

The Aha! Moment

Kate Daniels of the MFA Program at Vanderbilt University

MOST MFA programs require applicants to write a brief essay explaining why they are applying and what they hope to gain from the program. But do these essays play any real part in determining whether a writer gets accepted? Yes, says Kate Daniels, director of creative writing at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, but only if the writer's creative work shows promise.

When she's reading poetry applications, Daniels says, she always reads the submitted poems first, but if the poems are good she turns to the essay to gauge whether the applicant would be a good fit for Vanderbilt's program. "It not only shows the applicant's ability to write well in another genre, in this case prose," Daniels says of the essay, "but it also provides insight into the applicant's literary background,

education, experience, and personal characteristics, like determination and perseverance, that I consider essential to succeeding as a poet."

Here, as part of a continuing series, Daniels responds to an excerpt from an admissions essay—at Vanderbilt they are called "creative statements"—by poet Tiana Clark, who entered Vanderbilt's MFA program in 2015.

Daniels is the author of four poetry collections, the most recent of which is *A Walk in Victoria's Secret* (LSU Press, 2010). Clark, a long-time resident of Nashville, is the author of a chapbook, *Equilibrium*, which won the 2016 Frost Place Chapbook Competition and will be published in September by Bull City Press. ∞

MICHAEL BOURNE is a contributing editor of *Poets & Writers Magazine*.

1 "Right off the bat, this essay attracts my particular interest and approval. It has a title, and begins with an epigraph. These choices announce immediately that it is a piece of literary writing, not just a means to an end (getting admitted to our program)."

2 "I love the way the essay begins elegiacally, in a memory dense with specific imagery. This is evidence of the poet's attachment to and facility with image. I love the scene that is created, its confident pairing of narrative recounting and image-based description."

3 "Although I'm thrown off a bit by the reference to Bob Dylan at the end of the paragraph—why didn't she find a poet's quote on this rather frequent topic in literature?—I'm 100 percent back in when she relates in the last sentence what she loves about writing poetry."

4 "The first few words of the second paragraph make me tense—'This is why I want an MFA'—for this is the kiss-of-death moment for many of our applicants who end that sentence by writing, 'so I can teach creative writing at a university.' I want to hear about a poet's love of poetry, not about future job plans. Luckily, this poet does not go there."

5 "We tend to not give much credence to applicants' mention of work by the writers who are on our faculty. It's hard to tell if it's brownnosing or not, so generally I glide right by these references. The exception is when applicants spell our names incorrectly, or misquote our poems, or just list our names. This applicant actually quotes—accurately, down to the line breaks—from poems, so maybe she really *has* read our poems!"

6 "The reference to her original rejection from our program, and the detailing of all she has done since to support her writing, and educate herself—'my own do-it-yourself MFA experience'—impresses on me her qualities of determination and perseverance. I suspect she is very teachable, and eager to learn—personal qualities we look for."

7 "She actually thanks us for reading her application! I appreciate this!"

Blood: An Origin Story

As I speak, blood is coursing through our bodies. As it moves away from the heart it marches to a 2/4 or 4/4 beat and it's arterial blood, reoxygenated, assertive, active, progressive, optimistic.—Mary Ruefle

As a child, I remember making my first cake with my grandmother. I was on a stool in the kitchen and watched as she tapped and broke eggs into the bowl. No recipe for her, just muscle memory from years of making yellow cakes. Her pruned skin moved through the ritual of ingredients like dancing marionette hands, except she left the empty eggshells in the bowl and crunched them into the sticky batter. In expectation, I watched our cake rise like a mountaintop through the oven door window. The buzzer went off and we waited for our cake to cool. My grandmother proudly sliced out a wedge for me. I bit and the eggshell shrapnel slid between my gum and tooth; I bled. How does the memory of a little girl peering over the counter at her grandmother's moving hands root into my soul? Or now that I am a woman more familiar with the effects of Alzheimer's, into what shape will the prism of the present have bent those memories? These thoughts excite me to write and explore the distillation of one moment or emotion, to freeze the memory and excavate the layers of meaning. Bob Dylan said, "The purpose of art is to stop time," and this is why I love writing poetry: to stop time for the length of a poem and become myself again and celebrate the gift of blood in my mouth. I write to access the pulse, the center of the poem, hoping to glean the universal implications.

This is why I want an MFA—to have the time to stop time. The opportunity to explore the wounds, mysteries, and surprises of my past and present that I am just now, at thirty years old, beginning to understand and grapple. Kim Addonizio writes that the creative process is "a continuing engagement with being alive." This is why I love reading poetry, because for a moment I am at the zinc bar with Rick Hilles taking a shot that tastes "like trying to take in all of winter / in one breath." Or I'm with Kate Daniels at the restaurant with Doc and the T-bones "reverberating / Inside the prison house of history, / Longing to touch each other / Free from context inside the prison house of history." Or I can feel the singe of lust as Kendra Decolo writes, "I want to be your tongue / torching a city." These are the moments that cut me open and make me feel alive. These are the lines I highlight, underline, read over and over, say aloud, star and dog-ear the page. When I read Walt Whitman's, "I sing the body electric," instantly I felt the Dickinson's *screwing off* of my head. I was inspired to research and enumerate: nimbus, slave auctions, the poetic gaze, body politics, and my sacred and sexual intensities. These lines tap a lived experience that rings with *duende*—lit with charge and heat. They bleed the page....

During college, I would write poems in the margins of my notebooks, not realizing my calling was staring at me on the page. After graduating, I decided to apply for an MFA at Vanderbilt University, though I was not accepted. Since then, I have created my own do-it-yourself MFA experience and I believe my writing has matured considerably as a result. I committed myself to mentorships under both Bill Brown and Jeff Hardin through the Middle Tennessee State University's WRITE program, attended Vanderbilt's Saturday University Poetry Series, and took several poetry workshops through the Porch Writers' Collective. In addition, I founded a monthly workshop critique group called Poetry Church, joined the Lucille Clifton Collective through the Global Education Center as a member and facilitator, began serving as a board member for the Porch Writers' Collective, and have been featured in various reading series in Nashville....

Thank you for your considering my application.

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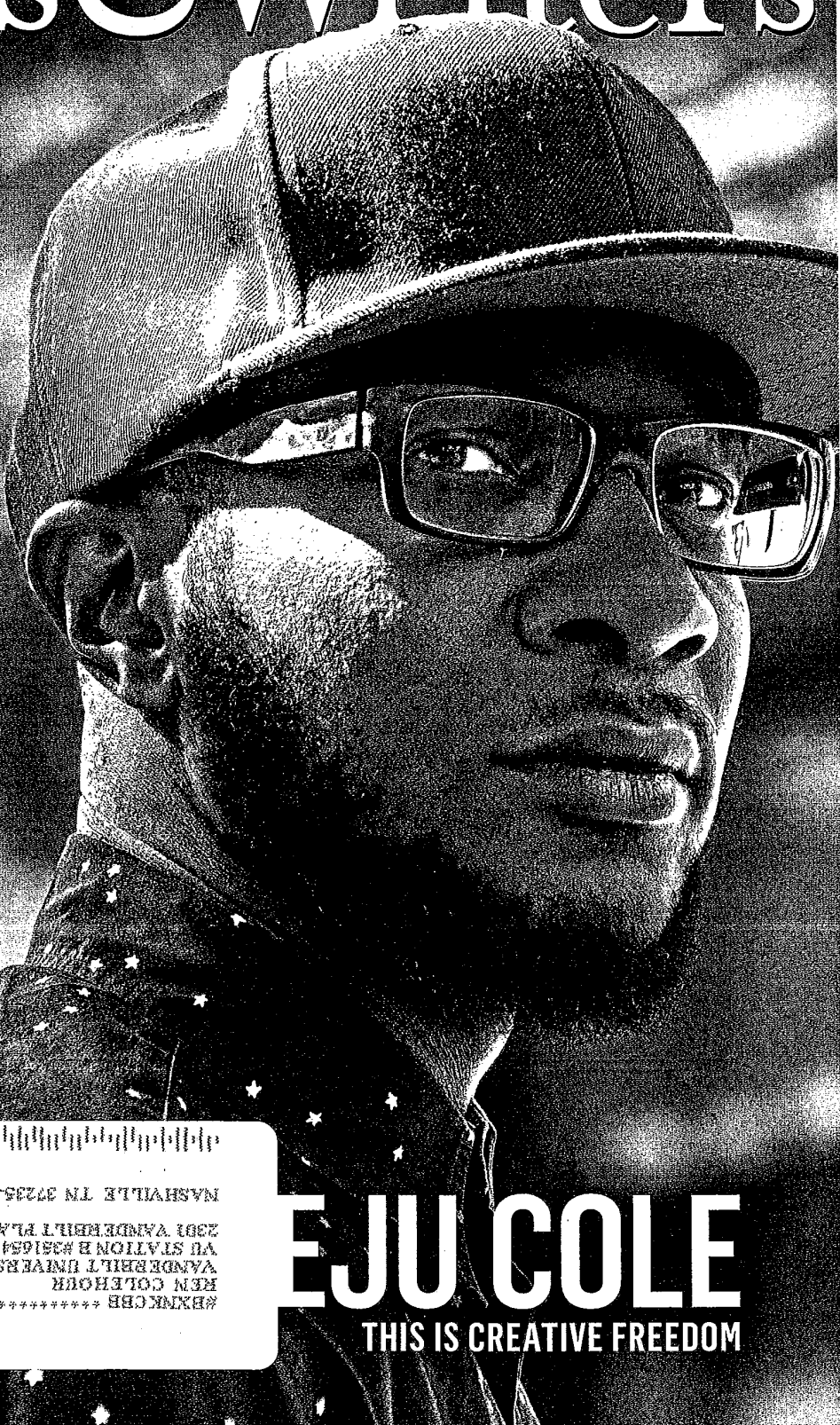
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