

## **Letter from America**

### **Summer 2007**

The state where I grew up, Virginia, is comprised of 42,769 square miles of varying topography – beach to the east, piedmont in the middle, and Blue Ridge Mountains to the west. It’s roughly triangular in shape, and its top point, Northern Virginia, is a major suburb of Washington, DC. Northern Virginia (or “NOVA”) skews all of the statistics. The population of Virginia is 7,078,515, but more than 1.8 million of these live in NOVA. In Virginia, more people work for the United States government, which has its headquarters in Washington, than any other industry. That’s about 1/4 of Virginia’s workers. The Pentagon building in Arlington, Virginia is the largest office building in the world -- it has nearly 68,000 miles of internal telephone lines. Growing up in NOVA, spending my teenaged years going to punk rock shows in DC, just across the river, I only had a vague sense the rest of Virginia existed. We saw it on family camping trips or beach holidays a few times a year.

Because it’s much cheaper to attend university within one’s own state, hoards of NOVA kids enroll at Virginia Tech each year. I was one of them – one of the hundreds and hundreds of 18-22 year olds making the four and a half hour trek down Interstate Highway 81 to the far southwest corner of the state. The scenery out the window is miles and miles of forest, cattle farms, and mountain foothills. Virginia Tech is an “in-state” school, but it might as well have been another universe. Nestled in the Appalachians, Blacksburg is the picturesque town we’d all seen only in the movies – with a main street that was actually called “Main Street.” The school colors, maroon and orange, might have seemed like a horrible accident had we not all witnessed the mountains around the campus blazing with those very colors each autumn. Although the university is enormous – over 25,000 students – Virginia Tech always felt like a small, tightly knit community.

Because Virginia Tech had been, for me and so many others, such a magical place, someplace so removed from the grit, traffic, and short tempers in NOVA, the events that took place there on April 16 seemed incongruous, impossible. I had lived in the dorm where the first two shootings took place. I met my lifelong friend, Wendy, there. When I saw the footage of the outside of the building, I thought about all of the happy hours we spent, writing in chalk on the heavy wooden doors to our rooms, recording overheard comments and drawing pictures of ourselves and people we knew and laughing until we nearly wet ourselves. At first, I thought about the tragedy from the perspective of a student – the student I used to be. How sad and unfair that the current students would not have the four years that I had.

Like a lot of people, I also thought about who I still knew there. I had recently reconnected with Lucinda Roy, Virginia Tech’s former Chair of English, at the AWP Conference in Atlanta. At a directors’ meeting, I had taken a chair next to hers and introduced myself. “You won’t remember me, but you stood in for my creative writing professor once in 1989,” I told her. The entire faculty who taught creative writing had been like rock stars to me – such was the intensity of my burgeoning

interest. “What a good memory you have!” she said. I shrugged, unable to articulate in that fleeting moment, what she and the other faculty had meant to me, how they had changed me. When I told her I was starting a new program, she went on to offer me a lot of insightful and specific advice about navigating the bureaucratic maze of deans’ offices and provosts’ offices.

So on April 16, I emailed her to ask if she was okay. When she wrote back and said that she was, she also said that she and her colleagues were waiting with dread for the list of casualties. “Some of them will inevitably be students we’ve taught,” she said. It was at this moment that I began to think about the tragedy from the perspective of a faculty member. I could see the faces of my own current students in my mind’s eye, and I thought about how I would feel if something happened to any one of them.

The next day, in the halls of the building where I work, a couple of faculty members asked if I still knew anyone at Tech and if I was okay. My hands shook. I felt uncertain if I could answer the question without weeping. It was partly about Tech. My own personal attachment to Tech had opened me to the emotion of the tragedy. And now it was the overwhelming feeling of love for my students and the sense of their vulnerability that was choking me up. The pictures of their faces in my mind were very like the gallery of smiling photographs of the dead on the news.

The next day, it was revealed that the shooter had been a student and an English major and a creative writing student. My mind shifted gears yet again, and now I began to think about all of the disturbed students I have taught over the years – how close had I come to a tragedy like the one at Tech? I remember one young man rolling up his sleeves to show me the symmetrical row of raw slashes he’d made there with a razor blade. There has been any number of students that I have referred to the counseling center because they chose to confide in me the degree of their desperation, angst, solitude. What I always worried about the most was that they would hurt themselves in an even more serious way than the young man with the bright red lines on his wrist. It never occurred to me that they might hurt their fellow students. But it will occur to me now.

I also remembered my first year of full-time teaching at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. A young man in my night class began stalking me, trying to follow me home in the dark. I reported him to the police, who explained that no crime had yet been committed. The second time I called, they told me that he could not be arrested but that they would go and speak to him. Their hope was that the mere appearance of the police at his doorstep would scare him enough to deter the behavior. It worked.

I also thought about a student I’d had in the UK, at St Martin’s in Lancaster. He began by writing me very long emails which critiqued all of the language in my course programmes. He asked if he could come and speak to me about it in my office, but I was so uncomfortable with the length and tone of the emails that I asked him to take it up with my supervisor. He appeared at my office anyway. He spent an hour

sobbing into his hands and decrying the institutional system that divided students from teachers, hinting again and again that he wanted to be my friend. Later he sent an email that said, “What if I drop out of university? Then will you be my friend?”

After this incident, I tried to raise the issue with management. There are a lot of policies in place to protect students from faculty and from the institution. But which polices protect faculty and the university community FROM students? It was made clear to me pretty quickly that this line of inquiry was a big no-go.

In conversations after the Virginia Tech incident, people have said to me, “I guess creative writing attracts disturbed students” or “I guess the fact that you are young and female means that you attract this kind of behavior.” My response to this is simple. The student’s fundamental makeup doesn’t change whether he’s in a business class or a creative writing class, whether he’s in the presence of a man or a woman. What changes is how much he chooses to divulge of his inner landscape and the manner in which he expresses it. It didn’t surprise me that it was Cho’s creative writing professor who tuned in most acutely to his problems. In creative writing, a student can’t get away with taciturn silence. He has to participate, and as soon as he is forced to do so, his idiosyncrasies are easily spotted.

Unlike most of us, Nikki Giovanni had the clout to put her foot down. “Either this student goes or I do.” So Lucinda Roy taught Cho one-to-one for the rest of the semester. In interview after interview, Giovanni and Roy proved to be the best ambassadors creative writing could ever have, indicating the sensitivity with which they tried to mediate Cho’s anti-social behavior. Giovanni’s poem from the memorial service has become a beacon of hope and healing, reprinted in *The Washington Post*, *The Virginia Tech Magazine*, on the Virginia Tech website, and elsewhere – giving national stage to the written word’s ability to comfort the grieving.

If you’re Nikki Giovanni, there’s not going to be much discussion following an ultimatum about a disturbed student. But what about those of us who are not nationally renowned poets? Given that we in creative writing are likely to be the first ones to recognize a disturbed student, should we be having a conversation about our responsibilities, rights, and recourses? Perhaps some of you guys across the pond will see this as a uniquely American problem, a gun problem. . . something not relevant in Britain. It would be interesting to me to hear from you about this.

My own feeling is that more talk about the issues is better. I hope you will consider attending the Feb 2008 AWP Conference in New York. With over 5000 delegates, there is sure to be some interesting talk about all of this. There will be a strong British connection, too, because NAWE is serving as a literary partner. My own institution, Eastern Kentucky University, will be a major sponsor. Are we making some kind of commission on conference fees? Is that why I’m pushing you to attend? Not at all. It just seems to me like the best opportunity for an international forum on the subject. And now, more than ever, there’s too much at stake for us not to raise our voices. As Giovanni’s poem suggests, we are all Virginia Tech.

*Kathy Flann*