With the Faculty Development Grant I was awarded in Fall 2012, I was able to purchase a new 13” MacBook Pro, replacing the ailing seven-year-old computer I had been using. I was able to use the laptop extensively for writing and research (and while traveling), during my Spring 2013 sabbatical. Here is the text copied from my Sabbatical Report, describing what I accomplished during my time away from Otis:

I am very grateful to Otis College, and in particular the Faculty Development Committee and the Office of the Provost, for granting me a sabbatical leave during the Spring 2013 semester at what proved a critical time in my writing life. I not only achieved my goals during this time away from school, but also was able to conceive of a range of new projects which hopefully will provide the basis for work for years to come.

During my sabbatical, I was able to secure a new literary agent (a process I’d begun the previous Fall), and with her guidance revise an epic novel about design which I had been working on for over a decade. I completed the manuscript during an intense month-long stay at the Djerassi Resident Artists Program in Northern California. Time at an artists’ colony is always such a rich experience; I was able to do my own work and also enter lively conversation with other writers and artists (and I should be able to draw on these contacts down the road to bring great guests to Otis). Shortly after my Djerassi residency, I was post-facto named the recipient of their Erik A. Takulan Memorial Endowed Fellowship. Now my new literary agent is taking the novel to the market, and during these complex and not altogether pretty publishing times, we’ll see where the book ends up (this could in and of itself be an epic process); but I’m very happy with the manuscript in its final form.

My chief goal during my sabbatical was to investigate forms of writing I’d not explored with any depth in the past (specifically the short story and the novella); my hope was to have most of a collection complete before the start of the Fall semester. Partly this interest in shorter forms grew out of laboring on one very long project over so many years, and I’d only previously published two short stories, which I revisited and revised in January. Also, in the last eight months, I’ve written three entirely new stories, and I removed from the figurative drawer a two-hundred fifty-page abandoned novel and turned it into a seventy-page novella (which I’m still refining). The title of this novella will also be the title of the collection, The Lookout. I now have one or two stories to write to complete the book (I am hoping to do this by the end of the calendar year).

I’ve also been interested in putting together an essay collection about narrative and architecture, and one of the great unexpected benefits of the sabbatical was, simply put, time to think. During the push of the academic year, I use what time I have at my desk to turn around sentences (paraphrasing Philip Roth), and I rarely get the opportunity simply to meditate on subjects and journal about them. Being able to return to a topic every morning, I was able to pull apart different essay ideas and develop one in great detail, an essay about what it has meant to be an atheist who finds himself frequently in sacred spaces.
For very personal reasons, I had been hoping to travel abroad during my sabbatical, and given the aforementioned interest, I decided rather last minute to pursue some connections and go to Istanbul (I left Turkey right before the rioting began last Spring). I was able to visit a dozen mosques and churches (at least) and conduct some research. And then, again most unexpected, because I ended up spending evenings with a pack of international archaeologists connected to the Research Center for Anatolian Cultures (affiliated with Koç University), I came up with a new idea for a novel set amid, well, a pack of international archaeologists.

Travel of any kind has always been a great time for me to generate new ideas, and I also came up with another novel which has a formal conceit, an algorithmic constraint. I’ve been journaling about a novel set in the world of professional tennis, and I was also able to continue working out a plot while conducting research (over the course of my sabbatical, I read a half-dozen memoirs by tennis players).

All to say: I had hoped to finish revising the epic novel and complete most of a short fiction collection, which I did; I hadn’t anticipated that I would emerge from this time with sketches for three new novels plus an essay collection; but that happened, as well.

I hope to bring back to the Otis classroom my sabbatical experience in two ways: First, I think I will become a better mentor to my students writing short stories with a now keener sensitivity to the economy of the form. And second, I’ve been reminded in such lovely ways how important caprice is to the creative process, and that creativity generates creativity.

I look forward to sharing work completed during my sabbatical at a reading I will give on Wednesday October 30th at 7:30 pm in the Ahamanson Hall Forum as part of the Graduate Writing Visiting Writers Series.