

Rapid Eye Movement

by Ryan Lund Neumann, Pope High School

Two sets of double doors stand guard on the far end of a dormant hallway. Comprised largely of glass, the darkness beyond these doors makes them look opaque. A man enters. Youngish in appearance. He wears a blue collared shirt that's untucked. Sleeves rolled up a third of the way. Black tie fastened, but not secured. Black pants, socks, and shoes. Backpack flung over one shoulder. He can hear the hum of electricity, but nothing else. Fluorescent lights reign down on beige exteriors. He walks quietly down the industrial tiled floor, past photographs suspended in clear plastic frames. He turns, stage left, down a narrow corridor.

Small signs hang from the ceiling. Exit signs indicative of the residents within each classroom. The man walks automatically as if on autopilot. Stopping at a section of classrooms in the middle of the hallway and extracts a set of keys from his left pocket. The man unlocks one of the classroom doors, enters, and turns on the lights. Upon entry, the intercom speaks:

"What are you doing here?"

Me: Whoa! What the...

Everything feels familiar, yet foreign at the same time. Eyes wide shut. Puzzled. Unsure of what to say.

Me: Uhhh...

Intercom: I happened to have the opportunity to read excerpts from your book this weekend. I wish I hadn't.

Then it dawns on me. The blank walls. Empty shelves. Lonely desks. I'm in my old classroom at South Cobb.

Intercom: Upon reading your "fictional" accounts and thoughts on South Cobb, its students and community, it was probably in the best interest of all that you decided to transfer.

The classroom windows are open when the electricity cuts out. Then, a flash of light. Followed by thunder. Rain begins to fall. The breeze blows water inward. Behind me, the door locks.

Springing into attack mode, I open my eyes. Feeling lost. Trying to place myself.

Internal Me: Where the hell am I? A hotel room...just, an anonymous hotel room.

Sitting up in bed, reality comes flushing back. Heart beating fast. I get out of bed, press 'brew' on the coffee maker, and check my phone. One new gmail:

“Just left you a message a few minutes ago. Feel free to call me back when you get the chance, thanks!”

Before departing Boston, sitting alone in an unlit conference room at the [Park Plaza Hotel & Towers](#), I had the opportunity to speak with Hannah Morgan from the [Marietta Daily Journal](#). It was cold outside. Temperature in the mid twenties. My family was waiting in the lobby, and for about twenty minutes, I talked to Hannah about [my book](#), the NCTE Conference, my [Talk](#), and some of the ins and outs of my teaching career.

It was cool. Like, really cool. The way our conversation ended, there was no time table. No guarantee (at least in my mind) that the story would run.

Day after Thanksgiving, while catching up on Twitter, I read the following Tweet:

Teacher wins nat'l award for self-published book,

and immediately think, “Oh shit. That’s me.”

Week after school’s back in session, I’m working on a contributor blogging query and need to build ethos. So I go back to the [article](#) Hannah wrote. Bring it up in another window. About to copy and paste the link when I notice there are actually some comments. Nervously, I scroll down the

page. Relief begins to set in. Then I read the last comment. Posted by someone with the anonymous commentator name of, *Uh-duh*.

“Nothing like another white teacher teachers at poor urban school for a number of years and then makes money off exploiting stereotypes of poor students only to transfer to a rich white school where the students are “better”. Meanwhile, those of us who understand how to teach students from poverty will continue to do the work we were called to do and not try to make money off of children’s lives. Be a man – donate you profits to South Cobb HS or at least stop proselytizing about how bad you had it.”

And then I get pissed. Debating the worth of a response, initially, I decide not to write anything in retaliation. Try to be the bigger man and all that. So I close the window, shut down the computer, get ready for bed, and go to sleep.

When I wake up, I’m running. Something’s chasing me but I don’t know what. Through the halls of South Cobb , an urban high school about twenty miles outside Atlanta. The place I began my teaching career. During the five years I worked there, the most consistent characteristic of the school was the transient nature of both its professionals and pupils. I feel like a fugitive. The walls of the school seem to be welded to the walls of Pope, the school I now work at and my alma mater. For all intensive purposes, and for reasons that are good as well as bad, Pope is the polar opposite of South Cobb.

In and out of classrooms I go, through offices, and out into the parking lot. Defying the laws of gravity. The laws of physics. And sanity. I wind up back in my former classroom. Rain pouring. Entering through one of the previously opened windows, shadows fill the empty shell. I go to leave, but can’t exit. The door won’t give. Water pools in an uneven section of the classroom. A swirl begins, and before I know it, the floor’s dissolved into a hurricane. While being slosed around with inanimate objects, a bookcase slams on top of my head.

Me: Owww! Fu–

An active sleeper, I am. I roll around—pretty much all night. Book shelves protrude from the headboard of our bed. Often, I roll right into the shelves on my side. Sometimes it's a flying elbow. Others it's some part of my head.

On one of the last Friday mornings of the most recent semester, the back of my head caught a corner of the lower shelf. Rubbing the point of contact as I stumble out of bed, I get the coffee going and input contacts. As I'm getting ready for work, I find that I'm still irritated by the anonymous comment I read the night before. Still lingering, I can feel the bad blood beginning to boil.

Shortly before heading out the door for the daily commute, I recall a suggestion given to me by my professor at UGA this past semester:

“Maybe it's time you started voicing your opinion more. You'll be able to affect more change by doing so.”

With that comment in mind, and before leaving for work that morning, I sat down and composed a reply for *Uh-duh*:

Let's get a few things straight, shall we? Actually, that's not really a question. So please, disregard the question mark. By the way, this is for you, Uh-duh (clever name by the way).

First off, let's clarify you're horribly worded first sentence. I think you meant, “Nothing like another white teacher teaches,” and not, “white teacher teachers...”

And then there's the whole, “makes money off exploiting stereotypes of poor students only to transfer,” and so on and so what. I don't know if this occurred to you while you were typing or if you were just in a frenzied state but, I'm still teaching. Obviously, I'm not making money.

#WeAreCobb

Internal Me: What to say next?

Oh! Got it. How about this: Have you even read the book? Have you read excerpts? Or are you just basing your comments on the cursory glance of your own ignorant interpretations?

And by “those of us who understand how to teach students from poverty,” to whom are you referring?

Better question, who are you? My name’s Ryan Neumann. But wait, you know that already.

Think it’s time to flip the script a bit. Be a man, or a woman, whatever – actually, no, be an informed citizen. Think before you speak. And after you’ve given it some thought, if you’d like to chat, I’d be more than happy to converse.

I could have said more. So much more. Cause the thing of it is, that’s only scratching the surface. It’s window dressing. But as the blood pressure brewed to boil, I glanced at the clock and realized that if I didn’t get going, I’d find myself detained in traffic.

So away I went. Into the Matrix, and onto the interstate. Contemplating the drive to work while driving to work which...is this weird sort of beast unto itself. I’ve tried to explain it before. Verbalized it. Blogged about it. And with some phrasings, I’ve come close. But I’ve yet to really hit the nail on the head.

Bout a month ago, I went and saw this movie starring Christian Bale, Casey Affleck and Woody Harrelson called **Out of the Furnace**.

It’s not exactly a happy-go-lucky film, but I really liked it. At first, I couldn’t really pin point why. There’s not much talking. Much of the story is told through body language. Expressions. Cinematography. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized, I can identify with the characters.

(insert spoiler alert here)

In the film, Christian Bale (Russell) and Casey Affleck (Rodney) are brothers. Russell works at the Furnace in Braddock, Pennsylvania. Younger brother Rodney escapes the Furnace that killed their father, instead opting to enlist in the Marines. After completing three tours of duty in Iraq, Rodney returns home a man changed and uninterested in simply “working for a living.”

For me, there's this one scene that's particularly telling. It's the last scene Russell and Rodney share together. While cleaning up the kitchen, Russell (Christian Bale) finds some bloody bandages in the trashcan. Putting the pieces together, Russell infers the bandages to be products of a prize fight. Unhappy with this new found discovery, Russell quietly waits in the living room where their father passed away to confront Rodney. After some time, Rodney returns home. Wanting to see his brother's hands, Russell presses Rodney for answers. He assures Rodney there's something better to be done with his hands. That fighting isn't the answer. Russell offers alternatives. He tells Rodney he should come work at the Furnace, and that there's nothing wrong with working for a living.

And that's when Rodney goes off. He says something to the effect of, "I gave my life for this country! And what's it done for me!?! What's it fucking done for me!?!" (To get a better idea of what I'm talking about, watch this [Out of the Furnace Trailer](#) until about the 44th second.)

The interstate can be a pretty lifeless space at 6:30 in the morning. My mind's usually all over the place. But on that nonspecific morning towards the end of the semester, the only thing I was thinking about, was that scene. Turning onto one of many suburban roads that lead to Pope, it finally clicked.

Internal Me: Damn. That's how I feel about teaching. That scene...says it all.

One part of me believes in it. Believes in the profession. In teaching. Earning moral rewards instead of monetary. Working for a living. There's a part of me that quietly takes pride in what I try to do, even if there's no way to tell if the effects of those efforts resonate beyond the classroom.

And then there's the other side. The side that's desperately trying to find a way out. Afraid that I'll become one of those teachers who die in the classroom. The side of me that just feels fucking crazy some days. Chomping at the bit. Wanting to fight. Ready to explode. Unable to communicate the reasons why. Wondering if there's a way to just write my way out of this profession altogether. The pressure building and building.

Most weekdays, these two sides battle it out on the way to work.

Pulling into a sparsely populated school parking lot, sunlight only beginning to peak through the shades, all of that big picture stuff just fades into the black. A fluorescent glow pours through two sets of double doors, and I remember this reoccurring dream I've been having, on and off, ever since I began teaching at Pope.

It's always kind of the same, but always kind of different.

Two sets of double doors stand guard on the far end of a dormant hallway...



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