When I'm writing, the books and journals migrate from the shelves and cupboards that line my sunny study and end up in heaps on the floor, around the desk, under the worktable—on which still more are stacked—and in the storage closet and the furnace room that catch the overflow. Although the result is a decorator's disaster, I know exactly where everything is—all around me like an embrace, exactly where I need it. If the authors of these works were here in person the room would look like a CCCC convention, enlivened by a swirl of teachers and writers great and good, philosophers, psychologists, rhetoricians, travelers, social commentators, anthropologists, and more, and student writers, generations past and passing. I would greet them with the hugs of welcome, and of thanks, that I extend figuratively not only from this page, but on every page of Composition Studies as a Creative Art. What a conversation we could continue, what a celebration.

Space limitations on the printed page, although not in my imagination, confine my acknowledgments by name to those whose involvement with the work here, new and reprinted, has been most immediate. The editors of the journals and books in which many of these writings were originally published offered advice so good (such as “Stick to the point!”) that I took most of it. Among those editors who reinforce my understanding that Composition Studies is not only a creative but a collaborative art are: Katherine Adams, John Adams, Bill Bernhardt, Wendy Bishop, Suzanne Bunkers, Ed Corbett, Sid Dobrin, Linda Flower, Sheryl Fontaine, Diane Freedman, Olivia Frey, Toby Fulwiler, Barbara Gebhardt, Rick Gebhardt, Kristine Hansen, Joe Harris, Doug Hesse, Cynthia Huff, Chris Hult, Susan Hunter, Joe Janangelo, Peter Miller, Gary Olson, Hans Ostrom, Jim Raymond, Mike Rose, Mimi Schwartz, Louise Z. Smith, Todd Taylor, Joe Trimmer, and Art Young, as well as a host of unidentified journal and press reviewers. My ongoing professional dialogue with, among others, John
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Brereton, Don Daiker, Peter Elbow, Rebecca Faery, Beth Flynn, Anne Gere, Lee Jacobus, Carol Peterson, Linda Peterson, Nancy Sommers, Kurt Spellmeyer, Ed White, and Rosemary Winslow—has also proven a significant formative influence for the writing in this book.

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Others, too, emerging from the recesses of real life to be reinvented in creative nonfiction—the quick and the dead, the intimate and the anonymous, the adversaries and the advocates alike—deserve recognition here for their dramatic contributions, sometimes to the text, sometimes to the subtext of this book. I am grateful beyond measure that the drama provided by my immediate family—my husband, Martin, our sons Bard and Laird, their wives Vicki and Sara, and our grandchildren Paul and Elizabeth—has been essentially comic (despite the scary parts recounted in this book), full of the excitement, enthusiasm and energy that make living, like composition studies, a creative art. Martin Bloom, social psychologist and professor, has read every word of every major draft of every chapter with uncommonly good critical sense, and a parodist’s intolerance of jargon (“I never noun”). He has provided a retentive memory for titles and key words that I’ve called out from an adjacent lane during our early morning lap swims, homemade apple pie at bedtime, and all the comforts in between. Best of all, he has trusted me to tell the stories I tell here. Every day, every word, is a gift.

University of Connecticut
January 1998
DEFINITION OF POETRY

Once
I took a course in aesthetics:
Three hours credit
If I could learn
What a poem was.

A poem was “the record of the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds”;
“The best words in the best order”;
“A criticism of life.”
But what was “best”? Would “happiness” necessarily dwell in a criticism?
And if a poem “tells us... something that cannot be said,” how could we discuss the ineffable?

A poem was a poem, we learned, if it made you feel as if the top of your head were taken off,
Or if your spine tingled
Or your gut quivered,
Save the classics, and with them, the more cathartic, the better.

A poem was metered, rhythmic, regular—Except free verse.
A poem rhymed—But not blank verse.
A poem had consonance, assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia—Or none of these.

A poem used a “higher concentration of imagery” than prose.
“But how high is high?” asked we bourgeois gentlemen, speakers of prose all our lives.
A poem was “poem-shaped,”
Yes, just as a human being was man-shaped, unless she was a woman.

Finally, we were told, “a poem should not mean, but be.”
Be what?

To answer the question for myself
I wrote a term paper,
“A Definition of Poetry.”
The instructor gave it an A.

But I never wrote
A poem.