

“Before” is among my favorites of the short stories I’ve written. Maybe because it took so long to finally place the story (decades, in fact.) But I think—as with most matters artistic—that this fermenting time, if you will, ending up being beneficial to the composition. I almost gave up on the story many times, but something in it always called me back, urged me to edit it another time, send it out to yet another journal. I think I just liked it that much. And it was that real to me.

The origin of the story is a simple one. I once worked a job precisely like the one the narrator does in the story. My first real job out of college. (For context, this was the mid-80s.) Looking back, I didn’t work the job that long, but it was certainly long enough. All that the narrator describes was my daily, eight-hour-a-day reality: dictating letters, relying extensively on prefabricated “pattern paragraphs,” editing drafts sent back to me by the keyboardists, placing the final drafts in outgoing mail, etc. And as the story suggests, some of the issues raised by customers were indeed heartbreaking. It was never any fun telling people that they owed money. It was especially not fun to have to tell them that a procedure which a medical professional had ordered was not considered by us to be medically justified. Those letters got many customers, and their doctors, rather irate. But worst of all were the letters I had to write asking for money back from customers because we had previously overpaid a claim. My God, what hubris on our part. Those letters were so delicate, so likely to result in customer outrage, that we were instructed to use a specific alias whenever we wrote them. When I asked a supervisor about the alias, I was told that supposedly someone who had received one of those letters had once brought a gun to the lobby of our building and insisted that they be allowed to speak to the letter writer. I don’t know if the story was true or not, but it was the kernel that, after sitting in my head for about fifteen years, led me to imagining “Before.”

The toughest and longest aspect of the story for me to get right was the voice of Angeles Gonzalez. From the very first draft, the story mocked the narrator’s stereotyped and condescending mental picture of Angeles. Yes, he feels guilty at having to write the letter, but his guilt only takes him so far. And it doesn’t help Angeles. Worst of all, it is tied up with an apparent, if unconscious, paternalism on his part. But getting the voice of Angeles right was a challenge. I wanted to make clear that she was an ESOL speaker, but I did not want her voice to

be so simple that it misrepresented her or, in fact, condescended to her. My early attempts at capturing her voice were atrocious. The story needed those years to get better.