

ABOUT DERRIDA, IF YOU'RE INTO THAT

**KATHRYN
NUERNBERGER**

Badgers remind me of the problem with metaphors and how everything is and isn't a metaphor, but in the end you have to pick a side or else. It's why I haven't yet written about when I was in Teach for America, which is a kind of Peace Corps for putting silvery-spoon *suma cum laudes* in inner city schools. And since Baton Rouge doesn't have an inner city, you can tell inner city is a metaphor for other things, and one of them is how I was proud of myself for being a white person in a room with black teenagers, and then I was ashamed to realize what I was, and then there were a lot of pencils and books and staplers and shoes being thrown and I was a rabbit, I guess. Even when I was pressing the buzzer to the principal's office or yelling "Listen, just listen!" or moving names on post-it notes down the consequences chart all the classroom management in-services said I needed while the students laughed that they were winning the game.

When a badger catches a baby rabbit from the nest you were just minutes ago cooing to have found, the screaming is so human anybody would cry and be afraid for themselves and realize you must not interrupt before it's finished. After they've formed a mating pair, badgers still bite each other to bleeding, jaw-locked over a scrap of prairie dog. When the mother is weaning she brings a carcass back to the burrow so she can cut at the faces of her pups as they try to eat.

My students were neither badgers nor prairie dogs. This is not meant to be a metaphor, but I know when I tell you some characters are white and some are black and there's correlative imagery about animals, metaphors will happen, and I don't know how to control the way they are received. Maybe that's the reason why when I was watching a nature documentary on PBS, it felt like that day the really huge girl in the back row whose name I don't remember anymore, even though she was the worst part of third period, stopped her loud chatter, the fuck-you-white-woman-trying-to-assert-your-authority-in-the-form-of-a-verb-conjugation-worksheet chatter, long enough to say, "If you teach us as *individuals*, then we'll listen." That was the thesis anyway of a much longer, self-important speech about how I didn't even know my students' names, much less what they needed to know to be adults in this neighborhood, and I had the gall to tell them to care about how to say *je m'appelle* and spend hours of their lives piddling with *être*. She was right on, except for how there were thirty-two students and one teacher, and she could only see herself in her desk, and I could only see myself in front of rows and rows of individuals who were sleeping or playing cards or calling me bitch and also I couldn't stop thinking that being from Fairfield or Dixie shouldn't mean no one teaches you how to condescend with a properly accented pronunciation of *croissant*.

That girl wasn't in my class anymore when I found out she was twenty and a junior and mother to a daughter who was already walking and talking. Badgers do almost nothing but dig, and they don't blink to grab a fresh-killed pheasant from right out of a bobcat's mouth. Because of the striped faces, they seem cute and loveable as a skunk, but if they are awake, they are hissing in a way that reminds me of my own lumbering toddler, who came a long time after Baton Rouge and made me feel sorry about everything I ever said to all the troubled or abused children I've known, which is getting to be really a lot now in this line of work, and I've never helped any of them yet. I think because there's no such thing as help. The high school was ringed by barbed wire and the windows were made of a plastic that eventually faded to a dingy yellow. When a kid broke a window, they put up a new piece of plastic. I had a key to the bathroom, but was forbidden to give it out and almost never did I give it out anyway.

Badgers are ruthless by design – their mothers work hard at making them so. With the kids I know it's different, because some of them are as tough as badgers and others are entirely something else, prairie dogs or pheasants or bobcats or rabbits, and by the time I have the metaphor straight, it's the last day of school and Josh – I still remember his name – is running down the hall hanging onto those pants I told him every day to pull up, and some kid I don't know and don't care about is chasing him. It's going to be a fight and Josh is going to be expelled this time, I guess. Probably not. Even when I beg them to expel kids, they don't do it. Probably I've just been looking for a fight this whole year and it's the last day and I want something to go my way, so I grab him under the armpits, and tell myself it's so he can't throw a punch. He's totally exposed, flailing and frantic like a pheasant, but that other kid stops at the sight of my teeth-bared face, then turns away down the stairs. For a long time I told this story like it was a moment I got right, but there is no right. There were other kids in the hallway and they were throwing free condoms from the clinic at each other. The bell rang. It was summer vacation. Cellophane packets fell in a glittering prophylactic rain. I bent to pick up my keys and one was stuck in my hair.

After ten years, it almost never comes up in conversation. I meet people and they wouldn't guess how much I love watching the kids ring up around a fight and some teacher has to push in there and grab someone out by the ear. It's exciting and violent. It's like one of those bushes of pink flowers blooming by the sign that warned bringing a gun into this school carries a penalty of five years hard labor. Every morning six buses line up in front of that sign and everyone who gets off the bus is wearing khaki pants and a red-collared shirt with a patch over the right breast of a roaring lion and the words "Capitol High." When the police came with their masks on, Derrida was one of the students on the roof throwing bricks. When the bobcat brought down the bird with a pounce and a swipe, he lowered his mouth to feed, but then the hissing badger shuffled up. He scorns the cat, makes him beg, makes him slink for the picked-over carcass of his own kill. Which one wouldn't I want to be?