

RALPH JAMES SAVARESE

Myself on High

She had just won a major literary prize. She was slim, blond, and preposterously attractive. I was slim, blond, and preposterously awkward. Somehow I'd gotten into her poetry writing class as a first-semester freshman. I'd submitted a sonnet about a monk so consumed with sexual longing that he couldn't pray. The monk was me, and the poem, of course, was awful. But because I seemed to know something about formal poetry and because she herself was obsessed with God (the thing my speaker should have been obsessed with), she decided, I guess, to let me in.

Soon I was in love. That her criticism was blunt only fueled in me a certain masochistic tendency. Her comments on poems included "Not fit for a dog's breakfast" and "Grossly sentimental. Try sharing it with your family." I'd walk out of class in a daze. Once, I failed to pause before crossing the street and was nearly workshopped by a bus. The more negative she was, the more determined I became, arranging my words like long-stemmed roses in a vase. The most stubborn of florists, I vowed to win not only her literary regard but also her theological heart.

One day, she announced that she had bought the desk on which a famous 20th-century poem had been written, and she needed a volunteer to help her husband retrieve it. My hand shot up, and though the word *husband* sounded an alarm, I pictured our future together. "Are you sure you're strong enough to lift it?" she asked in front of everyone.

I would have marched to her house right then, but she told me to come the following Wednesday. When at last I set out, my heart was racing. To calm myself, I hummed the hymn I had sung in church the previous Sunday:

*There let the way appear steps unto heav'n;
All that Thou sendest me in mercy giv'n;
Angels to beckon me nearer, my God, to Thee.*

As in a dream, the melody seemed to lift me up and deposit me at her door. “John, this is Ralph Savarese,” my teacher exclaimed in the front foyer. Shaking her husband’s hand, while looking straight at her, I said, “Nice to marry you.”

Nice to *marry* you? Before I could process the slip, they were both guffawing. My beloved went down on her knees—she wasn’t praying—and pounded the floor. I ducked into a powder room, gasping for air. I wanted to drop the class; I wanted to leave the university; I wanted, in short, to die. The powder room, I belatedly recognized, had no window and thus no escape. The husband had to beg me to come out. “Ralph, it’s OK, really. Everyone falls for her,” he said, still laughing.

At the end of the course, my poems, too, were humiliated. My teacher told me, “Stop writing. You haven’t a lick of talent.” But then, three years later, after I had turned to another writer on the faculty and after she had been assigned to read my senior thesis, she took it all back. “You’re the only one I’ve ever been wrong about,” she said in a note.

I couldn’t believe it. I grabbed that note and ran all over campus, proclaiming my triumph. You’d have thought a DNA test had just cleared a murderer’s name. **THIS WRITER IS INNOCENT! THIS WRITER HAS A FUTURE!** I then went back to my dorm and crafted a reply: at first, a rather effusive thank you, which I scrapped, followed by something uncharacteristically bold. *The only one you’ve ever been wrong about?* “Don’t be so sure,” I wrote with liberated fury.

Because she had preached the virtue of brevity, I left it at that—a single jab of the pen. Students who didn’t relish proving an authority figure wrong, as I did, or who weren’t like mangy, beaten dogs that keep coming back for more would probably have stopped writing after her initial discouragement. Who can say when talent will emerge? What right did anyone have to be so cruel? As I reread my one-liner, I felt a rush of dignity, like a drug injected into my arm. Then fear. What if, at some point, I needed a recommendation from her? “Screw it,” I muttered, and sent my reply.

Don’t be so sure.

Years later, with my first book of prose coming out, the marketing people begged me to contact her for a blurb. At their request, I had listed all the writers I knew, and they had seized on her. I told them

the story of my principled objection, as if to resist, as if to say that I couldn’t possibly comply with their request. But the truth was I wanted her to see my book. Of course, I also wanted it to do well, and I knew her name meant something. Plunging headlong into the business of commercial publishing, I repeated to myself what an experienced writer had counseled: “Best not to confuse integrity with self-destruction.”

And so I asked my former idol for a blurb—the way one might ask for a favor from the Pope. But would her holiness remember me? Would she be willing to read my book? Although we hadn’t kept in touch, I continued to follow her. I knew about her divorce from the man who had coaxed me out of that powder room; I knew that she was teaching at another university; and I knew what sort of reviews she had received after each new book had come out.

“I don’t write blurbs anymore,” she replied by e-mail. “It takes too much time. You write one and sign my name. No passive voice or clichés.” Write one and sign her name? Could I do it? Would it be ethical? What sort of dispensation was this? Behold the stained—yes, stained—glass windows of my soul! And then a voice: “Best not to confuse integrity with self-destruction.”

Wavering at first, I attacked the challenge with gusto. Self-encomia poured out of me, as on an assembly line. *Not since Homer has a book had such narrative sweep. Or: Only a writer as elegant as F. Scott Fitzgerald could so deftly develop his motifs. Or—my favorite: Like that other Italian, Dante Alighieri, Savarese has descended into the underworld and brought back truth itself.* Suddenly, I was nineteen again: I had hair, I was thin, and I craved my teacher’s approval, except now I could have it in whatever form I wished.

Imagine praying to God and answering the prayer yourself. Or imagine singing both parts of a love song—say, “Do you love me?” from *Fiddler on the Roof*. “Do you love me?” “Yes, I love you.” It was like eating a truckload of Twinkies. The nearly diabetic aftermath left me deflated, even ashamed. I had wanted to be read, I realized; I had wanted to be held in her arms. *Do you read me? Yes, I read you.*

Knowing that I desired her endorsement and offering it precisely as she refused to give it, she mocked the independence I had achieved. It

was a cynical, even malicious, way of honoring a teacher's obligation. I stared at line after line of spurious praise and came to a decision: I wouldn't use a blurb by her. Myself on high? I simply couldn't. Thus, once again I renounced my god. I'd rather be alone, I reasoned, without her.

As I waited for my memoir to be published, I came across books with puffs very much like the ones I had drafted: no passive voice or clichés and lots—I mean lots—of elaborate hyperbole. I understood the temptation. Who doesn't want his book to sell? When mine finally came out, she asked me in an e-mail why I hadn't used her blurb. The publisher had apparently sent her a copy, or she had come across it in a bookstore. "*Your* blurb?" I wanted to say. "*Your* blurb? Is there no limit to your megalomania?" Instead, I thanked her for her generosity and then, breaking free for good, explained that my editor had found it insufficiently flattering.