Standing at the loading platform, we watch the truck backing in. The driver jumps out, springs up onto the dock to push up the rear door. We lean in for a better look. A solid mass of stacked boxes, like a sliced chunk of the great wall of China, waits to be unloaded.

What we've been looking forward to claiming, we lift, move, and unpack—the 1956 Rogers High School yearbook, *The Red and Black*. Later that day it will be handed out with some ceremony during assembly by the principal, Mr. Peter Donnelly, and the faculty advisor, Miss Amabel North. As a member of that yearbook staff, I help carry the boxes from the loading dock into the auditorium and place them backstage, puffed up by my own importance and by my first taste of publishing. Not long after its publication, my *Red and Black* was packed back into a box where it rested in the garage over the years.

Open it now, many years later, catch the strong scent of mildew, and see rows and rows of photographs of very young people. Notice there is almost no writing in this book. Although composed for adults, it is a picture book. No words at all appear except names under photographs. The other staff members and I must have spent those long hours diligently checking the spellings of names since there is no prose here. No poetry. No fiction. Only photographs and little else. A strange book really.

On the other hand, notice that writing—handwriting—covers many pages, even filling several, even spilling onto the pages of advertising at the end of the book, and notice that these handwritten messages reflect many types and kinds. In fact, *Moffett's Universe of Discourse* may be better exemplified here than in any other school publication. True, there are signatures, standing alone as more names without text, but there are also notes—along with warnings, reminders, apologies, protestations of love and friendship, recapitations and recastings, fulsome promises, exaggerated praises, and essays crafted of “insider” codes known only to reader and writer.

Here's one typical message: “Stay as sweet as you are.”

Translation: “I have no idea whether you are sweet or not, but I read this just now in someone else’s yearbook, and, frankly, I can’t think of anything else to say.”

Here’s another: “I know we’ll always remember Mr. Donnelly, the Creamery, our yellow uniforms, chocolate Awful-Awfuls, slumber parities, and Matzoh balls.”

Translation: “Although we both know it was a year of some ease and some terror, of unpredictable manic and depressive switches of mood, we did have
some very good days, so now's the time to put the best face on things. I hope we don't lose each other.

And another: "Harris Sperling."

Translation: "I do not even know you, and I have no earthly idea why you asked me to sign this, but I will."

And finally, this: "To a nice young lady. Sincerely, Miss North."

Translation: "These Navy people... how they come and go. How touching that they think we know who they are and remember them."

A strange book really. A book written after, rather than before its publication. Written by hundreds of people who do not think they are writers at all, by several who would tell you, if you asked, that in truth, they loath writing.

But somehow—mysteriously—on that day if on no other we become, as at no other time, a writing community. Writing in yearbooks we mark the time as our own, the era, the age as ours, saying, "We have our own story. We exist. Even if we don't know one another the way we wanted to, thought we would, needed to, still, we exist." In yearbooks, we create and define ourselves not "the way we were," but "the way we wish we had been." And like many other transparent hopes put into bold words, we see through ourselves and our words easily even as we write them. We know in the midst of writing ourselves into a group of people connected as we wanted to be—that it won't work. For who has ever glimpsed the pages of such a book, full of its reassuring promises of undying friendship, without knowing she lives alone, and, for the most part, among strangers.

Still, this day of the yearbook was one of the rare times in school when I did indeed feel like a writer, did behave as a writer.

So, after the long days of school have come to a close next year, on some rare day in early June I wish for the seniors that they may sit out on the lawn or linger in the auditorium after receiving their yearbooks, writing furiously, writing intently.

Let the shy ones ask tentatively of people they've admired, but never spoken to, "Will you sign my book?" Let the popular ones laugh easily in a circle of classmates—and behave like writers at best-seller book signings—sending and savoring words. Let those who like to write craft long messages so tender and private that a page must be turned down and stapled. Let them write on and on and on until they must say "continued on page 95."

Let it be a day when the whole school—now become a departure point—gives itself over to opening boxes in which can be found something of the story of the time. Let the bells not call them to class too soon—but allow them to spend all the long, soft afternoon crafting to one another messages of love and recognition.