believed that persistent writing of one's



"We have thirty-five minutes—and remember, every American abroad is a traveling ambassador."

thoughts would start the juices flowing.

I never heard Eda Lou encourage a nonfiction writer in the therapeutic way she did poets and novelists. She looked at the nonfiction writer as a sturdy plant that needed no prodding to produce; in fact, if she had had her way nine-tenths of these plants would be plowed under. Once, buttonholed for advice by a brilliant critic-to-be, she replied: "Get the best education you can. Master the tools of research. Don't consider any complicated idea well expressed until it is presented so clearly that a feeble-minded sixteen-year-old would get the drift." Pedantry and obscurity drove her wild.

She persistently advised us to write about what we knew, until our imitation of life was distilled into art. She had an instinct for pruning, for cutting back, for bare eloquence. The clear icy poet in her hated the spaghetti of contemporary prose. But although she sand-blasted the mature artist for this primary sin, she allowed extra adjectives to the young.

Eda Lou *lived* the self-discipline she taught. Despite family difficulties and an urge to do creative work, she pounded out book reviews and anthologies. "It's nothing," she'd say offhandedly. "I simplify decisions. I eat the same daily breakfast and lunch. My work place is always set up, and I write *something* every day."

NO writer ever succeeds without inner help, but Eda Lou primed the artistic pump faster than most psychiatrists. Her most effective method was money; from her NYU salary she would literally *pay* promising novelists and poets to write. She believed that this help could relieve the soul-torture of creative writers, particularly sensitive young husbands with three children; she subsidized some writers for years.

Eda Lou told us that writing was like food. "You have to eat something every day," she said, "but it doesn't always have to be something good. Cook yourself a meal, warm it up, shove it in." The severe self-criticism that keeps pen from paper she considered the block of blocks. Somewhere in a lifetime of bad writing, she maintained, the first-rate in anyone is bound to emerge.

And Eda Lou could use the shock treatment, too. A bright young man gave her seventeen reasons why he couldn't write. Fourteen of them sounded pretty valid to me, but not to Eda Lou. "You think the stuff will stink," she told him.

Eda Lou was innocent in the marketing of literary material, but directed us freely through any doors that were

open to her, and she wrote enough letters of recommendation to fill a diplomat's briefcase.

The writers she held up to us as models were an untidy crew. Besides Joyce, they were mostly poets, a very few novelists, a few short story writers like Katherine Anne Porter. Eda Lou was concerned less with the best than with the contemporary. Her approach was to give us authors with whom we could identify. There were Hart Crane, Robinson Jeffers, Wallace Stevens, and T. S. Eliot, all of whom were in some way flawed, all of whom challenged our souls. She lingered over lesser lights, too, and we took them to our hearts: Horace Gregory, Muriel Rukeyser, William Carlos Williams. The bases of her choices were personal, lyric, and warm.

Behind all this float scenes I cannot shake: Eda Lou Walton's family background, the querulous nostalgia into which she was born. She assumed her burdens like an infant Moses who weaves his own basket from the bulrushes. And she conveyed to us the tone of that era she called "The War and the Wastelanders" as if we were living through it. This had been *her* growing-up time, a lean time for adolescents. The war and the wasteland molded her later life as nothing else, sapping her courage and self-belief, shaking and weakening her roots. In his *Anthem for Doomed Youth* (I can hear her reading it now), Wilfred Owen wrote what might have been her funeral oration in 1961: "Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds/and each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds."

The last time Eda Lou functioned for us as a teacher was in 1954, when we visited her and her husband in Wac-hung, New Jersey. As usual, her digs had acquired an atmosphere somewhere between a Village coffeehouse and an institution for the chronically ill: the house half unpacked; Bedlington pups; thousands of books in barrels; an aged relative "interminably making chicken soup"; Scotch, epsom salts, vodka, Empirin, gin, and ammonia. Papers and poetry were everywhere. Manuscript pages flew out of windows. As we sipped coffee she read Yeats to our two-year-old.

"You don't have to give up everything for art," she said that night. "It's a bloody fake to think that shedding responsibilities can leave you light enough to do what you couldn't do otherwise. You make your little esthetic dent by observing as best you can, and turning the mess you see into some order."

"Wherever you stand, you see the makings of art. You just put it down.

You put it down large and clumsy and you pare it until there isn't any excess. If you're afraid to put it down for fear it will be bad, forget the whole thing; get lost. Mostly it *will* be bad. Keep going, like a workman. And keep cleaning up at the end of the workday."

After that visit, our lives became more complicated, and the possibility of spending literary weekends with Eda Lou grew remote. Those were the years in which we learned what she had so mercifully never told us: that the Marines *don't* always land, that accident and change rule the world.

NOR were those years good to Eda Lou. Her marriage ended. And after retiring from NYU at sixty-five, she got a job at Bennett College in North Carolina, living right next to a four-lane highway that roared all night and sent her to sleeping pills. Her letters to us, querulous and cranky, if full of small jokes, were battle-weary.

Thirty years before she could have fought inertia, plunged into the deep education of youngsters poorly prepared. Now she was tired, and a desperation ran through her letters like a small night alarm on a large street.

One day we got a letter from Professor Cargill of NYU. He told us that Eda Lou had gone to California, fallen, suffered a severe concussion, and died without regaining consciousness. My husband and I looked at each other, mute, ashamed of ourselves and the world that had burned up her talent, her energy, and her love. Her life seemed like nothing: a pile of published reviews and book, and howling Bedlington pups.

But *was* her life nothing? Not if you had been Eda Lou's student. If you had been, you couldn't forget her passion for the right word and the clear word, or her large and effective concern for what the apprentice writer was trying to express.

Like some great paintings seen up close, all that was visible in Eda Lou were rough spots and cracks. But viewed from a slight distance, a radiance prevailed:

Bread shall be given
and nothing more be asked
for the flask is empty
and eye knows
the whole harp like lie
of the traditional rose.
Dust spins a cricket music
dry and ineffable
on every lidded window sill
and the blind guest above the
kindled
fire forgets his angel
and the lyre.
This has our autumn cost.