The earliest memory I have is of reading out loud. My parents were high school graduates who believed that it was important to try to give their only child a good start in life, so they had bought a copy of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which came along with a multi-volume children’s encyclopedia in red covers. Those books were the foundation of my early reading, because the back of each volume contained stories drawing on and referring to the alphabetic entries. My mother used to read those stories to me before bed and, one evening, sitting beside her on the couch, I got impatient for her to start reading (I think she was talking to my father) and started reading aloud myself. I remember the moment because both of my parents became alarmed — or that’s what it seemed like to me. I was afraid I had done something wrong.

My father had a newspaper in his hand. Thinking that I must have memorized the story and was less reading than recalling, he said “Can you read this?” I read a few words, not all of them, but it was enough for my parents to get very excited. I gradually realized that I wasn’t in trouble; on the contrary, my parents were delighted. I was four, and
that moment shaped me as a reader. The joy in reading came partly from the book, getting lost in the story, but it also came from the reaction of those around me. There was a reward in reading, as my own actions were reflected — in positive or negative terms — in the reaction of others.

Reading out loud was fundamental to early childhood reading, but then it went underground. I read in my room; I read in a corner of the living room, in an old green recliner by the window, with a pile of books on the floor; I read at family gatherings, out of the way on a couch or a spare bedroom; I read in the mall, when my mother wanted to go shopping, and would park me on the floor near the clothes racks. That reading was silent and purely visual. Reading in school, too, was silent, whether in the form of the speed-reading projectors introduced in fourth grade or in the novel hidden inside my seventh-grade science textbook. As a Jehovah’s Witness, with at least five hours of congregational meetings per week, I was also silently reading. Reading re-emerged from silence only when I went to university, where the classroom turned out to be a place where what had been purely visual experience suddenly became aural again.

The first place this happened was in a course on Joyce’s *Ulysses* taught by Hugh Kenner. I wasn’t enrolled in the course but some of my friends were, so I went along to many of the class meetings. Kenner had a way of conducting class that turned out to be my first introduction to how to teach, though I didn’t know it at the time: while he would spend some of the period talking about the text or answering questions, much of the time was spent in simply reading *Ulysses* out loud. I cannot put into words how powerful that was. Kenner must have taken great care in choosing what passages to read, because our understanding
of the work grew exponentially with every one of them. He read the words simply, almost in a monotone, rarely changing the pace or volume of his speech. Many years later, when I began to teach literature, I learned also to choose passages that would be powerful when read aloud, and to try to teach myself how to use my voice in order to ventriloquize the text — or, at least, my sense of the text — in a way that mirrored my experience in Hugh Kenner’s classroom.

The second place this happened was in graduate school, in a course on English Renaissance poetry taught by Edward Tayler. I had taken a course with Tayler before, and so was familiar with his carefully constructed seminar format, which required students — usually two or three per week — to read out a textual analysis of one of the assigned works. In this particular course, however, we were focused on lyric poetry instead of the long narrative poetry or prose of the previous course; as a result, each presentation was focused on a single, self-contained lyric. One of the first presenters, Heidi Brayman, was about to begin reading, but paused briefly; she asked, “Do you mind if I read the poem out loud first?”

I remember the feeling in the room. At first, everyone almost held their breath; was this a juvenile, immature thing to ask? Would we be wasting valuable seminar time if she were to read out loud something that, after all, we had already read silently in preparing for class? We all looked at Tayler, who didn’t say anything at all for a minute, but looked down at his notes, written on index cards. (His notes weren’t just on that week’s texts; they were about each of us, our interests and interpretive tendencies. If we ever do a book on How We Teach, I would write about Tayler’s pedagogy, which I found utterly transformative, but
which is also emphatically not the way I teach. There’s a productive contradiction hidden there.) Then he raised his head, and his voice shook a little bit; he was visibly moved, and simply said, “Yes.” After that, every one of us (without asking) read the poem out loud before we started our presentation. Like listening to Hugh Kenner read *Ulysses*, the experience of listening to fellow students reading the poems they had chosen was powerful. Reading it out loud did something unnameable, did a kind of interpretive work that was completely different from what we were doing when we analysed the structure or talked about the contexts in intellectual or social history. I didn’t know what that work was, but it was clear to me that something was happening.

During the same year I was in Tayler’s seminar, I was teaching my first child how to read. I had sometimes read to my little brother, but we were so far apart in age that I was out of the house when he was learning to read; because that experience was only occasional, I couldn’t really observe his progress. It was completely different with my daughter, who loved her books so much that, at bedtime, she would fill an old basket with stuffed animals and a pile of little board books and paperbacks. Reading aloud to her every night was almost like song, because while some of the books were new acquisitions that would only gradually become familiar, others were favorites that we both had memorized. Those books were almost like songsheets. Even now, almost thirty years later, I can repeat the lines of Maurice Sendak’s *Pierre*, or Sandra Boynton’s *The Going to Bed Book*: “and down once more, but not so fast, they’re on their way to bed at last.”

I would read to her, and she would read to me, with the proportion of reading gradually shifting over time. Those
were intensely intimate evenings, made so by the shared experience of reading. Reading to her younger siblings as these came along, and then reading to little cousins in later years, were echoes of that initial pleasure in reading out loud together, that narrative voice as song. Reading to a young cousin over a few weeks last summer echoed those experiences: we would take turns, sound out hard words, and — when the same book was read on consecutive nights — re-read with the same cadence and intonation, so that every night was a new performance of the song/text. This ritual, repetitive, almost liturgical kind of reading, especially evident with my own children, to whom I read most frequently and over long periods of time, had a powerful impact on two levels: it produced a sense of intimacy between we two readers, and it developed a kind of launch pad for solo reading, generating an almost audible internal voice for these new readers.

Though I never reproduced the reading aloud in graduate seminars that was a feature of Tayler’s class, it was a fundamental feature of my undergraduate teaching as soon as I took up an academic job, drawing both on that shivery feeling in the graduate seminar and the long-ago memory of listening to Hugh Kenner read from *Ulysses*. In discussion classes, and even more in large lectures, the fundamental backbone of every class prep was the selection of passages. In smaller classes, I would sometimes read out a passage and sometimes ask a student to do so; in very large lectures, however, I would be the one to read out loud, taking care to choose passages that I knew would produce a powerful emotional response: Priam anticipating his ultimate fate, in the *Iliad*; Procne seeing the face of her son, Itys, in the *Metamorphoses*; Dante recognizing the face of his old teacher, Brunetto Latini, in the *Inferno*;
Caliban explaining the strange music on the “isle... full of noises” in the *Tempest*. I’m nearsighted and don’t wear glasses, so in the 400-person lecture theatre, I could never see the faces of the students clearly. But I could always tell when their attention was on me, because of the feel of the room. When I was reading those passages, I could tell that they were rapt — at least sometimes, when I had chosen the passage well and my reading was strong. Here, reading was not just having an aural effect; it was having an affective effect, moving the students emotionally in a way that (I hoped) would stimulate their desire to read while also opening up their sense of curiosity in preparation for tutorial discussions and conversations outside of class.

The embodied effects of reading become evident when people read aloud. This is the case for the instructor standing before a large class; for the student reading a passage in the course of discussion; for the audience gathered in a bookstore to hear an author read their work; and for a cluster of readers gathered to read *Moby-Dick* at the New Bedford Whaling Museum in early January, or *Ulysses* in Dublin on Bloomsday. Online reading sites (e.g., http://www.mobydickbigread.com/), too, bring together readers and listeners, trading the image on the page for the impact on the ear. The power of reading aloud became most apparent to me not in the lecture hall, however, but in a smaller class; and it wasn’t my own voice that created the effect, but rather my lack of a voice. I was teaching a British literature survey, and we had just begun to discuss metaphysical poetry; I had asked my students to read selections from Donne and Marvell in preparation for class. That morning, however, I woke up with laryngitis, unable to make any sound above a whisper. What to do? I came to class and wrote a brief explanation of my state on the
board. Then I silently handed out a photocopy containing a few of that day’s poems; once they were all distributed, I came over to one of the students and whispered, pointing to a stanza, “Read!”

She read. And then I whispered to her, “Say something about it.” The students were bemused, a little puzzled at first as to how to respond, but they rose to the occasion. I went from student to student (“Read!”) and asking, in a whisper, for more. This was a strange occasion, not repeatable, but it taught me a lesson about the power of reading. I learned to harness that power in the classroom; simultaneously, however, I found that my own delight in reading was slowly disappearing, in ways I’ve described above, in the introduction to *How We Read*. I assume that this was because so much of my daily work was reading, whether for research, class prep, or grading, causing me to lose sight of what it was like to read for pleasure. In the last few months, however, working with Chris Piuma on a podcast about reading called *The Spouter-Inn*, I’ve begun to rediscover that pleasure in reading through — what else? — reading aloud. Each episode centers on a single book, and while we don’t prepare a script, we do sketch out a road map of the themes and — most importantly — the passages we think we might like to talk about, some of which we read aloud.

I’ve suggested above, in the introduction, that the present volume and *The Spouter-Inn* are, in a sense, twins — both focused on reading, but while *The Spouter-Inn* tries to build enthusiasm and desire for reading on the part of its listeners, *How We Read* instead foregrounds the challenges and pleasures to be found in the act. Both seek to bring out the regenerative, renewing quality of reading, the capacity of one narrative to bring out other stories, for one
piece of art to engender another. This quality was beautifully and movingly illustrated when one of our listeners, an artist named Gabriel Liston, commented via Twitter on how he had been listening to *The Spouter-Inn* while finishing his painting *We are not so very broken* (the frontispiece to this essay), an image of an accordion and a book, lit by sunlight. I like to think that this image is part of a cycle, starting with the images that inspired the book Chris and I are reading—whether Gertrude Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* or Melville’s *Moby-Dick*—moving to our shared spoken words, reading aloud from the book; to the painter, painting the painting; to the person who responds to Gabriel’s work, whether in spoken word or another art form. Reading binds us in a concatenated chain, back into the past of our writers and forward into the future of those readers who will come after us. Reading out loud brings that chain of writers and readers to life.