I'm honored to be giving this lecture. I'm especially honored to be associated with the Hopwood awards, which have such an eloquent history, reaching far back into American writing. In his autobiography Time Bends, Arthur Miller—who won two—refers to "the Hopwood award which at Michigan was the student equivalent of the Nobel." Here is the proof, if any is needed, that encouragement lasts long into a writer's life. I should add that at Stanford, in Creative Writing, we are also admirers of the program that shelters these prizes. We have had such a fine traffic forwards and backwards over the years—Kirstin Valdez Quade is a recent and wonderful example. I want to thank her for her gracious introduction here today. Kirstin's writing and her stellar teaching are both something we're very proud of at Stanford.

This lecture series, coming in this context, seems to point towards a single theme: the advice older writers can give younger ones. But I have doubts about this. I'm not at all sure one generation of writers can advise another. Which is not to say the voices of older writers aren't important. For instance, I have so much liked the statements of two distinguished writers associated with this program. First of all Nicholas Delbanco's assertion that "the conflicted self is crucial." He was saying it about the novelist. But I think it has a wider application. And when I talk later about writing, some of what I say will point to Peter Ho Davies's important remark from an

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interview: “I want to pay attention to the world that’s being created,” he said, “not to the writer who’s created that world.”

Nevertheless my doubts remain. “The young writer,” said William Faulkner, “will learn from almost any source that he finds. He will learn from older people who are not writers, he will learn from writers, but he learns it—you can’t teach it.” His words resonate. Most young writers start out treading and grinding the same paths earlier writers have been on. But those younger writers will have the sense—I know I did—that it’s now their own road. And that ownership matters more than any advice about how to travel it by those who were there before.

When I think of all this I keep going back to a scene from the past of Irish writing. It sums up everything that can go wrong between generations of writers. It happened between two men. One kept a record of it, so it did happen. And as I said, when I think of the dangers of intergenerational counsel this is what I think of.

To go back to this event you have to revisit the year 1902. You have to imagine a café in the city of Dublin in Ireland. To add the arcane to the outdated, you have to imagine a smoking room in that café. The meeting took place on O’Connell Street, which was then Sackville Street. It was a wide street in a garrison city which was still under British rule and would remain so for fourteen years. And all of this in a country that was considered a backwater of Europe. Not a country that people—except for a few deep inside its secret societies—held out much hope for. The meeting was between two men, two writers who had never met before. One was in his middle thirties and one a mere twenty years of age.

The two men were William Yeats and the very young James Joyce. And they were not equals. Yeats was already an iconic figure. He had founded the Irish theater. He had written admired poetry. Joyce had yet to write anything important. When I think of the hazards of this sort of advice I think of what happened next. Before any conversation could be started, James Joyce leaned across the table to William Yeats and said “You are too old for me to help you.”

So maybe advice doesn’t always work; isn’t even meant to work. But does that mean there isn’t anything that can be shared between generations of writers? Is there nothing a young writer can get from an older one? Is there anything, in other words, they have in common?
I think there is. That's what I want to talk about in this lecture. I believe there is something that can be passed between writers, between generations—that changes in time but not in essentials. Something that crosses boundaries, borders, languages, and identities. Something that needs to be reinterpreted, understood differently in different times, and stated again and clarified again. Something that is common and cherished in a writer's world but also always threatened.

To try to be clearer about this, I'll have to be personal and go back to when I was a young poet in Dublin, a world away from Michigan or indeed from Stanford where I work now. Indeed—since I go back there so often and know this first hand—a world away from Ireland as it is now.

I had returned to Dublin when I was fourteen, after spending part of my childhood in London and New York. Ireland may have been a backwater of Europe. But it was also improbably a city where lightning had struck. In a figurative, artistic way that is. Literature and language had announced themselves there in the persons of writers like Joyce, Yeats, Beckett, O'Casey. I began writing in the 1960s, in a time which still drew confidence from that.

I knew that much. But I didn't know other things. I didn't yet know, for instance, how I would fit into this intensely conservative and Catholic country, with its oppressive doctrines and its narrow outlook—especially on women's lives. And I was not sure I understood the relevance of the literary revival either. To my uninformed judgment, there seemed to be two entities. The narrow nation, sometimes called priest-ridden, and the literary culture that apparently was a contrast with it. I wasn't sure either of them honored a woman's life or a woman's creativity. I looked at both and was unsure. Which doesn't in any sense make me unusual at that time. I think there are many young writers who look around them and know their emerging purpose of being a writer has divided them from their old life but hasn't yet connected them to a new one.

At eighteen I was a student at Trinity College. I studied English literature. I read poetry as a canonical fact: Here are the poems, we were told. Here is the background of the poems. Here is what to learn and what to remember. At first I signed on to those limits. I had no idea poetry could be a mirror of history. I had no idea it had once—in our own country, Ireland—been forced to shine out of a darkness with effort and pain. I had almost no
sense of the long tributary that flows, full of voices and experiences, towards any young person who wants to be a poet in their own time and place.

And then at the age of eighteen I picked up a book called *The Hidden Ireland* by a writer I had never heard of, Daniel Corkery. It had been published in 1925. The book follows the shattered narrative of the Cromwellian clearances in Ireland in the eighteenth century. It alights in their aftermath in a small part of Gaelic Munster, which is called Slieve Luachra, a mountainous area on the Cork-Kerry border. Corkery writes about poets such as Aodhagán Ó Rathaille and Eoghan Rua Ó Suilleabháin. He records that they spoke the Irish language and wrote their poetry in it. That they were witnesses to the destruction of that language and the breaking apart of the Bardic order. "What Pindar is to Greece, what Burns is to Scotland... that and much more is Eoghan Ruadh to Ireland," wrote Corkery.

That evening as I read on I could see what Robert Penn Warren meant when he said "the poem is not a thing we see—it is, rather, a light by which we may see." I stopped on one page, and at one passage. Everything I was or hoped to be listened to what those words said. Here is the passage, in which Corkery is describing the poets of Munster.

Then we must also remember that these poets were simple men, living as peasants in rural surroundings; some of them, probably, never saw a city; not only this, but they were all poor men, very often sore-troubled where and how to find shelter, clothing, food, at the end of a day's tramping. Their native culture is ancient, harking back to pre-Renaissance standards; but there is no inflow of books from outside to impregnate it with new thoughts. Their language is dying: around them is the drip, drip of callous decay: famine overtakes famine, or the people are cleared from the land to make room for bullocks. The rocks in hidden mountain clefts are the only altars left to them; and teaching is a felony.

Not to excuse, but to explain them, are these facts mentioned; for their poetry, though doubtless the poorest chapter in the book of Irish literature, is in itself no poor thing that needs excuse: it is, contrariwise, a rich thing, a
marvelous inheritance, bright with music, flushed with colour, deep with human feeling. To see it against the dark world that threw it up, is to be astonished, if not dazzled.

I can remember where I was when I read this. Even now I ask myself—why was I so moved by an assertion nobody could prove; about poets from another world, most of them lost to time and history? I believe I was moved because it was the first time I had come across a bold statement about the importance of the artist's life. It was the first time I had read that language and literature could testify in and through time; that such testimony could pierce the darkness of a history. It was the first time anyone had expressed the dignity of the life I hoped I would live.

And that—not really advice and not wisdom—is what I think generations of writers share. It is what older writers have in common with younger ones. At Stanford in the Stegner poetry workshop I'm well aware that the poets in my workshop, most of them young Americans, would probably not find much to say to one of Corkery's Munster poets. But I also believe that the purpose of each set of poets is the same. It is a life lived in and through language, with all its challenge and reward. This won't change and has never changed. And it is the artist's life—the living of it and the upholding of it—that is the value we all share.

I realize that leaves questions. For instance, how does the general value put on a writer's life work in the individual life of a practitioner? How does it translate? It's especially a question for writers who are starting out on the new and difficult task of craft and excellence—a task that can look just too intimidating at times. In an interview Alice Munro said—she was speaking about a particular book: "I remember the day I started to write it. It was in January, a Sunday. I went down to the bookstore, which wasn't open Sundays, and locked myself in. I remember looking around at all the great literature that was around me and thinking, You fool! What are you doing here?"

Yet sooner or later almost all writers have to look beyond their own personal experience. Sooner or later they have to define what a writer's life—the one they've chosen—means to themselves and to those around them. This in turn can produce difficult questions, and some of the answers I'll suggest are not the orthodox ones. But the fact is we all face the
complications around these questions. Today a writer's life can be so mixed in with the idea of a writer's career that it can be hard for a young writer—maybe for any writer—to know where one ends and the other begins. The pressures of one on the other have become continuous and can even be disabling.

Nevertheless the way our lives as writers link up with the lives around us is of real importance. When I think of what best expresses this I think of the poem "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg. The poem starts with a chant about who is on the margin and who is at the center. It makes prophetic claims for sexual outsiders, the displaced person. It insists on their visionary importance to a whole society. Then it moves to the third section where Ginsberg considers the suffering of his friend Carl Solomon, who was in an institution at that time, referred to as Rockland in the poem. And just at that point in the poem we stumble over the powerful and startling line "Ah Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe."

As Ginsberg writes that part of the poem, as he calls out to Carl Solomon to promise that they will share both safety and danger, he signals something about the aesthetic as well as the ethic of writing. He models the image of a writer who is unwilling to use the power of language to divide himself from those who lack it. These words of Ginsberg's, his insistence on the woven-together fates of the individual who is expressive and the one who is not constitute an actual manifesto. They dignify the project of the imagination; they also point out its obligations.

So how are we to define this shared value of the writer's life? How can we be clearer about its obligations—if indeed we even accept those obligations exist? I know there has always been a theme in the self-definition of writers that suggests the only responsibility they recognize is to write well. It's a compelling argument. This is the singular pursuit described by Franz Kafka when he wrote: "Don't bend; don't water it down; don't try to make it logical; don't edit your own soul according to the fashion. Rather, follow your most intense obsessions mercilessly." I also think it's echoed in these wry and spirited words of J. D. Salinger.

Do you know what you will be asked when you die? Let me tell you first what you won't be asked. You won't be asked if you were working on a wonderful, moving piece of writing
when you died. You won’t be asked if it was long or short, sad or funny, published or unpublished. You won’t be asked if you were in good or bad form while you were working on it. You won’t even be asked if it was the one piece of writing you would have been working on if you had known your time would be up when it was finished—I think only poor Soren K. will get asked that. I’m so sure you’ll only get asked two questions. Were most of your stars out? Were you busy writing your heart out? If only you knew how easy it would be for you to say yes to both questions.

But even with these primary concerns, surely there must be some room for Ginsberg’s half line of poetry—for those words calling and warning us to keep vigil at the boundaries between expression and silence, to patrol the line carefully between aesthetics and ethics? Calling and warning us to understand our responsibilities to both.

This in turn involves values that are not always talked about. Values that attend not just the writer’s work but that much more elusive thing: the writer’s witness. For instance, one of the true benefits of coming to a creative writing program like Michigan’s or Stanford’s is that you are admitted to a community of craft. You join a conversation that has the power to sustain you all your life.

How you respond to that conversation has something to do with the witness you choose to give as a writer. The truth is, there is an unrelenting temptation today to talk about the product of creativity instead of its process. To talk about finished poems, plays, novels. About books you can hold in your hand, give to your friends, point to and speak about. Books that are the outcome of a culture and an imagination. Books that may even have your own name on them.

All well and good. But what about the process of creativity? What about those who exist in its shadow more than its light? What about those men and women who nearly wrote poems, who were almost fiction writers, who never quite became dramatists? Men and women in whom creativity burned but who, for some circumstance, some absence of fortune or fluency or luck, never wrote those books. Never held them in their hands. Never saw their own names on them. How are we to think about them? Do we

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even want to think about them? Don't we have a kind of fear, a sort of superstition, a need to establish our separation from them?

Let's imagine, for instance, you have a friend who starts out with you to be a writer, with whom you share ambitions and hopes. Let's say in those important and precious conversations that you planned and promised one another to be writers in the world, with books to show for it. But let's also suppose ten years from now that friend has not written the book you expected, has not finished the poetry or completed the novel you were so certain he or she would. Will you decide that person isn't creative because there's no visible product, even though you know the process is still alive in that person's mind?

At that point I think we all have to think for ourselves. We have to resist the pressures of a society that urges us only to value the product. Only to honor what is seen, and can be owned and may be sold. Each of us, in resisting that, has to try to make our own democracy of creativity.

I believe we have an obligation to honor writing beyond its outcomes, to honor creativity beyond its products, and to realize we share it with so many who will never do what we do. I don't for a moment say we shouldn't honor and be grateful for the tangible forms of the creative life. We should and I am. But we should also remember that the dream of creativity lives—and is honored by—far more people than ever get to write a poem, or design an essay or evolve a perfect plot.

Those people who keep that dream in front of them, who are hospitable to the process of creativity even though they never achieve its product—they also participate in that democracy of creativity. And all those people who do write poems, who do finish novels, who continue in the world of expression, should consider themselves infinitely indebted to all those who hope for that world but never reach it. And if they are not safe, we are not safe.

I want to finish this lecture with a poem I cherish, which seems to me true to the artist's life and true to the language we make and its purposes. It unfolds for us that vision of the power and connection of the artist's life with those who listen for it but may never be able to participate in it.
DEDICATIONS
I know you are reading this poem
late, before leaving your office
of the one intense yellow lamp-spot and the darkening window
in the lassitude of a building faded to quiet
long after rush-hour. I know you are reading this poem
standing up in a bookstore far from the ocean
on a gray day of early spring, faint flakes driven
across the plain's enormous spaces around you.
I know you are reading this poem
in a room where too much has happened for you to bear
where the bedclothes lie in stagnant coils on the bed
and the open valise speaks of flight
but you cannot leave yet. I know you are reading this poem
as the underground train loses momentum and before running
up the stairs
toward a new kind of love
your life has never allowed.
I know you are reading this poem by the light
of the television screen where soundless images jerk and slide
while you wait for the newscast from the Intifada.
I know you are reading this poem in a waiting-room
of eyes met and unmeeting, of identity with strangers.
I know you are reading this poem by fluorescent light
in the boredom and fatigue of the young who are counted out,
count themselves out, at too early an age. I know
you are reading this poem through your failing sight, the thick
lens enlarging these letters beyond all meaning yet you read on
because even the alphabet is precious.
I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the stove
warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder,
a book in your hand.
because life is short and you too are thirsty.
I know you are reading this poem which is not your language
guessing at some words while others keep you reading
and I want to know which words they are.

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I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn between bitterness and hope
turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.
I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else left to read
there where you have landed, stripped as you are.

—Adrienne Rich