The Ouija Professor

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There we are: it's Halloween of something like 2012 and we are three undergraduates attending Montana State University. Bozeman is boring for meek types, the pale busy people who study literature. We have an urge to party but have no drinks, no costumes, and no party. One of us has a Ouija board. Another has a car. We do what comes naturally, which is wait until the sun sets and drive to the house of our departmental advisor. She provided us with her address some semesters ago; she hosts end-of-term parties and lets you cram final research papers in her mailbox when you skip the last week of classes. She'll go to movies with you during the summer if you pick her up. Prior warning isn't necessary. It is unlikely that you'll be turned away.

There's no sign of her being home—there never is—just the amber glow of lamps set deep in her living room. We ring the doorbell. The first few times I visited, I grew anxious at the pause between the bell and the opening of the door, as she got up from where ever she was to answer. What if she forgot? What if we were at the wrong place? But eventually I learned that this, the waiting at the door, was simply part of the whole package. To come to Gwendolyn Morgan's house is to wait at the mouth of a cave long enough to feel it, to know that you are stepping into someone else's place, and to doubt. But she would come.

So the door opens, and she looks at us with surprise, then the familiar annoyance, bemusement. She sees the Ouija board. It's a glow-in-the-dark model, the stuff of teenage girl sleepovers. *How very undergraduate*. But how very camp, and how very enticing. I don't remember if we brought wine as an offering. Just our grinning faces. "Okay, fine," she says, and she lets us in.

I know Gwendolyn Morgan primarily as a professor in the English department at Montana State University. She was my advisor for four of the five years I spent there, eventually guiding my undergraduate thesis. Gwen is a person involved in as many things as humanly possible—ask her what she's been up to since "retiring"—and I've known her as a thesis advisor, writing critic, and extracurricular organizer. But how I know her best is through her classroom teaching.

I can only describe a Gwen classroom as minimalist. Gwen does not like traditional structure. Her syllabi were little more than the title of the course and a calendar. There were no videos in her courses, no e-learning doodads, no hot pedagogical tricks gleaned from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*'s forums. Chalkboards were nice, but by no means necessary. You would come in, sit down, and Gwen would stride in (it was always a *stride*, like she was approaching battle), put her bag on the nearest table, open her tattered copy of whatever classic we were reading that week, and begin lecturing. The first two weeks of class would be a crash introduction to the civilization of the semester, the ancient Greeks or Romans, or the Celts or Anglo-Saxons, and then everything after that would be students interpreting the text based on their new body of cultural knowledge. Gwen

would sit on the table in front of the room and go down every passage she had underlined the night before, asking us to tell her why on earth this reference, word, or formation might be important.

Generally, we were really bad at doing that. It took us a few weeks to really absorb that hills were important in Celtic literature. There was simply too much information to synthesize in real time. That, I think, was the point. There was no notion of building a portfolio through her courses, of everyone getting a gentle, rolling introduction to criticism and writing, or everyone getting to share what they liked or disliked or what works meant to them. We were there to practice a skill, interpretation, with a master craftsperson. Similar for the person entering a university piano studio after years of community-center music lessons, this new environment could feel harsh and sterile and even scary for its absolute lack of airbags. Lots of flailing and grasping at straws was involved, lots of practicing slowly and, seemingly, fruitlessly. But if you trusted the process, you'd change in ways I'm hard-pressed to articulate even now. Students would become defter, more clever. Clunky and confused reading sped up, became more like a conversation with a tradition. Answers would come faster, and references would build upon themselves over the semester, becoming ever more-complex structures we could intuitively enter and rearrange. We would get the feeling that we were rewiring our own synapses. The reader became an architect.

Some would flail more than others. I did. Gwen is a human thresher, a gatekeeper placed at the doors of the English department. Courses would begin with forty to forty-five people and she'd have it down to thirteen by the end of the term. Grades were based on two or three papers; upper-division courses would require something like forty to sixty pages due within two weeks at the end of the term. C-s and Ds would be handed out liberally. Her famous work: after the first round of papers was graded, she'd stride (again, *stride*) into the classroom and write on the chalkboard how many of each grade she gave. Rarely would there be more than 7 As; rarely would there be fewer than 7 Cs. This would be followed by a review session titled "Reasons Why I Hate You," which would take a look at the most common grammar and/or conceptual errors we'd made that week. And then the next week there would be four fewer students enrolled.

Hazing? Maybe. But there was also a campiness to it that made us love being there even more. Often, after the last presented reason why she hated us, Gwen would stand to the side, roll her eyes, and admit that this batch of papers was actually really good. One time, we didn't know how to respond to that, so we started applauding.

This might sound arid. Quite the opposite. This wasn't brutal but was, like all good minimalism, the process reduced to only what truly mattered. She simply wants you to learn, and correctly. Her office was open at all times for people who needed help. If you needed an extension, you'd get it. If you needed help navigating departmental politics, you'd get it. If you needed something good to read, you'd get it. If you needed a shoulder to cry on, you'd get it. If you needed something to alleviate the homesickness of the first few years of college, or someone to challenge you about your self-

damaging work ethic or endless addictions, or a place to spend the night for whatever reason, you'd get it. Gwen had a reputation, spread mostly by people who didn't take her classes, for being a merciless authoritarian. But she'd let students avoid writing a final paper if they publicly produced one of the plays we read that semester. The plays were always makeshift, underground things, rehearsed in spare time and in borrowed lecture halls, hardly professional in a mainline academic or dramaturgical sense, more angel-robes-made-of-bed-sheets than methodology-thesis-research. But in this was the soul of the classroom, the cultivating of an open interest in all aspects of culture, not just rigor, but also wonder, and expression, and not knowing. This includes Ouija boards. And students showing up at their professor's doorstep with Ouija boards.

I'm looking at my undergraduate transcript. Here are the courses I took from Gwen: Classical Foundations of Literature, an independent study in Old English translation, 16th/17th Century British Literature, Old/Middle English Literature, History of the English Language, and a senior thesis supervision (something about reader-response theory, cybertext, and *Minecraft*). There were many other courses I could have taken: Tolkien, Mythologies, The Structure and Function of Language, Oral Traditions, upper-division College Writing, Dark Romanticism, Fantasy and Film, The World of Faerie. One could easily earn more than half of a B.A. from Gwen alone. And there were many other opportunities for group independent projects that I never even heard about until they were concluded: creative writing, more translation courses, more studies in media and fiction and history and being in the world. Sometimes you just can't keep up.

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She revels in witchcraft, lore, recipes, pots made of rare metals, manuscripts. She has an ancient Chinese canvas, as tall as a man, stretched out on the wall above her fireplace. She recites the unwritten rules of the Ouija to us, things that I now cannot recall beyond generalities. Don't ask if there's a God, or if the thing communicating is God. Keep your fingers on the *planchette*. Ask one question at a time. There is an etiquette here, a diplomatic template. Keep orderly; don't joke. (We joke). End the session with "goodbye." If you feel uneasy, or if the answers become aggressive, end the session swiftly and politely.

Gwen says there are two explanations for Ouija phenomena. The first is that one really, truly is contacting some force—angels, demons, guardian spirits, ancestors, Satan, whatever—that is external to the system and bringing them in for advice or company. The second is the old, James-Randi type of physiological reductionism, that when a few people put their fingers on a delicate and easily movable device, the hunger of group-think produces little subconscious twitches and arm movements that guide the device so smoothly as to appear autonomous, so one could conclude that the Ouija board is kind of dumb and no fun anyhow. A woman of both science and imagination, she more clearly explains the latter while making the former more visible, more plausible by virtue of its

lack of details. It doesn't matter which explanation is appropriate. The board is here, so we're going to use it.

Gwen is a master of rhetoric and storytelling. It makes me doubt. I want to know if she is going to lead the session, apply small pressures, force certain answers. As we ask our first few questions of the board, I keep my eyes on her fingers, just as one, pointlessly, watches a magician's hands.

Were we duped? I don't know. Sleight-of-hand would not be out of the question, for Gwen is a physical person. Her seminars, Montana State having adopting the sit-in-a-circle-and-share seminar style, would often end with her impatient, out of her chair, pacing the room. Her arms would often fling into the air during lectures. Worse, they'd remain strangely still when she asked a question about the reading nobody could answer, her body language a dowsing rod for unsatisfactory students. She would famously throw chalk at the heads of insolent students, often for wrong answers, especially when they sassed her, especially when they sassed her well. When blunt millennial eyes would leave the ironies and grotesqueness of British drama unparsed, Gwen would take it upon herself to act out roles, melodramatic postures, stage fights. She'd draw impassioned and bad chalkboard drawings, and, very rarely, bring out her lower registers in guttural recitations of Old English as it was—or, my favorite, in becoming the satanic Ghost of *Hamlet*. The black ink printed so boringly in our Dover editions of Renaissance drama would wriggle, steam, uncurl out of her smoker's throat: *Swear* became *ssssssweaaaaaaareeeee.*

More than that, more than teacherly performativity. There were moments, events, very small but refined gestures Gwen deployed that indicated that you had done something out of the ordinary. And out of the ordinary things are what Gwen loves best. A head nod, quick and violent, such that her hair flew up in a particular way. The way she pointed a pink fist at you in the classroom when you either succeeded or messed up. A very particular way she hunched and stomped, used only when you had definitely messed up. A catlike way of reclining during an end-term party in her house; a sign of contentment and relaxation. An inflection, a choice of words at first innocuous and incidental but that deepened in meaning when used months later, and later still: "you're a *star*!" One could see only a few of these things spread out over years, like sighting rare birds. But these movements were so consistent in form, so tightly executed, that one would realize they were parts of herself she had developed and polished and loaded with meaning throughout her career, casual gestures concealing intimate cargo, small treasures she would bring out in moments of surprise and love.

Excellence in form. I wouldn't put it past her to know her way around a Ouija board. An out-of-place piece, though: Sleight-of-hand makes sense here, but tricking students does not. Gwen houses an activist's ethic, one that is bald in assertions, needs, requirements, aspirations. She is the last person to conduct business in the dark. One of the many administrative scandals during my time at Montana State was the banning of tobacco products on campus in the name of some self-

contradictory concept of public health. I wasn't there for it, but I believe it wholeheartedly—that, on the eve of the legislation's enforcement, Gwen took her two-hour Tolkien class (for which she, already, regularly wore a Gandalf hat and carried a sword) to the courtyard of the humanities building, where she proceeded to pace, chain smoke, lecture, growl at passers-by. *Dragonbreath* is her nickname, one she bears proudly. Equally: *Momma bear*. Subtlety is in Gwen's readings, but it isn't in her bones, and thank god for that. There aren't enough dragons in the English department.

We ask the board about normal things. Ghosts, comets. I don't remember. I ask a question that, in retrospect, is stunningly, inappropriately personal. Gwen doesn't mind. She asks me for clarification and listens thoughtfully. Someone gets up and finds more cheese for the cheese board. We dutifully participate for each other's questions. We drink. We grow bored. One of us thinks of a good endcap for the session, something that's urgent given life as it is but still, on some level, silly. "Who will be elected president?"

At this point, the *planchette* is settled, exhausted, near the Z, or the Y, one of the lesser letters. It pauses, thinking. It begins to draw upwards, toward the middle of the alphabet arcs. An arc along presidential history: our first real soothsaying moment. We lean in. It passes the *R,* one of two possible answers, and we get excited, but near *R* is also *O*, and that is passed by, as well. The two obvious choices are out. I struggle to remember the name of a third-party candidate in order to predict the Ouija's prediction. But the *planchette* does not cooperate. It breaks through *D, C, B,* the upper atmosphere of letters, into empty space. It roundly avoids *Yes*. It is heading off the map, beyond letters, where emptiness dwells, and I am disappointed. We have, it seems, been duped with a non-answer. Our collective intuitions could not agree, or our demon has failed us. Our *planchette* is drunk. It slows down and stops over the board's glow-in-the-dark logo. *Ouija.* Great. But then one of us, not me—was it Gwen? Was it Jacob? Was it Anne?—leans in and notices that the *planchette*'s portal is squarely over the first letter in *Ouija.* An answer, *O, Obama,* and we squeal and squeal.

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Fun. But I take this memory incredibly seriously. Amongst the worst habits of academia—the gatekeeping, the inherent rightness of theory, the tendency for the acts of reading and writing to contain so much introverted neuroticism and hand-wringing, the undergraduate impulse to transform ambiguity into ideology, the luxurious ambivalence and endless clarifying clauses of criticism, the research archive or library turned into a site of cruel hoarding rather than liberation—there was Gwen, pushing you to go, go outside and live a life, and live it as rigorously and fully and confusedly and with as fleshed-out a bibliography as you could muster, even if she didn't see it, even if you had to fight her about it. A postmodernist, she wants to see what you can do *with* the texts, not just what you knew *about* them. But she wants you to do something *real* with them, as unstable as that term may be. She loves interpretation, not speculation, not manipulative invention, not deconstruction so endless as to be masturbation. She wants students to be mobilized, to mobilize

themselves. If in your essays you created an innovative and internally consistent interpretive framework and then failed to use it to its fullest extent, leaving untouched details that begged to be mined and processed, she would deduct points.

I'm not sure if she sought to turn anyone into a linguist or a historian, like herself. Nobody in my cohort followed that path, nor do I really remember anything about Old English despite translating the Exeter Book's *The Descent into Hell* for two years. This seems to be deliberate, based on circumstance; her repeated cry was, "How can one study at Montana State, which has a library that *has no books in it?*" (Exaggeration, I thought, until I went to grad school at a larger university.) I don't think she was ever interested in making more of herself, a common complaint about academic advisors. Nor did she seek to initiate non-traditional or rural students, of which I was one, into upper-middle class forms of canonical knowledge, some awful rigid way of processing the world. Nor was she there as a peddler of fads or, as is a pervasive theme throughout Montana's intellectual infrastructure, utility. She instructed us to think, to weigh, to critically inquire, to generate and hypothesize, not in a dried-out institutional sense, nor in an insular sweater-vest sense, but in the way that creates punks, filmmakers, musicians, community theater-attendees, investigative reporters, drag queens. Sometimes she wouldn't know what you were going on about or doing for yourself, and would let you know that clearly, but that would ultimately not matter. There weren't enough people like Gwen at Montana State or at any of the places I've attended since. But she is not a brand. She can't be copied. She is, simply, Gwen.

How did we end the Ouija session? I don't remember. We do other things, mostly talking, finishing the cheese. We don't stay later than midnight—"I'll turn into a pumpkin," she claims. I don't remember if we tried to hide the Ouija board in her house. We finish her wine, and she walks us to the front door, as she always does, and she gives us all the hugs she can offer, as she always does, and her dog says goodbye as well, and we step off the porch and walk to the car, leaving her and her living room lamps to burn on through the night.