



Out of the Bucket

Personal Reflections, Professional Insights, and Marathon
Musings by the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project
2003 Summer Institute

Out of the Bucket

SLWP
2003 Summer Institute

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Thank you, Bucket Man:

What do you think?
What have you learned?
Have you put yourself in danger?

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Prologue

For my sabbatical in Fall 2002, I moved to the French Quarter with the sole purpose of writing every day. Each day I wandered, filling five journals with my writing at coffeehouses, bars, parks, benches, the river. During that journey, I met many people who influenced my thinking and writing, one of whom was “Bucket Man.” I met Bucket Man one midnight on a dark French Quarter street. He was swinging an industrial-sized plastic bucket by his side, and when he saw me, he pulled the bucket over his head and began singing. Sound poured out of the bucket like a symphony. When he removed the bucket, he looked me in the eye and asked me who I was and what I was doing there. Imagine being asked that question on a dark city street by a man who sings in a bucket and wears a chain of keys around his neck.

I told him I was a writer and a teacher. He looked me up and down, then asked me three questions: “What do you think?” “What have you learned?” “Have you put yourself in danger?”

I have come to believe that these are the essential questions for a teacher and writer to ponder, and I have passed them on to teachers in our Summer Institute. These questions have led us to talk about how we may be called to account for our thinking when we least expect it; about how we need to talk to students about what and how we have learned; and about how we need to take risks and seek dangers that are intellectual, emotional, existential, and sometimes even physical in our jobs. Otherwise, what do teachers really have to say to a world that has enough on its mind already?

As one Summer Fellow in our writing project said today, “Teachers are heroes.” I agree. Like Odysseus, the job of each teacher is to plunge to the depths and to bring experience and learning back to the world. Nothing less will do. Teachers in the Writing Project are a special type of hero. Like Odysseus, whose name translates as “Trouble,” they know that they are putting themselves in trouble every day. Daily they must take risks in the Summer Institute and in their classes. Daily they are called on to account for their thinking and learning. The challenges that defined Odysseus’ troubled existence included a Cyclops, Sirens, gods, and goddesses. Instead of mythical monsters, our teachers encounter other challenges: parents, administrators, colleagues, students, standardized tests, writer’s block, the five-paragraph theme, English grammar, and 100 other perils. Still, like Odysseus, our writing teachers persist. Like Odysseus, they survive through a combination of intelligence, experience, values, and vision. They grow, they change, they adapt, they learn, and they seek knowledge and danger. They do it because that is their calling.

It has been glorious working with the teachers whose writing fills this anthology. Heroes infused with the spirit of Bucket Man, their mission is to think “out of the bucket.” Because they can, because they do, their students will be forever changed.

—Richard Louth, Director, Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

My Wings

Brandy Autrey

The word “flight” can be defined in many ways: “the act, manner, or power of flying; soaring above the ordinary; or when referring to a set of stairs.” Its meaning to me will always involve a memory. “Flight” will always involve my brother’s smile.

My fellow flying companions included my younger brother, Cory, and even younger cousin, Mallory. Our runway was the hallway of the house I grew up in. We would position ourselves at the edge of the living room, toes still on the blue carpet but as close to the linoleum as possible. One at a time we would run as fast as we could down the hall: the wind in our hair, hearts beating wildly against our chests, fingernails digging into our tightly clenched fists, arms close to the body, our bare feet stinging as they struck the flower print linoleum. Our only thought was of the destination awaiting our arrival. We knew, as soon as our feet found the brown carpet to my parents’ room, it was time to soar. We used the majority of our power on the last steps, which would send our bodies floating into the air. Our legs were our wings. Once airborne, we would stretch out our arms and glide onto the bed which seemed to swallow us for a few seconds. Once the sound of pounding footsteps was heard, we knew to struggle quickly out of the endless covers and roll off the bed; the next flight was about to land.

After all three of us had landed safely, we’d reposition ourselves and prepare for our next takeoff. Our flights were further developed as we grew in our experiences. We used fewer steps, which meant longer leaps covering more distance. The fewer steps we took, the more skills we demonstrated.

Our quest for flight didn’t end because my parents purchased a new home nor because we grew out of the hovering feeling. No, we stopped because of a tragic crash landing. I’ll never forget running down the hall not to ascend into the sky, but to hear the screams and see blood erupting from little Cory’s lips. After Cory’s collision with the bed railings, we never flew in the house anymore. Our gliding feeling has not been replaced, nor our memories forgotten. Cory still has his scar, though. It’s our reminder of the years we owned the skies.

Wreckage

Brandy Autrey

Today's journal writing word is *wreckage*—I would define this as the interior state of my husband Chuck's car. It's funny how he'll let his car get in such a mess-age, but feel so strong-age about the house's clean-age condition. He won't let the grass have much grow-age, cutting it almost every other day. You can imagine his pain-age when we were having all of that rain-age. Anyway-age, he'll let the bedroom stay a little messy, but not the bathroom-age. No, when the hairspray build-up-age is getting too detectable he'll start pointing it out. It's not that I would want to live in slop-age, either. However, I'm too busy giving the kitchen some clean-age to give anything else attention. I swear, on a good day you have to clean that darn kitchen a minimum of five hundred times-age. What is the deal-age? It's like every time you turn around-age the kitchen needs some clean-age. Anywho-age, since Chuck is deep into his mow-age, should I be equally into my kitchen clean-age? I'll have to give that area of my life-age further thought-age, maybe apply some work-age. I wonder what this says about our marriage?

Bayou Sec

Karen Elkins

Memere and Papere's house is gone now. After they died my dad, aunts, and uncles decided to take it down. First, however, they divided up everything that was of any value in the house. Dad didn't really want anything, except the cypress porch floors. The swamp lumber had been felled and planed by his grandfather and originally served as his kitchen floor. Somehow, in the course of renovations and additions, my grandparents took the lumber to make their porch. So, when the house came down, Dad carefully salvaged the lumber; I asked for the old shaving dresser, which now sits in my dining room.

My paternal grandparents' home, buried deep in the sugar cane fields of south Louisiana, was in a small community named Bayou Sec. That means dry bayou. It was dry back there—hot and dry. Their house sat in the middle of their seven acres that were carved out of the cane fields into a neat green rectangle. Every weekend Dad would pile the four kids into the Ford, and we would make the trek from Metairie to Bayou Sec to visit Memere and Papere. We left behind our air-conditioned house in the city to travel to a place that, to me, seemed lost in time. To pass the boredom of the long trip, I sat in the back seat, my nose buried in a book, with my three brothers. Every now and then I would have to fend off their fists as they broke into brotherly fighting. Distracted from my reading, my eyes would drift out the window to see the endless line of evergreens that bordered the blacktop highway.

To reach Bayou Sec, Dad eventually turned off the blacktop highway and headed down a narrow, dusty gravel road. The large gravel crunched under the car's tires, and we bumped and shook the entire three miles, breathing in the dust that flooded the car's interior. If we met another car coming from the opposite direction, both vehicles had to put one set of tires in the edge of the cane field in order to squeeze along the narrow space. However, that was better than following a car. When that happened, we ate dust the entire way. It was either that, Dad said, or wait in the hot car and suffocate while the dust settled. Whatever happened, the car was always dusty at the end and so were we.

When we finally arrived, Memere would be sitting in her rocker fanning herself with one of those hand fans that had a picture of Jesus on one side and a Landry's Funeral Home advertisement on the other. Assorted aunts and uncles were usually there, too. They all sat lined up in rocking chairs facing each other, speaking Cajun French as fast as their tongues could rattle off the words. Papere and the uncles smoked cigarettes. Papere rolled his own. His thick fingers, nails yellowed from years of smoking, would carefully place dark, fragrant tobacco leaves on thin paper; he rolled the cylinder, licked the end to seal the cigarette then nimbly flicked open his lighter. As he lit the tobacco, smoke curled in front of his playful eyes, but he never missed a beat in the conversation.

I'd lie on the maroon naugahide couch, listening to the lilt and cackle of the language. Every now and then an English word would slip out. Then, I would get the drift of the conversation. When I tired of trying to follow the latest bayou gossip, I'd slip past Memere's rocker and look at all the pictures she had on the old dresser in the corner of the room. The dresser was long with a marble slab right in the middle of the top piece of wood. Mama said that's because there was once a wash basin kept on the top. Instead of a wash basin, Memere now kept scores of family pictures. She had run out of space to put all the faces of her children and grandchildren, so pictures were stuck here and there in the corners of the frames. One picture showed my Aunt Irene's family on her oldest daughter's wedding day. Aunt Irene had seventeen children. I couldn't name everyone in that picture, even though they were all cousins.

I did have two cousins my age, Debra and Judy, who would often arrive just in time to save me from having to play with my brothers, who were usually running around outside chasing chickens or having target practice with a BB gun. While the old folks rocked and talked, we girls escaped to the side porch and played jacks on the uneven cypress floor or explored Papere's damp, musty tool shed that was full of animal traps and wood scraps. When we were thirsty, we'd draw cool drinks of water out of the cistern, the little tin cup always carefully placed upside down on the faucet handle.

It's all gone now—the house, the porch, the tool shed, the cistern. Many of the aunts and uncles and even some of the cousins have passed, too. I haven't made the trek since the house came down. Dad says it's all a cane field now. But I have the old shaving dresser. Pictures of my own family grace the top. Sometimes my memories come flooding back if I dwell too long when dusting it. Dust—perhaps the dust has finally settled in Bayou Sec, but the vivid scene of a world lost in time still floods the interior of my mind and brings back the days of my childhood.



A Picture Worth a Thousand Words

George Dorrill

In *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg stresses the value of the individual life: “It is important to say the names of who we are, the names of the places we have lived, and to write the details of our lives.” An old photograph has helped me to remember some of the details of some of the lives of some of the people who have lived on this earth, precious details of precious lives. Why write about this old photograph of a white house sitting in the middle of a large field? Because that house no longer exists, having been torn down to erect a Seventh-Day Adventist church, and, of the five people who lived in that house from 1947 to 1959, I am the only one left alive. If I don’t write these details of our lives, who will?

The photograph is an 8 x 10 glossy black and white with the bottom margin trimmed off, taken by Air-Photo-Service of Lakeland, Florida, some time in the late fifties. Behind the white house, there is a strip of outbuildings and a number of cars and trucks—a 1956 black and white

Chevrolet Bel Air four-door hardtop with the trunk and the front right-side door open, an earlier model Chevrolet and three trucks, including a 1954 Chevrolet and two other trucks built in the late forties or early fifties. In front of the house, a mule is pulling a wagon with a solitary driver down the white concrete two-lane road that traverses the bottom of the photograph. On either side of the house are plowed fields separated from a larger field of broomstraw by a plowed firebreak. At the extreme top-right and bottom-right corners are patches of woods, and at the bottom left corner of the picture is what looks like a newly graded dirt road running perpendicular to the concrete road.

All of the above details could be discerned by anyone examining the photograph, but what additional details could come from someone who lived in that house from 1947 to 1959? There are many. When I showed this photograph to some colleagues, one thought it might have been taken in Texas, because of the large treeless field; another thought it might have been taken in Amish country in Pennsylvania, because of the wagon. It was taken in neither place; instead, it was taken on the North Road near Orangeburg, South Carolina, the town where I was born in 1942 and lived until the fall of 1960.

The house was originally a four-room frame house that my father bought for \$150 in 1947. The story is that the house was originally a honky-tonk that had to close down because there was a killing. The four rooms were the front room, the back room, the kitchen, and Momma and Daddy's bedroom. There was a hall between the kitchen and Momma and Daddy's bedroom with the bathroom opening off the hall. A peculiarity of the bathroom was that it had no door. Instead, there was a screen that one could unfold if one wanted privacy.

Let me talk about each of the rooms. One of the first memories I have of life in the house was on a Sunday after my first communion. I was five years old, so it must have been shortly after we had moved into the house. I had been given a sterling-silver rosary and was playing with it in Momma and Daddy's bedroom. For some reason, there was a table lamp made out of a beer can with no bulb in the socket. I don't remember whether it was already plugged in or I plugged it in. When I dropped my sterling-silver rosary into the socket, it caused a short circuit and immediately started a fire at the outlet. We hadn't dug our deep well yet, so our source of water was a shallow well that was later covered with a concrete slab, as can be seen in the photograph. My mother and father had to run out to the well to get water to put out the fire. It was a close call.

Momma and Daddy's bedroom was where my father read to my brother Sparky and me from his collection of Classics Comics. His mother, my grandmother Mamie, ran the Orangeburg newsstand, and he had the complete collection. We would climb up on his bed and he would read to us. Their bedroom was also the site of the *sanctum sanctorum* of the house, the locked closet. The locked closet held our most valuable possessions. It was where my father kept his coin collection. He was a jukebox operator and ran through a lot of coins every week, so it was natural for him to be a coin collector. It was also the place where he kept gallon jars of corn liquor being "aged" with caramelized dried apples. My father very rarely drank at home, but when he took his frequent motorcycle trips, he would often take his corn liquor with him. Finally, the locked closet kept a loaded .38, a story about which will take us from my parents' bedroom to the front porch.

My father, being a jukebox operator, would frequently be away from the house evenings on service calls. One evening while he was away on a service call—I was still quite young—we had a visit from the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan is well known for being anti-African American, but it is anti-Catholic as well. We were one of the few Catholic families in Orangeburg, and this may have been the reason for their visit. At any rate, a large caravan of cars with their interior lights on parked in front of house. A group of hooded figures came into the front yard with the

intention of burning a cross there. My mother was home alone with her three boys. She went to the locked closet, got the .38, and went out on the front porch. This is what she said: "The first son of a bitch who takes another step, I'll blow his head off." The men stopped, turned around, and drove off. My mother was a brave woman. When she was in high school, she foiled a jailbreak by firing the pistol her father, the jailer, had dropped when he tripped while pursuing the escapees. They stopped in their tracks, and her brothers caught up with them and recaptured them.

The front room was used less than other rooms, but it had bookcases with wonderful books in them: *Compton's Encyclopedia* and *Our Wonder World*, a twenties-era encyclopedia with illustrations of tabooed men being fed with extremely long forks. Later, when I was in the eighth grade, we got our first TV, and we tended to use the room more after that, but the nearest TV station was in Columbia, forty miles away, and we had to erect a telephone pole with a large antenna on top to receive any signal at all. I do remember watching the Jack Paar show the night the aspirin bottle exploded.

My younger brother Sparky and I slept in the back room, which also served as an office and occasionally as the dining room. My youngest brother, James, who was born in 1948, joined us in the back room when he left my parents' bedroom. Later, my father built a concrete-block addition to the back of the house for us boys, which became the new back room. The addition can be seen in the photograph by the slightly different shade of the asphalt-shingle roof and the different treatment of the windows and bottom. The old back room became the air-conditioned room. A small extension to the roof sheltering the air-conditioner can also be seen in the photograph. It was the only air-conditioned room in the house, and it was very important to keep the doors closed. In fact, my father eventually put springs on the doors, like the springs on screen doors, so people wouldn't have to be constantly reminded to close the doors.

The kitchen, though small, was probably the most used room of the house. We ate our meals there, and were often joined for dinner by people who were working for or with my father. Dinner for us was the noonday meal, and I think the photograph was taken at dinnertime. The large number of trucks in the yard and the length of the shadows indicate that. One of the trucks was probably owned by Ralph Goolsby, my father's friend and an electrician, who worked with my father frequently. Another may have been the truck of Jimmy Union, who told the first shaggy-dog story I remember hearing. The punchline was "Yes. May I have a cookie?"

Behind the house was a strip of outbuildings. My father bought three war-surplus plywood cabins from a navy base in Charleston and had them hauled to Orangeburg, where he set them up behind the house, with a one-car closed garage and a two-car open garage between them. Later he added another two-car garage to the northernmost cabin. As far as I know, cars were never kept in the garages. My father kept his 1951 Harley-Davidson in the middle garage, where I kept my Hopper four-speed English bike. Instead, the garages were the repositories of jukeboxes (or piccolos, as we called them), pool tables, pinball machines, and other paraphernalia. My father worked out of our home. The three cabins each served different purposes. The southernmost cabin was the workshop, where repairs were made on the different pieces of equipment. The middle cabin was the locked cabin, which had slot machines, a safe, punchboards, and expensive merchandise. The one-car garage was also locked. One of the high points of my youth was when I discovered a notebook an aunt had kept when she was in high school. It was full of pornographic stories and verse. The only thing I remember from the notebook is a single couplet:

I cried, "Ted, drive it home!"

He didn't stop until it hit my backbone.

The northernmost cabin was where my uncle Houston stayed for a time; it later became a kind of magazine storehouse. I spent a lot of time in that cabin. It had a bed with a chenille bedspread

and had thousands of magazines: *True*, *Collier's*, *Rosicrucian*, *American Rifleman*, *Popular Science*, *Popular Mechanics*, and many others. I loved reading magazines. I still love reading magazines. My favorite magazine was *True*. I still prefer reading nonfiction to fiction. My favorite part of *True* was the cartoons by Virgil Partch, ViP. He specialized in the-man-crawling-across-the-desert genre, and his depictions of people were unmistakable: the nose was a straight continuation of the forehead, with the eye protruding from where they met. I wish I could see a ViP cartoon now.

There is obviously more that I could say about the house, its environs, and its inhabitants, but I've already written over a thousand words, and I won't impose on your patience any longer. As Natalie Goldberg says, "We are important and our lives are important, magnificent really, and their details are worthy to be recorded." A picture *is* worth a thousand words.

Faith
Steve Grigas

Faith
Faith, we all have it.

We know the sun will rise tomorrow,
Hope you are there to see it.

We know there will be hunger,
Hope you receive your daily bread.

We know there will be new leaders,
Hope they are inspired by agape.

We know there will be another war,
Hope you avoid the shrapnel.

But this is not true faith.
Faith is the belief in things not yet seen.

What things?

Dream.

Rain

Laurie B. Heck

Rain
Rain, Rain, Rain
All I can think about is
Rain

Emm, Emm, Emm
Smell it coming soon
Splat, Splat, Splat
On a tin roof
Shoo, shoo, shoo
Blowing through the trees
These
Pleasant thoughts of rain

Rain, Rain, Rain
All I can think about is
Rain

Too much rain
Way too much rain
Beep, beep, beep
Sounds of warnings
The water is rising
The winds are blowing

Sandbags, sandbags, sandbags
Where are the sandbags?
Bam, Bam, Bam
Branches, pine cones hitting the roof

Beep, beep, beep
More warnings
The eye is coming
Hurry, take cover
Lights go out
These
Unpleasant thoughts of rain

Rain, Rain, Rain
All I can think about is
Rain

Roads

Rebekah Allen Hoffpauir

I have traveled roads...

Route 29 south to Charlottesville rocks me gently, lulling me with a voice familiar. From the din of the city, it carries me, past shadowy hay bales, past white-framed farmhouses. It carries me through halls of poplar and pine pressing in to offer shade to the traveler. It carries me into the heart of my motherland.

The rolling, black-paved road through Virginia, sustains me. I follow its bright yellow centerline and white-edged peripheries, tracing my way to the University like my father before me. Like me at age eighteen, he traveled this road, in search of knowledge. Here in this same space, separated only by time, we listened and learned, thought and read, debated and discovered. We sought our futures guided by the wisdom of the past. This road, running further south to Lynchburg, led my father to my mother when they were nineteen. Mom and Dad traveled this road, a conduit of their love. Route 29 connects my family and my past to my education and my future. It permits me to grow up in quiet interludes, allowing me to remember where I came from, while pushing me forward to whom I want to become.

On this road, sustained and comforted, I dream. I move confidently from the present to the future. I am a teacher who wins national recognition and starts a school for inner-city youth. I am the wife of a diplomat, fluent in Spanish, living in Latin America. I *am* the diplomat. On this road I worry. Am I smart enough? Can I meet the expectations of others? Will I ever fall in love, marry and have a family? Who am I? Where am I going? Do I dare?

I have traveled roads....

The road to Chimaltenango winds unmercifully. It tosses and bumps its travelers through the volcanic mountains of Guatemala. The ride, best endured when the stomach is ignored, causes me to focus my attention on the land, colored a rich green during this, the rainy season. Fields of life-sustaining corn stretch neatly and steeply up this ancient volcano's side. A young boy drives the family's cow precipitously along the edge of the road in search of a verdant place to graze. Women walk in twos or threes—one carries a baby on her back; another, a basket balanced on her head. Their burdens bend them until they appear older than their years, their weariness wrapped in the bright-colored *fapas* of their ancestry. They were up before dawn pat, pat, patting tortillas. I pass a man clad in a straw hat, brown pants rolled mid-calf, and a loose white shirt. He smiles and waves, showing off his one front tooth.

Into my Mayan reverie careens twentieth century modernity—modernity perhaps several decades old by usual North American standards. A bus, which carried blue-eyed youngsters to school only ten years ago in the south of Texas, struggles against centripetal forces to hold to the road. Once a mustard color, so familiar to any American, the bus, which now boasts shades of yellow, blue and pink, has become a vibrant expression of its new owner. A sticker plastered across the window advises *Vaya con Dios*. The sticker is not the only thing stuck tightly and holding on for dear life. Inside people cling to their baskets, chickens, and bundles as they are pushed and pulled by the mysterious and mighty forces of physics. The bus leaves me behind, covered and choked by a dense cloud of exhaust, as it speeds its passengers away from Mayan tradition toward the City.

And so, after observing old men walk toward their fields and young men drive toward the City, I arrive in Chimaltenango, my stomach and its contents still, miraculously, intact; my perceptions forever altered. The road, full of paradox, changes me. A child of privilege, what is my connection to the people of this country? What can I offer, spiritually or materially, to the

people of Guatemala? I struggle to understand the politics of mission work and the role that I might fill. I dream of making this road my life's work, but there are other roads I must follow.

I have traveled roads....

For the first time, I travel a road that runs east and west. This road is different from the others for it has no physical twists, no turns, no hills gently rocking, no breath-taking mountains. Louisiana's I-10, straight and flat, runs through some of the most unbearably mind-numbing terrain I have encountered as a traveler of roads. I love and hate the life that this road has brought me. This is the first road of my adulthood.

I am utterly alone, a chaser of dreams that elude me. I follow this road hoping to find love. Just west of Baton Rouge I leave I-10 on a short diversion northward to New Roads, Louisiana. The name of this place is all wrong, for the road is rough, old, riddled with potholes and lined with thistle. The history of this place is all right for here the mighty Mississippi changed course, leaving behind a false river. Here, like the river, I push and shove, trying to make love fit a space carved out in my heart. Desperate, angry, defeated, I leave a piece of myself behind. This love, perhaps that is what it is, cannot travel with me. This love takes another road, but leaves me desolate, weeping, on I-10.

I move back east across the Mississippi, alone. Deep in my being I understand this road I travel suspends me in a void far from any other road I have ever known. On this flat road I think I can see forever. Hating what I see, I throw myself into my work. I follow I-10 to the heart of Baton Rouge where I encounter the ghetto.

A grin, a flash of gold, suspends itself in time, daring me to understand. I am one white face amid a sea of brown. I battle that old, primeval fear of the other, the misunderstood, the constant watching of my own back. I need to understand; I fear I will not, amidst the jive, the hustle. I pour myself into them, and, the gap between us begins to close. Then come moments beyond class, beyond race, the moments of human connection, of shared emotion, of enlightenment, when history is forgotten and only what is now matters—laughter, learning, hope. I laugh with these children, I learn with them and I hope for them. I am spent, for the work is exhausting, a thirteen-month tour of duty. I leave them behind, understanding more than ever that I cannot change the world but I can change a life.

I now realize that this road has more to teach me, more hidden dangers and pleasant surprises, than I had first surmised. Seeing ahead, I discover, isn't everything. I-10 brings me my love. He carries me West, into the promising sunset of adventure. My love carries me across the Atchafalaya, showing me beauty I had yet to discover. I wonder at graceful egrets and cypress growing strong from their watery footholds. As the sun's glow falls orange and soft around us, I dance and shimmer like the beams reflected from this bluish basin. I wonder at the love this road has granted me. Content, I savor the evening of our journey on this particular road, for when the sun rises there will be more roads to travel, more lands to discover together.

Tuesday Morning

Mary Koepf

Standing in the living room
early on a Tuesday
the rest of the world still,
asleep,
a soft hum from the morning news
I held you close,
your head on my shoulder
I could feel your heartbeat
slowly,
peacefully,
keeping time

and we danced
in our own world
at that moment

No talk of war,
no terrorist threats,
no political platforms,
no suspects' faces,
no hunger,
no pain,
no disease,
no tears,
no neglect
no body discovered in Whiskey Bay

Just you and me
in the safety of our love
in the moment
and we danced,
and I loved you,
on that Tuesday morning,
alone
in the safety of our world,
just you and me

The Magic Fishbowl

Richard Louth

The following piece is based on a journal entry written during my sabbatical in New Orleans as I sat by the Mississippi River on November 2, 2002.

You have to get over the feeling that you're always missing something, or somebody. When you do, I believe, life opens up to you.

I spoke to two strangers today who ignored me. When I emerged from my apartment, a group passed my door, and one of them wondered what street they were on, and I said "Royal," but they passed me by without noticing. Then by the river, a girl was trying to take a photo of her companion, a macho Spanish guy, and she had him kneel on the grass and wait for a riverboat to come into the picture, so he looked away from her at the river and away from the boat too. A group of people waited to walk by—a couple of girls who walked behind my bench then a big, dirty bum carrying a drooping plastic bag who stood by and waited for the shot. It was like a scene from a play—the boyfriend, annoyed to wait; the girl who had to have the perfect picture; the homeless man who once had a life. All pausing politely for the click of the camera, for the perfect picture. And I, sitting, watching, waiting, wondering. The girl took the photo, the boat continued upstream under the bridge, the bum passed by, and the couple came together, talking Spanish and fiddling with the camera. I said, "Would you like me to take a picture of both of you?" and the girl quickly replied, "No thank you," and they moved on. Perhaps this is a sign that today I should remain silent and simply (if anything is simple) watch.

"I want to go on the boat and see if it is haunted or not," the little girl says to her parents, looking at the Natchez.

"And if it is, what will you do then? Jump off?" they say. Then they pass. Another group passes—young people, and a scream comes up from Jackson Square behind me where the unicyclist must be at the end of his act, and one guy fiddles with his camera and says, "Hey, let's go over there and see what's going on," and another replies, "Don't listen to him."

So, two themes are emerging today. Beware of other people's business, and beware of thinking that what is happening is happening somewhere else. Face the fact that somewhere else, at this very moment in time, maybe even close by, something magnificent is happening. One must by nature miss these things, miss IT, whatever IT is. We know we must miss IT, but we still continue to look, continue to think IT is elsewhere.

Today on the edge of Jackson Square is a car show. About a dozen red Ferraris line the street diagonally across from Muriel's restaurant, which used to be the Chart House. A "Pirelli" banner flutters in the air. There are more cars on Chartres as I round the corner. Ferraris, racing cars, luxury cars. A blonde in square glasses and a weird plaid dress with a slit up the side that only the rich could wear is walking a dog and talking to a gent who bends to pet it.

"Have you seen my husband?" she says.

It is hard not to look at her. What is the story here? Why is her husband not looking at her as I am? Is he looking at the cars? Or does he own one? What is the story here? The rich? Adults and their playthings? Or the fact that everyone is looking for something. A theme I cannot get rid of.

Across Jackson Square, a street performer riding a unicycle high as a street lamp juggles Saracen swords. Before me is the river. Pigeons walk, fluorescent green on the back of one's neck, pink lavender on another, over the bricks between the river and me. Where is IT at? Down the walk where the calliope plays? Or closer, where the trumpeter practices an easy tune? Or with the couple sitting beside me on the bench, one empty space between us?

I think IT may be with this shadow of my hand on the page, the wind curling the next page toward me, flirting with me like a lover, and the morning sun on my face, so warm.

“All the speakers this morning were poor. . . did you notice?” The woman says to her husband sitting beside me. He mumbles in return. My theme again. Where is IT at? Guess it wasn’t with the speakers this morning.

I have been blessed in the past with my ability to find these perfect moments, though cursed with an inability to capture them in writing. How do you capture the man in the group passing me, turning his neck to look at me writing, as the rest of his body and his group goes forward? All while the trumpet plays that song we hear at the beginning of a baseball game. I am so lost in my search for IT and the desire to capture this moment that I cannot even remember the song's name.

It is the perfect temperature—cool and windy, yet not cold. And when the sun hits my face and writing arm, it feels glorious, like I felt as a little kid. There was this day I remember so well—one that won’t go away, perhaps one of a dozen that form the basic fiber of my life. I was lying on the grass at Bruce Buckler’s house on another Saturday morning like this after we’d just delivered newspapers, a job that ended with us lugging a huge canvas bag of papers up over a tall stone wall to the last customers’ houses. And it was cool and breezy and sunny this day and everything seemed new and clean. Behind us was the giant wagon we used to haul the papers. To my right stood his clean, white shingled house where we played in the cellar with bowling pins and listened to the Beach Boys over and over again on his portable record player and where in the back we’d go to touch his bald father’s rusting rifle, a relic from his days as a foot soldier in the Philippines. I could never imagine him shooting it.

Up in the attic of that white house one day we found a fishbowl of coins tucked under an eave. It was like a treasure chest—nickels, dimes, and quarters shining up to the top. When we found it, we did what any kid would, and sifted our hands through it, letting the coins fall through our fingers and looking each other in the eye over the treasure. The first day, that is all we did. But soon—it might have been the next day, the next week, I am not sure—we snuck up to the attic again. We looked more closely this time, sifting through, reading the old dates, holding the shiniest ones up to catch the sun coming in the skylight. There were so many coins, there seemed to be no bottom to the fishbowl.

We each took a coin. Maybe two. To save, we told ourselves. But in those days you could buy a soda fountain drink for a dime, a paper bag of penny candy or pack of baseball cards for a nickel. And at the end of the week, our newspaper route barely paid us a dollar. That first time, we each took fifteen cents, two shiny coins. But it had us hooked, and each day we went back we took a bit more, and for a long, long time it did not even look like the supply was diminishing. To our young eyes in the dim light of the attic, it seemed even to grow larger! A magic fishbowl!

The more we took, the more there seemed to be. And at a certain point we realized that we could never, again, consider talking to anyone about this. It was too late. We had crossed some line. More than half the bowl of coins was gone suddenly, and we had fed for weeks on candy and drinks, had bought Magic Markers of all colors and uncapped them and sniffed them till we grew faint, and were profligate in our purchase of playing cards and comic books—Superman and Archie and the Fantastic Four and the Justice League of America. And before long, we argued. Should we stop? Take more? Who would treat the other this day? Whose money was it? Was it Bruce’s money, since it was his house? And was this all a gift or a loan to me? It felt better to think of it as his, and as a loan, for you could always imagine paying back a loan though you could not think of restoring the lost magic to a magic fishbowl. As we dug deeper, we went back and back in time, the coins growing older and older, and before we knew it we’d passed the

point of no return, gone to the time before our parents even were born, and realized we could no longer ask about the bowl, reveal we knew of it. We could never find out whom it came from or why it was there, knowledge that haunted us because it was now more valuable than all the guilty pleasures it could buy.

We were now guilty, and knew. The evidence was clear. Either we had discovered a secret that we had ransacked and could never reveal or understand, or we had stumbled upon someone else's hidden treasure, stolen it, and would someday be caught. We must have talked about replenishing the bowl's coins before we finally stopped, but it was impossible. Even if we had taken and pooled all the money from our newspaper route, we probably would never have enough, and our coins would all be too new, not from before our births or our parents'.

For years after, I felt guilty, as if I were living under a cloud. It got to the point that I was less afraid of being caught than troubled by having done what I'd done. In a way, knowing I'd never be caught made it worse—made it impossible to repay the debt, restore the magic to the bowl and to my youth. I suppose that is why I still remember that day and place. The clear blue sky of that young day, the cleansing breeze and the smell of new cut grass, the warmth of the sun offset against the dark attic, kneeling on hard wood surrounded by cobwebs, transfixed by the coins in the bowl, taking, coin by coin, day by day, my own innocence out of that magic fishbowl, and spending it. That is the story of my growing up.

The Institute Dinner

Shannon Miller

Driving in my car headed for Hammond to attend the Summer Writing Institute dinner, I was thinking how in the world did I get accepted into it. After all, I was held back for a learning disability, and I can't spell to save my life. Then it hit me all at once; I really hate to write! And by God's good grace and my good fortune, I got out of teaching writing for several years despite being an elementary school teacher. Finally after a forty-five minute drive and about eighty reasons why I hate writing, I arrived at my final destination with sweaty palms and butterflies in my stomach.

Before heading in, I took a deep breath and thought, "cocktail." As I walked in I felt relieved to see a lot of smiling faces ready to greet me at the lounge. I mingled a bit and introduced myself before I headed to the bar. At last, a cold-frosty beverage to help calm my nerves. I paid the bartender and suddenly my legs started to feel a cold draft. I looked around to see if I was standing near a fan, and out the corner of my eye I noticed something baby blue blowing behind me. It was my SKIRT! I was standing partially over an A/C vent that was on the floor. In my defense it was kind of dark in there, and the vent did blend in with the dark wood floors. But all I know is when that air kicked on my skirt kicked up. That's up there with walking out of a restroom with toilet paper stuck to your shoe.

Now feeling more stressed out than ever, I went upstairs to eat and to find out more about what I got myself into. At last I began to feel relaxed again because it sounded like some fellow members had similar feelings and ended up enjoying writing. But the worst wasn't behind me yet. I had another unforgettable moment, this time with my dinner salad. The restaurant placed the salad dressing in a container for everyone to use. By the time it was my turn, all of it was gone. One of the fellow members passed me what she said was the house dressing. She told me it was creamy garlic Italian dressing, and she had it last year and it was good. I watched her use her knife to plop some on her salad. Even though I was skeptical since no one else was using this "great dressing," I was hungry. So I grabbed my knife and plopped some on my salad as well. I didn't pay much attention to the fact that it didn't mix up too well with the lettuce and I started to eat. After I was about half way done, I glanced up and noticed that the other lady wasn't eating her salad, and she was looking at me funny. Then I overheard someone ask the waiter for some butter. The man informed her it was already on the table and pointed to the salad dressing I used. Yep, I used butter, and not just any ordinary butter, but strong garlic butter all over my salad. Great, not only have I flashed everyone here but now I just ate butter on my salad. I told the lady that the "house dressing" was actually butter and she said she figured it out. But did she help another sister out? HELL, NO! She just watched me eat rich garlicky butter all over my salad.

Of course, leave it to me to make a schmuck out of myself not once, not twice, but three times in front of my peers. On the way out I was driving and started wondering why everyone was passing in my lane, honking, and flashing their lights at me. Then it dawned on me; I was going the wrong way on a one-way street! Hopefully Hammond will treat me better during the summer than it did that night of the Summer Writing Institute Dinner.

Carpe Diem

Karen Ollendike

I crawled under the fence and raced to the hole in the corner of the pasture. Quickly, I slipped inside and waited for my heart to stop pounding and my eyes to acclimate to the darkness. After a few minutes, I scooted through the dirt tunnel to a larger dug out room where I was meeting my three best friends to plan our next adventure.

Every day until we had to return home at dusk, we led a pack of neighborhood kids of all ages in the adventure games my friends and I invented. We didn't care if we had food, or got dirty and sweaty, or had cuts and bruises on our legs and arms. We loved to create daring and exciting adventures where we often performed heroic feats of bravery. Sometimes we pretended we were wild Indians, or explorers discovering unexplored lands. We hiked and imagined we were pioneers carving our way through the wilderness. When we were hot and tired, we swam in the creek, or climbed up in shady trees to talk and dream some more. The pretty dresses my grandmother sent me hung in the closet until they were too small, and the dolls and toys my parents bought me stayed untouched in my pink bedroom with the white curtains. The TV set was dusty, because it was never turned on. Those things were uninteresting compared to the adventures I could create and the discoveries I could make.

The summer before I entered fifth grade we left our small town in Oklahoma and moved to the suburbs of Dallas where I missed my friends and freedom terribly. Our house was in a new subdivision. Everything seemed flat and hot and boring. The girls I met at school were interested in boys and clothes and shopping, and not at all interested in playing outside and getting dirty and sweaty, so I stayed inside in my room reading about grand adventures in places far away from the suburbs of Dallas. While these adventures were exciting to read about, they were not my own. I was only observing, I wasn't doing, and I missed the thrill of creating and inventing. My father saw how lonely and miserable I was, so one Sunday afternoon he took me for a drive and, to my mother's dismay, bought me a horse.

She was a beautiful little bay quarter horse with three white feet and a white spot on her forehead. I had never even sat on the back of a horse alone, but I was overjoyed and loved her at first sight. I named her Mischief, and she was everything I was not supposed to be, headstrong and feisty. I taught myself to ride her by getting on, falling off, and getting back on again. Soon I was racing her around barrels, and soaring over fences and streams near the stable where I kept her. I was fearless, and I was free. I spent every day riding and exploring the surrounding country roads and pastures. I often rode bareback because I felt more connected when I felt her strong muscles rippling between my legs. We were one powerful animal, and I felt that there was nothing we couldn't do. Once I found a stream that was deep enough for Mischief to swim in, so I took off her bridle, climbed on her back, and holding on to her mane, I let her swim through the cool water with me riding gently on her back. It was exhilarating. It became our favorite spot, and I was once again an adventurer, doing the unexpected.

I am an adult now, but I have never outgrown the love for adventure and challenges. I continuously try to do things that are unusual and difficult. Many people who were quite daring when they were younger stop doing new things when they get older. I think there is something sad about thinking when one reaches a certain age that she should be passive and take the safe and easy path of least resistance.

A few years ago on a vacation with friends to Barcelona, Spain, we sat outside on a cool summer evening at a local restaurant eating savory *paella* and drinking the dark, rich, red house wine while watching a magnificent performance of Flamenco dancing. I was caught up in the beauty and passion of the dancing, but when they asked guests from the audience, and me

specifically, to come and learn to dance with them, I held back. Not because I didn't want to, but because I thought my family and friends would disapprove. After all, I was a middle-aged woman with teenage children, too old and mature to dance the flamenco, so I politely declined and watched longingly as others enjoyed the fun. Later that evening as we walked back to our beach house, I made a decision. If I am not harming anyone, I will not let other people's opinions of me stop me from trying something new, no matter how old I am. I don't think that our adventures should stop when we get older, just because of what others may think of us. The adventures we have when we are older are different from the harmless ones we had as children, and sometimes the risks are higher, but that is no reason to sit back and let life pass us by. I believe in living life to the fullest. No matter if you are young or old or somewhere in between, I challenge you: *Carpe Diem!*

Buckets

Jennie Pearson

I began to think about buckets the day Bucket Man became the mascot and symbol of the 2003 Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project. Although I thought the idea was a little corny, I knew it had a special meaning for Richard, our director, and that it was what the Bucket Man had said that had meaning, not the bucket itself. But, after thinking about it more, I realized buckets do have meaning in my life.

What is special about a bucket? A bucket can be many things: straight-sided, tapered, tall, squat, plastic, metal, full, or empty. It can hold many things: liquids, solids, or just air. A bucket can have a lid on it. If it does, you can keep things in it so they can't get out or things can't get in. A bucket can be like me, free flowing or all canned up, not letting anything out or anyone in. The more I think about the buckets in my life, the deeper they get.

I see my old horse with her gray nose in a bucket of oats and sweet feed. I smell the sweet, syrupy, Crackerjack smell of the feed in the bucket as she munches contentedly, her soft brown eyes just visible over the rim of the bucket.

I remember the sound of milk twanging against the bottom of my empty milk bucket on a cold winter morning. I feel the warmth of the cow as I lean in close to her side. Then the sound changes to a soft swoosh, swoosh as the bucket fills, steady streams of milk become a rising foamy cloud in the bucket. Sometimes I see a bucket flying through the air, milk sloshing all over me from a well-aimed kick, or I feel the weight of a full bucket, heavy and pulling my arm down as I walk listing to one side to the house. I see Mama pouring the long stream of warm milk through the old silver strainer into the big gallon jars where thick cream will rise as it cools. She'll skim it off to make sweet butter or to go with hot biscuits and cane syrup.

Buckets were there as we made the syrup. I see Mama skimming the syrup with the big strainer, dumping the foamy skimmings into a big galvanized bucket, my brother Ike pouring the hot caramel colored liquid from the vat into shiny new syrup buckets, and Daddy's strong hands placing the lids on and sealing them tight.

Then later when the syrup buckets were empty, we took them berry picking. Early in the spring, we filled them with sour, tangy Mayhaws, sometimes laying a sheet under the tree and shaking it so we could scoop up the little miniature apples. I was always disappointed that their looks were deceiving. They definitely didn't taste like apples! Later in the spring, when we picked dewberries, we filled our buckets between Highway 51 and the railroad track on the edge of the Manchac Swamp. Buckets were filled quickly here, not only because the berries were large and juicy, but also because our fear of what might be lurking beneath our feet in the dense briars and swamp grass spurred us on. My favorite time was early summer, when we went after blackberries along Lizard Creek, Hog Branch, or the Blood or Tickfaw Rivers. When our buckets were full, we dove into the cold water and washed away some of the red bugs and the hot sticky sweat, coming out of the water, cool but sandy now, with shirts and jeans plastered to our bodies.

I think buckets have been around for a long time. But I guess they are timeless, because even in this age of technology we still need them. I have started noticing how people use buckets. You can sit on a bucket, like you see some people do. My dad used to say that you knew spring had come when the people fishing along the river stopped sitting on their buckets and started sitting on the bank.

Buckets are especially handy for fishing. I see my red-headed, freckled-faced grandson sporting a big grin as he heads to Great-Grandma Birdie's pond with a bucket of worms in one hand and a fishing pole and an empty five gallon bucket in the other. He'll come back with his

worm bucket empty and the other one full of wiggling sun perch or maybe something bigger, his eyes sparkling as he recounts his adventures.

I see him again with his baseball coaches at the ballpark with their buckets full of wiffle balls and baseballs for practice. Then I see the coaches during the games sitting on their buckets by the dugout, hands and fingers flying as they pantomime signals to the batters or catchers.

Buckets are everywhere. I go to school in August and smell fresh paint and see lidless buckets of color waiting to restore old walls and create new beginnings. I see kids lined up at recess, waiting with their quarters, for Mrs. Doughty to fish a big green pickle out of a five gallon bucket. Like my memories of past buckets, that vinegary dill smell lingers in the empty pickle buckets long after the pickles are gone.

Now I look at the little bucket of pencils on my desk and think about all the words and pictures that bucket holds. I see my first graders, with their grubby little fingers and excited eyes, as they pull out a new pencil with crisp, sharp point, ready now, armed and capable. I think about the words of Bucketman, who asked, "What have you learned? Have you put yourself in danger?" I am realizing the value of reflecting about what I have learned and about being willing to put myself in danger for what I believe or to learn new things. I want my students to learn this also. May I never put a lid on their bucket, but rather give them the courage to think outside the bucket.

The Heavy-Handed Act of Birth

Diana Phillips

Twice they've left me,
A light one and one dark
Pushed out by curse words and the muscle-winded diaphragm.

No one was with me when they came
The room went black as the heavy lid of unconsciousness closed me.

A woggling mound
searing ripping sound
swollen eyes
skin of blood
bloated balls

All wounds can be sown back to right.

Children, I wanted to stop you,
But there was nowhere else for you to go.

Woman in the Cellar

Diana Phillips

She had hair in her eyes and walked the walls with her hands
Someone alone and forgotten
Perhaps she is buried with the WWI weapons under the hedge.

Nightly I traced my way through that coldness,
through the complexity of old houses.
There was no key.

She opens the plyboard pantry door and smells the stale bread,
the dense darkness of it all.
Through the second plyboard door, then down.
She sits in the corner at the end of the corridor and watches.
The wall is sooty black and grimes her touch
as I search for the switch that eludes me.
She sees and laughs,
and waits.

How did she pass the time in this underground lair,
where the air is black syrup, the skin becomes dust,
the coal becomes a soft bed.
Why does she let me through?

If I can just reach those stairs and lock her out.

Every night she took a piece of me and ate it.

How to Get to Death From the Grocery Store
For Carrie Yoder: body found in Whiskey Bay 3/13/03
who haunts me in the bathtub

(Pay attention)

Unpack each bag delicately,
take my shoes off at the door and lock it right.

(Troubles begin unseen)

Death knocks black and I let him in
Blitzkrieg attack
I close my eyes to the hastily planned heaviness upon me
He beat me
He raped me
He strangled me
then dropped me off somewhere deeper than human.

Now I speak the language of the wetlands
Along the riverbed I see
glass bottles, bones
watery in the stillness.
My fingers hang below their joints
reading the language of the river bottom—
a language known only
by the burdened limbs of the dead.
Flying through muddy clouds and glass stars,
I was already here before you noticed I was gone.

A fisherman found me,
pulled me from my watery grave,
a torn mermaid bruised purple and blue
with transparent fish-pecked eyes.

A disturbance in the universe that You allowed—
explain this.

Mona Lisa snapshot...
the water took me
wrapped me
slumbered me well,
combed my hair
licked my tears
snuggled me like a mother
and promised revenge.
Promised to restore order in the universe,
while you shuddered yourselves to sleep.

Diana Philips

Shady Oaks

Melanie Anne Plesh

10 February, 2002

I dreamed I was in a car with three people I didn't know and a dolphin the size of a dog. I knew it was wrong to have a dolphin in our car, out of water where it didn't belong, but I didn't do anything about it. It ran (ran?) around inside the car and then bit me. After that I had a sex dream.

It's a sparkling Easter-like Sunday morning, and today is the day I, in essence, begin the process of making my entire yard into a compost pile. Dig up areas, mix in kitchen garbage and leaves, churn everything together, level it, put leaves on top, water it for the rest of my life. The man next door has raked up a lot of leaves. Maybe I can talk him out of a few bags. He's got to get rid of the leaves to make room for the dirt he's going to have to buy because he doesn't have any leaves. The cycle of stupidity.

I bought a shovel and a pitchfork at Super Wal-Mart and I made my first dig, a triangle about 10 by 10 by 10. I marked it with sticks and am thinking about charting the yard and noting the places and shapes of my digs on it. I love this scientific inquiry, this studying the condition of dirt. But a problem: will I then have to note what garbage I put in each hole? And the state of deterioration of the leaves? It's a cool idea. But forget about it.

The poor ground is like stone. Dense like that. Almost inorganic. My back is sore and so are my hands and the arches of my feet. I found burned wood fragments about 6 or 8 inches deep. What mystery will unfold as I dig up the back yard at number 34 Shady Oaks Drive? Someone is barbecuing. Every so often I get a whiff. I need a barbecue pit just to defend myself against the bastards. It's war in the suburbs. Choose your weapons, gentlemen. Dueling tongs it is.

Three bird things happened today. This morning a crow with a mouthful of nest material alit very deliberately in the cherry tree and looked at me. He was followed by a second crow, also with a mouthful of nesting material, also in the cherry tree, who also looked at me. If I was to say, it seemed they gave me a disgusted glance like I wasn't getting it, then they flew over Brewster Road to St. Anselm's, suggesting they were done with me. They gave me the message that if this is home I should build a nest. Or maybe they were just giving me the bird. The second bird occurrence was at Wal-Mart. It was some kind of exotic raptor with black and orange-banded primary feathers, and dark feathers on his head that made him look hooded. He was flying low and erratic over the parking lot like he was sick or exhausted or confused. He landed in one of those silly little Wal-Mart parking lot "trees," then went to the concrete and didn't move. I got close enough to see his tired eyes, and we stood there for even as long as a whole minute, watching each other, both of us I guess wondering what to do. But he flew up before I had to do anything. As soon as he was aloft, still seeming impossibly tired and confused, two crows (two crows!) came and chased him away. He disappeared into the sky behind garden supplies. It was a sad thing, and did not feel like the proper balance of Nature. Hawks are supposed to win. The third was just a little bluebird who perched in that same cherry tree, looking at me, like he was looking for something. News, bird. So am I.

This nesting that I seem to be experiencing belies the notion that I, like the dolphin and the hawk, am not where I belong, that *I'm* a fish out of water in Shady Oaks Subdivision. This is now my

milieu, my domain; my borders are drawn within an inch of correctness. My garden. Voltaire said tend to your garden. Tend to your garden, know yourself, to thine own self be true. It's all the same thing. I used to feel special. But now I see I'm just another gardener like everybody else.

4 AM (11 AM in Paris) Can't sleep. Such anxiety. I am not a poet. Nothing riles me more than this particular ineptitude. I see like a poet, but I can't make the words work. I feel fruitless, and yet I still take water from the Earth and the shining from the Sun and love from those who labor around me. But I see! I do see! I see the sweat of a horse and the ladybug on my sleeve, the hawk over my house, the dead cedar waxwing which I in fact see so well that I bring it home and bury it in my yard, into the sometimes barren Earth. Still my life feels like a series of despicable moments. My heart is tired and sick. I think I'm mortally wounded. But I keep on breathing. I arise every day just to keep on breathing. It's absurd.

It's storming right now, lightning, thunder, huge ponderous drops coming straight down, perfectly vertical. I have such high hopes for this day.

I dreamed that people were looking for me, and I for them, and they were calling for me on a radio. A man reprimanded me for not understanding him. Dreamed that my car was in the river and its tires came off and I jumped in the river trying to catch the tires and put them back on the car.

I put up a bird feeder but haven't gotten a bird. I did get a squirrel. He's out there right now trying to figure out a way to the food. When a squirrel has a good idea or has made a cool discovery he twitches his tail. Maybe I should notify *National Geographic* about my discovery.

12 February 2002

It has been a perfect day. I awoke at 6, drank some coffee, then went back to bed and dreamed someone was making me pancakes. I woke up from that dream feeling like my body was filled with concrete. I lay for a long time trying to decide whether or not to move. I liked the dilemma. In the end torpor lost, as it always must if life is to proceed.

I bought an Angel Face rose bush like mother loved so much and a blue rose bush for Vince for his birthday, and a Tiger Lily for me. I know it's way too exotic to last, the Tiger Lily (how can something like that even breathe in everyday company?), but I bought it anyway. Also bought eighty pounds of bagged garden soil for three dollars from Albertson's. And after all that composting. Then came home. I was hungry and so felt compelled to look in the Schlimmertopf clay-pot cookbook and happened across a recipe for "Fish Ragout Helgoland," and it reminded me that that's a story I have to write, the story of my trip to tiny Helgoland in the North Sea, and its sixteen sea channels and the Italian fishing boats that brought us from ship to shore and the perfectly handsome Italian sailors who defined swarthy, rough and polite at the same time, taking our hands, helping us embark and then disembark the boats onto little wind-swept Helgoland, into its green stones, its low-lying intense flowering brush, the only thing that can live in its wind, into little Helgoland's history in World War II as an arsenal exchange, the leftover pilasters from destroyed buildings piled along the shore enhancing and protecting Helgoland's edges from the sea. An exotic place out of all perspective. The flowers brilliant beyond the norm. Which I think is a flower's badge of daring, daring to exist in such an unseemly place and blowing loud about it and in such color.

Dream Come True

Amy Savarese

Everything I have done up to now has been in preparation for motherhood. Keeping in mind what will be best for my future children has always been a consideration for me when making a decision, such as choosing a husband who would be a good dad, a career that allows me to spend time with my kids, or a car that is child friendly. In all areas of my life I have factored in the hope of having and caring for my own children, planning carefully so that I can some day be the best mother possible. Finally, after years of patiently waiting, a baby is on the way!

I am so excited and enjoying every moment. Well, almost every moment. Along with the joys of pregnancy come the hardships. Sometimes moodiness lurks in my tongue, waiting to strike at any moment. Irritability hangs on my aching back. Fatigue sits on my awkward belly, always getting in the way. Indecisiveness decides to wrap itself around my brain, refusing to let any one idea stand out from the others. The only thing that keeps me going is that I know it's all going to be worth it in the end.

I love the feeling of the baby moving. It reassures me that he's healthy and strong. As I anticipate his arrival, I imagine all the wonderful moments we will share with him in the future: holidays with our family, vacations in the sun, watching him accomplish each new endeavor. I want him to have a happy childhood, full of great learning experiences, and to grow into a motivated, well-educated, self-sufficient adult. I just pray my dreams for him don't get in the way of his.

Last Supper in Birmingham
(in memoriam: September 15, 1963)
Vicky Tangi

It's all ready now. Chicken fried crisp
and golden, milk gravy with giblets for the rice,
collards seasoned with salt pork and a splash
of vinegar. She's already set the cornbread
on the counter to cool, covered by a cup towel
to keep it moist. Already sweetened the tea
in the gallon jar. Already laid the table for three,
the white cloth starched and ironed late
the night before.

Her mind silences the morning's scream of fire
and crumbling mortar. Families shattered
like glass; church and community bathed
in the blood of little children. Some shouting
vengeance; others wailing lamentations.
She unplugs the radio. *Oh God, why
have you forsaken us?* Yet there but for the grace
of God...

She takes the cobbler from the oven
made with blackberries picked by just the three
in June's heat and mosquitoes, the berries frozen
till now, a moment needing sweetness.
It would be a fine meal to serve her boys,
come from the Sabbath's odd message
of peace and forgiveness, laid against the day's
unspeakable horror. Court orders don't change
hearts in Birmingham. But her boys, her boys are safe
for today.

She looks at the clock over the stove.
Goes to the porch and waits
for the afternoon sound of bicycle wheels churning
from the road. They're due home any minute now.
Everything is ready. A smile softens
her care-worn face. Yes, indeed, it would surely
be a fine meal. She rests a moment
in the wooden swing. Any minute now,
any minute

Sunday Drive *in memoriam* for Virgil Ware, who died in Birmingham, Sept. 15, 1963
(intended for 4 voices)
Vicky Tangi

Riding fast, cold metal in his hand

Pastor's words, "If God had meant

feels so good like hunting deer out of season

On my honor, I will do my best:

"for whites and coloreds to mix..."

faster now, almost to the hill

To do my duty to God and my country,

"And brothers and sisters, if the good Lord
did indeed make us equal,

and to obey the Scout law.

"...he most assuredly meant
to keep us separate."

(Two little blackbirds sittin' on a hill)

To help other people at all times.

"...in the name of Jesus..."

To keep myself physically strong,

(One named Bob and one named Bill)

mentally awake, and morally straight.

"Amen."

(Fly away Bob)

And the shrieking in his ears and the metal
hot in his hand like getting that first buck

(Fly away...)

Morning Coffee

Lisa Watts

A perky little redhead was in Miss Donna's pin oak tree across the street, circling the trunk with purpose, carefully choosing his spot before beginning his work for the day. Susan watched the procedure from the shade of her mother's front porch. She appreciated the breeze that blew across the porch, but felt the weight of it telling her there would probably be rain before the day was out. The humidity was a given, with or without the rain. Susan heard her mother come out onto the porch, and gesturing with her cup in the general direction of the pin oak, said, "I wonder if that's the same woodpecker who's been knocking around in my yard, or if the whole neighborhood's being invaded." She sipped her coffee and continued her study of the industrious little bird.

Darla Matthews sat in an empty chair next to her daughter, took a sip of her coffee, and said, "People used to call that a Lord God." Susan glanced over and raised her eyebrows. She studied her mother much in the same way she had studied the woodpecker that was now pecking out Morse code for the neighborhood. As usual, Susan was filled with a sense of awe and admiration. At sixty-two, Darla Matthews was comfortable with her home, her family, and her life. She was neatly dressed and perfectly groomed right down to her coral lipstick even though it was still shy of seven o'clock in the morning. Susan would gladly bet the fifty-three dollars in her wallet that her mother's bed was made, the furniture polished, and supper already planned. If a friend were to call and ask her to go shopping, Darla would only need to pick up her purse and lock the front door behind her.

"So why did they call it a Lord God?" Susan prompted.

"Well, the Old Folks used to say, 'Lord God! What a bird!'" Darla replied with a straight face.

Susan laughed appreciatively and settled in to watch the rest of the neighborhood wake up through her mother's eyes. She didn't have long to wait before her mother's running commentary updated her on the recent activities and routine operations of the community.

"Well, I see Thomas is back on his feet." Thomas had been in an auto accident and had driven a rental car for two weeks. Seeing him wave from the cab of his truck told its own story of finished repairs.

"There goes Debra off for Round Two." Debra religiously walked two miles every morning, changing shoes after the first mile to accommodate a foot ailment. Her pace was legendary among other walkers in the community.

"I swear, I'm going to put a sign up in That Woman's yard that says, 'Underclothes are required in this neighborhood.'" That Woman was the new neighbor across the street; she had apparently forgotten to pack her bras and bring them to her new home.

Susan waved at Thomas as he passed by on his way in to work, and she chatted with Debra, who zoomed by like a woman on her way to a shoe sale. But her mother's comment about the new neighbor was too good to pass up. "Mama, why don't you buy Miss Donna one of those Eighteen Hour jobs as a housewarming gift? Or you could invite her over for Miss Connie's birthday party and let her win the booby prize. No, wait a minute. I've got the horse right here. Mama, you could tell her you, Miss Connie, Miss Anne, and Miss Arlene have a neighborhood watch and ask her if she would like to join so she can keep abreast of community events."

Darla peered over her coffee cup, trying to maintain a stern expression in the face of her daughter's unrepentant grin and said, "Nobody likes a smartass, Susan." But her coffee cup wasn't quite big enough to hide her smile, and she felt herself being pulled into the spirit of the conversation. "Maybe I'll call over to the cake shop and order Connie one of those boob cakes

for her birthday, only I'll get Velma to put a bra on it." Picturing her closest friends gathered around a cake with such an outlandish decoration, Darla couldn't hold in her laugh any longer. "Of course we'd positively have to bury Arlene; can't you just see her face?"

Chuckling and shaking her head, Darla rose from her chair. "I'm going to get more coffee. Do you want some?" Susan looked up as she put her empty cup into her mother's outstretched hand, and two sets of hazel eyes met, laughter still evident in both. While she waited for her fresh cup of coffee, Susan turned her attention back to the woodpecker across the street, but she smiled when she heard her mother softly laugh and say, "Abreast of community events. The very idea!"

PROFESSIONAL INSIGHTS

Inconvenience and Devotion

Brandy Autrey

As I stared at the mountain of carefully stacked clear plastic cups, hundreds of bulging alert eyes met my sunburned face. Which one should I choose? They all looked so desperate, floating trapped inside the blue water with those black specks dancing around them. I wished I could purchase all of them, but that was not in my directions. My first grade class had previously prepared me with the knowledge of which one to select. My orders were to pick out a whitish-yellow beta fish, one who met these requirements: he needed to “have flowing fins” and “look like he’s a pretty smart fish.” With these thoughts in my head, I grabbed one of the containers whose contents met those standards and proceeded to the checkout line.

It was the last day of my school holiday; the next day I was to return to school. I knew not to return unarmed without this fish. Our first class fish, Sparklely, was found floating upside down in his bowl the week before the Easter holidays. I had promised the twenty-three, droopy-faced first graders we would have a new class pet when we returned. And a promise is a promise.

I’ll never forget when I presented this confused petrified fish to their enthusiastic faces. It was an immediate bond—he was an instant class member. No pledge of allegiance, skip the calendar math, we had to name him as soon as possible. The naming process kicked off with careful observation. The potential names were then listed and voted on by the never fail hand raising method. No feelings get hurt in this process; we are in this together. This is our class fish. Finally, the unnamed horrified fish was crowned Rocky.

That was two months before school let out for the summer. The walls in my classroom are now bare. All of the decorations are put away or covered in an attempt to keep away the dust. The students are put away also, at daycares, camps, and grandma’s houses. But, where is our class fish now? Rocky still floats gracefully above yellow, orange, blue, and purple rocks. His fins continue to flap, swaying musically against the water of his glass fish bowl. This bowl, however, is awkwardly placed among the bright yellow walls and dark blue ceiling of my nautical themed bathroom.

Why would I bother purchasing this inconvenience less than two months before the end of school? I did it because a promise is a promise. I did it for my students. It’s just one of the many inconveniences that I took on by deciding to be the type of teacher I am. I do it for their faces, for their reactions. I do it because my students would do anything for me. Their devotion grows from mine.

I promised these same fresh faces the first day of school that I would give them my all, and then expressed I expected the same from them. Because of this bond, our class was different from the others. Being a class doesn’t quite describe the relationship in my classroom. It was more like a team or a family. I can say that all of the inconveniences were worth it, even those bulging eyes that meet mine every time I enter the bathroom.

Breaking the Rules

Karen Elkins

In my twenty-five years of teaching I always resisted befriending my students outside of the classroom. I firmly believed that teachers should keep a professional distance from their students and that this distance helps teachers be more objective in assessing students' grades and behavior. After I began teaching, I found it easier to be fair with the entire group if I did not have "favorites." I also noticed that students immediately sensed when one of their peers had become "teacher's pet." Everyone knows that the teacher's pet is allowed to run errands, hand out papers, and get by without doing all of the assignments. It is difficult for the students to watch this person receive special attention. Keeping that professional distance, for me, meant that I would treat all of my students equally. This was the way it was when I was in school, and it was the standard when I began teaching. I intended to continue the tradition.

So, after twenty-five years of perfecting my "cool" persona, what happened to me last year really challenged my philosophy. I decided to pursue National Board certification, which required that I show intimate knowledge of my students in each of the four parts of my portfolio. Entry One, Analysis of Student Growth in Reading and Writing, required that I feature two students and show, through samples of their work, how my classroom instruction impacted their reading and writing skills. Joshua, the first student I selected, was a freshman in my English I Honors class. He was athletic, well liked by his peers, spoke beautiful English, but could barely read and write. I wanted to learn more about why his spoken English was so strong and his reading and writing skills so weak. Chris, the second student I selected, was a senior in my English IV Honors class. He had excellent grades, was captain of the basketball team, and had participated in a summer institute at Princeton before his junior year. Despite these accolades, English was Chris's least favorite subject. So, his writing was uninspired and his interest weak at best. He had the potential but not the desire to excel in my class. I wanted to find out how to inspire a student like Chris. At first, it seemed that I could complete the requirements of the program without becoming too involved with the students. I had to know about them, but they did not have to know about me. I could select their work from what they produced in class and use it to show National Boards the range and scope of my teaching.

Well, everything went along fine until it was time to complete Entry One, which I had saved for last. The March 15 deadline was fast approaching, and I had decided to devote my entire Mardi Gras holiday to completing it. The school would be vacant, my family had left for a ski vacation, and I had five days of uninterrupted time to work. I went to school bright and early on Saturday morning. I studied my students' work, I read and reread the National Board manual, and I typed. After repeating this process for twelve hours, I was only half-way through analyzing the first student, Joshua. I realized I needed more from him and that I would need more from Chris as well. My problems ranged from not having their work in the correct format to not having enough of their work. I needed their notebooks, where I knew they had even rougher drafts of their writing. I needed to know more about each one of these students to be able to write about them. By the end of that long first day, I was praying that these boys were not going to celebrate Mardi Gras. Luckily, I had their home phone numbers; I planned on calling them early the next morning.

I reached Chris first, but he had plans to spend the day doing community service with his church youth group. He said he'd be finished about 3:30 and would be happy to stop by school on his way home. Wow—he sounded so pleasant and as if he were happy to do me a favor. Next, I called Joshua. It was as if he were waiting for my call. He said he was bored, had no plans for the day, and would love to come to school to do some writing. Wow again—I couldn't

believe how willing these boys were to come to school on a holiday. Joshua did not drive, so I picked him up. He lived literally on the other side of the tracks—or in "the bottoms" as it is called in Walker. When he came out of his trailer, I noticed that he was well groomed, as he always was, and that he had put on dress slacks and shoes for the day. After treating him to lunch at Subway, we went to work. I shared with him what I was working on and all the information I had gathered from his portfolio and cum file. Since third grade, he had scored in stanine 3 in English Language Arts. I told him that I had spoken with his track coach and knew he could win a scholarship but needed to begin preparing now in order to have the skills he would need for college. He silently listened to everything I said and then went to work rewriting some of his essays as well as producing some new writing. He told me of his love of singing and of the choir director who had been his mentor throughout elementary school. Joshua's love of music and devotion to his choir director were the reasons his speech was impeccable. We discussed ways to use his speech to improve his writing. We talked about his reading, too. He read for me and I realized that he could hardly sound out words that were more than two syllables. Because he wanted to improve, we decided that he would come to my room every afternoon before track practice, and that I would tutor him in reading and writing. I allowed the conversation to go wherever it wanted and learned so much more about this unbelievable young man. Finally, around 3:00, I took him home.

About 3:30, Chris showed up. I went through the same procedure with him. First, I needed some of his work reformatted. He loved computers, so this was an easy task. Next, I asked him to tell me why his essay on *A Tale of Two Cities* was so much better than his other essays. He had chosen, from among a list of eight topics, to write about Charles Darnay's three trials. Chris explained that he had participated in mock trials at Princeton, so he loved the topic and was inspired to write the essay. Finally, I needed him to revise an essay he had written using nonprint text as a prompt. I knew he was competing in the student of the year contest and hinted that doing some extra writing would help him on the essay portion of the contest. However, he really became interested when I explained my National Boards project. He seemed to feel honored that I had selected his work to study. Getting this work from Chris was really special, you see, because he had finished my class in December. So, here was a student willing to do work for me after the class was over.

Joshua and Chris continued to work for me, coming by my room to see if I needed anything, for four more weeks. They came before school, at lunch, and after school. They came when I asked and when I didn't ask. I tutored Joshua every afternoon and kept granola bars and sports drinks in my room so that he could have a snack before going to track practice. I continued tutoring Chris for the state student of the year contest. When he asked me, I advised him to tell his mom about the new pop-up, in-dash TV screen he had just installed in his truck against her wishes. Besides being these students' mentor, I had become their friend and confidante. Because I opened up to them, because I said it was important and showed them it was important by including them in the process, they began responding to me in ways I didn't expect.

The fact that my students were willing to do extra work for me was extraordinary; however, the relationship we had developed was what moved me. I had come to respect each of them as individuals with whom I could work, laugh, and share. I realize now that students and teachers can and should enjoy a friendship and that this friendship enhances the learning environment. My concept of professional distance was shattered. I broke all of my own rules. Things have changed a lot in the past twenty-five years. Teaching is different, the students are different, and this teacher is different.

Unfinished Work

Steve Grigas

My life can be summed up in two words—unfinished work. There is so much to do and, hopefully, a long life to do so. I need more time to be a better father, husband, teacher and, now, writer.

Tomorrow I will find time to write.

I will find time to expand my vocabulary, my ability to describe, to detail, to express my innermost thoughts.

I will find time to organize my files and my ideas on world events and to write on world peace and the forces which influence.

I will find time to complete the screenplay I started over ten years ago about a typical midwestern boy's loss of innocence as he desperately tries to hold on to it.

I will find time to finish that spy novel. I haven't decided if Birdsong will expose Petrov as the mole or lose faith discovering HIV was genetically created. Created by whom?

I will find time to write on an idea which developed during the writing marathon, an idea to write about the Garrison investigation from a fictional standpoint of 1967 New Orleans.

Einstein states time slows down the faster we move through space. Maybe if I can move fast enough...

Writing Phobic!!!!

Laurie B. Heck

I am a junior high school math teacher with writing phobia taking a writing class. So why am I taking this class? One, I hope to overcome this phobia. Two, I want to feel comfortable about writing when I ask my students to write in class. Three, I will be able to show them how to write. And finally, the best reason of all: one day I will write so well that I will create a manuscript and sell it for millions of dollars to Steven Spielberg. Then, I will definitely know that I have overcome my fear of writing. Okay, back to reality.

Writing is an activity that I find very frustrating. I may at times know what I want to say, but I don't know how to start saying it. Or, I may start only to get stuck. Sometimes I think I have a good idea of what to write, but suddenly I'm blasted by another thought that should go somewhere else and I lose the initial thought. I don't really know why I let myself get like this. I do try to remember this feeling, though, when my students feel frustrated doing math.

To me, math is much easier to deal with because I can see the rules that apply across the board. Once the rules and steps are learned, they are used over and over again. Numbers, amounts, and measurements are concrete; I can picture these in my mind. Objects, pictures, diagrams and tables can be used to visualize the problem.

With writing, on the other hand, I can't see the steps as clearly. To add to the problem, there are too many exceptions to the rules. Tense, commas, sentence structure—these things are all a blur to me. I'm sure that my poor pronunciation and weak vocabulary add to my frustration.

With math, there is a specific answer. Not so when writing. At least that has been my observation. Sometimes I feel as though the grading process may be more biased because of the personality of the grader. With math the problem is either right or wrong.

Regardless of my frustrations, my students are expected to know how to write about everything they learn. Yes, even in MATH. And it is with this in mind that I face my writing phobia.

Dissecting Life

Mary Koepf

One morning, my daughter woke up early while I was getting ready for work, so I held her and danced in the den to some music on TV. I could feel her head on my shoulder grow heavier as her breathing became slow and even, and I knew she was asleep. In that moment I felt total peace, relief from all my worries, so I stayed there swaying for a minute or two more. Later at work, that scene was still with me, at the forefront of my thoughts while I was free writing with my students. So I wrote down whatever came to me, and that became the rough draft of a poem I started working on.

Later in the week a typed copy of my poem was sitting on an empty student desk when a colleague entered my room for a meeting. She picked up the poem, which had no title or author's name, and began to do her English teacher thing, commenting on the onomatopoeic "hum from the TV," repetition, and lack of a rhyme scheme. As she stood there, so proud of her ability to break apart a beautiful, serene moment between a mother and daughter so as to demonstrate her knowledge of elementary literary terms, I felt like she was intruding on my moment, an uninvited guest who can't appreciate the significance or the worth of the scene she completely dissected. If I didn't know it before, I knew as she stood there reading and commenting, that when it comes to writing, the whole is NOT equal to the sum of its parts.

In a 1996 interview following the success of her novel *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan discussed how she felt about what others read into her work that she claims is not there. She said, "It's very personal. So I have a hard time accepting what is said about my work when it's taken apart." Should my work ever make it into another English teacher's classroom, I know I cannot go with it and explain where it came from or keep it safe from anyone who might break it apart, slice up a moment or a feeling into mere words. But from here on, I can take what I've learned from my experience into my own English classroom, letting the beauty of the words and the images they create speak for themselves.

Setting Standards

Shannon Miller

The educational process is supposed to ensure children an equal opportunity to receive a quality education. Far too often, children in poverty are starved in their school environment. But I have had the honor to teach at an “at-risk” school that has definitely broken the mold.

This small and unique school is called Midway Elementary and is located in a place in Florida named Midway. Midway isn’t a town but just a neighborhood of rundown houses. It’s nestled on the swampy banks of the St. John’s River outside of Orlando. Most of the houses in Midway are painted with neon colors with ceramic Rottweilers perched on the windowsills. Some occupied homes have broken windows and a bedspread as a door. Very few Midway citizens actually have a job, most just play dice and drink all day in one of the vacant lots. Sadly, prison, abandonment, drugs, and poverty are not issues, but life for these children.

For years this school struggled to meet the needs of its students. But that was before the implementation of a performing arts program. The performing arts enrich the lives of these students. Kindergarten to fifth grade participate in drama, tumbling, art, choir, step, ballet, hip-hop, and instrumental music. Children are introduced to these activities that stimulate the mind and soul. Students are now excited to be at school. Attendance problems are almost unheard of, and referrals have declined drastically.

Midway Elementary has made tremendous strides to improve the entire learning environment. It fills the spirits of these students with inspiration. In a sense, it’s a program that promotes self discovery of one’s multiple intelligences. Teaching at Midway Elementary School of the Performing Arts has raised the level of my expectations of what should be considered quality education.

Learning by Doing

Karen Ollendike

Flags waving in the warm fall air, colorful ethnic costumes, bagpipes, minor key Eastern music interspersed with spicy Latin samba music and dancers in colorful skirts, savory smells of garlic, onions and peppers, interesting things to see and buy from around the world—the annual International Heritage Festival, a cultural feast created by the Baton Rouge Center for World Affairs. I loved this yearly event promoting international awareness. I always volunteered there, encouraging my students to do the same, so I was shocked when my phone rang and I heard the voice ask: “Can you help us? The festival is in trouble, fewer and fewer people are attending, and if we don’t get the attendance back up, we may lose our funding from the city and our corporate sponsors.”

I did not want this to happen, but was unsure what I could do to help them increase festival attendance. I decided to see if my students had any ideas. Problem solving is part of life, and so my twelve sixteen and seventeen year old German III and IV students and I began brainstorming on how we could improve the festival. We came up with several ideas, so I divided the students into teams to work on the areas that interested them. John Dewey said: “Learning should not only prepare us for life, it should be an integral part of life.” These students had the opportunity to learn about life by working to help a community project succeed, and in the process, they learned valuable real life lessons in problem solving.

To create an early interest in the festival, they came up with an art or essay contest on international cooperation for K-12 students. The team came up with themes, contest rules, and prizes and suggested that the information be sent to English and Social Studies teachers in the surrounding area.

For the day of the festival a couple of teams worked together to design a “passport” for the visitors. This “passport” looked like a real passport and contained a page to fill in personal information, a world map, facts about the world, and several pages for stamps from the different “countries” or booths that each visitor visited. It was a souvenir documentation of each visitor’s world travels on that day.

The program director and media consultant loved the ideas and implemented them that very year. It was a huge success. Teachers saw the educational benefits and encouraged their students to attend. Students convinced their parents to take them because it was school-related, and entire families and friends came along to see what it was about. We had record attendance. This festival is still a successful event, and they are still using the ideas those twelve students came up with that semester.

Young people, like these students, are idealistic and daring. They want to make a difference. They don’t know yet that they can’t change the world, and that is why they usually do. We need to tap into that potential for greatness by giving them projects where they can develop and hone their skills.

The state of Louisiana is, unfortunately, known for its low student test scores and inadequate education system. We lament that our college graduates leave as soon as they graduate to find employment elsewhere. Alfred North Whitehead writes in *Aims of Education*: “But if education is not useful, what is it?...Ideas that are not utilized are harmful.” Instead of hiring high-priced consultants to help us find answers, why don’t we form task groups of interested students, teachers, business people and politicians to work together and find solutions to these problems. Whitehead also wrote: “There is only one subject matter for education, and that is life in all of its manifestations.” We can make education useful by listening to and utilizing our students’ ideas. When we give them problems to solve that are bigger than they are, and guide them in successful

problem solving, we let them experience real education by finding real answers. We can change them from not only being only consumers of education, but also producers of education.

We should give students equal ownership of the problems, and then value their solutions, by taking their suggestions seriously. When we implement their ideas, they grow in confidence and skill. They will not only benefit from the experience, but they will also surprise us with the fresh answers that they come up with to solve our education problems. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Moving Beyond Formula Writing In the English Classroom

Melanie Anne Plesh

The high school exit exam appears to be here for the long haul, whether we like it or not, and it has spawned anxiety on all fronts. States and school systems are pressured to attend to numbers which seek to chart student learning, but it is teachers upon whom the burden of seeing that our students pass the test primarily lies. The test need not be the focus in our schools – fine teaching takes care of the test – but it has, nevertheless, become so. Teachers, against their better judgment, end up feeling compelled to teach to the test.

The English portion of the test includes a section wherein the student must write a response to a question or prompt. She must take a stand and support her thinking in about 300 words. This small and straightforward piece of writing has caused teachers to search for ways to teach the essay to students. One particularly insidious discovery is the simplistic formula essay, which prescribes organization, placement of the thesis, style, number of supporting points, and even prescribes which transitional words students are to use to move from prescribed point to prescribed point. By this time, however, the essays are hardly the students' own. They are not writing; they are filling in blanks, forced to think in a pattern. I find this to be the height of disrespect.

The following is another way to “teach” essay writing.

Introduction

The word “essay” is most commonly known in its noun form: a product. However, its verb form tells its real story. To essay means to attempt. An essay is the product of essaying, the product of a person attempting to explain herself and to say why she thinks as she does. We cannot teach another how to think her own thoughts, and we should not impose our vision of order onto her. People have a natural inclination toward order, and what a teacher can do is help his students find their own way. We humans are by nature curious about the world. Youth are as capable of profound thinking as any adult I know, perhaps moreso since the young are generally less jaded. If we tell a child how and what to think, we may all be missing out on some life-changing knowledge we've let school squelch. We may be telling our Shakespeares to shut up.

Day One.

I have eight tables in my room, so I divide my collection of the essays I've clipped from various news sources over the years (I have hundreds) into eight numbered folders. I tell my students to skim the essays, stopping to read only the ones that interest them, no matter what the reason. I tell them that if they're halfway through an essay and find they've lost interest, to put it aside and find another one. I want them only to read the essays they wish to read. We read like this for at least thirty minutes (though this can easily go on an entire period). I ask that they keep all the essays they've either read or rejected handy for analysis.

Then we discuss what they've read. My role is to moderate the discussion, to keep the environment as respectful and safe as I can, and to be a recorder. Since most of the issues we bring up are controversial, there's a lot of passion in the room. One of the great things about this discussion is to see passionate adolescents start out by taking an absolute stand, thinking mostly in black and white, and then to watch them gradually begin to see the gray. It's wonderful to be among people thinking, and all because they had just read some essays they liked.

Day Two

We continue the discussion (to get the energy back up, about fifteen minutes), discussing any topic of interest from the news. Then we stop speaking our thoughts and start writing our

thoughts (essaying the subjects on paper, as it were). Any subject will do. I write with them, ostensibly to show them that I take this work seriously, but really because I'm just as fired up as they are. We enjoy having the chance to get quiet and think to ourselves. We write out our whole argument, and this is what we use for a first draft.

Day Three

The next step is to have a brief look at the essays they'd read in the beginning that started it all. I ask them to figure out what in the first few sentences made them keep reading. I write specific examples on the board that they call out. I also ask if they can see what the author seems to be promising in the first number of lines, and whether or not the promise in the beginning is fulfilled. Actually, as I point out, they probably wouldn't have kept reading had they been disappointed. So the question is *how* they were satisfied, *how* the promise was fulfilled.

We now look back at the first drafts to see how they can be improved after what we've talked about and noticed, and we spend the rest of the period revising. I let them talk for a while so they can read to each other and ask each other and me for advice, and then I call for quiet. We make revisions on the draft, but do not yet concern ourselves with mechanics.

Day Four

We look at the essays in the box again, looking specifically for conclusions. I ask what makes a satisfying conclusion and I write all that on the board. Then I have them read their essays so far to themselves and free-write conclusions. The final step is response groups, and the resulting revision and proofreading. I give them several days to turn in the final draft.

Grading:

I give credit for each written step -- points for doing what I ask. The final draft I grade strictly on presentation. At the beginning of the year I had given them a list of common mechanical, spelling, and format mistakes, and I take off points wherever they make these errors. That's the "points" part. But I also write commentary on each essay, in the margins and at the end. And while the numeric grade does matter to them, they're a lot more interested in my comments. They care about what they've written because they care about their thoughts, and these essays are authentic renderings of their thoughts.

As the Year Progresses:

Students seem only to need to go through this procedure two or three times before they get it, so we continue in a less formal way. I bring in new essays and just read to them, which may instigate a discussion and then an essay. Last year, one of my students often wrote and read aloud about her great-grandmother, who was 100 years old. Every time I (and eventually, other students in the class) found something in the news about old people we brought it in. This caused our class to have sort of a theme, and we talked and wrote a lot about grandparents.

Why the Box of Loose Essays Rather Than Anthologies:

I've been collecting essays for years, long before I ever thought about using them in the classroom. They were just essays I couldn't not keep, and so I collected them in a box. What I've found is that it seems to matter to students that they're reading essays cut from primary sources like newspapers and magazines rather than essays that have been reproduced in a book. They trust the clippings more than the anthologized essays, and they take them more seriously because they know for sure these are real essays from the real world. Holding a piece of writing cut out of a magazine seems to have more sway, as opposed to anthologized essays that reek of school, and

hence, are not authentic in their eyes. Also, individual essays are easier to manipulate and scan. And to reject.

Something I Haven't Tried But Will:

It could be interesting to give out several essays (probably ones they've already shown that they liked) and ask groups to infer the structural organization of each one. For example, if there is an explicit thesis, what is it and where is it located? If not explicit, what's the implicit thesis and how do you know? Then I think I'd ask how they would teach what they learned about essays from these essays they've studied. And then I'd probably ask them to teach that, maybe to a ninth grade class. What they will find is that no two essays are alike, and that in the world they will never find the kind of formula essay we teach in high school.

In Conclusion:

The verb form of "essay" sheds a new and simple light on what it means to write an essay. To essay, to think, to try, to attempt to explain one's thoughts on a subject, is a sophisticated and intellectual exercise. And when students realize that there is no particular or absolute form or structure or organization for the essay, which they can see for themselves by reading essays that come from the real world, they feel far more free to think for themselves. And they do think. And they love to. And their thoughts do not come out hopelessly jumbled or chaotic, but have a rhythm, a logic, an innate organization. Further organizing and clarifying comes in the revisions.

Essentially, my students are being taught how to write essays by the likes of Leonard Pitts, Rick Bragg, Hillary Rodham Clinton, George Will, William Safire, Norah Vincent, Bill Clinton, Gandhi, Golda Meir, Colin Powell, Saul Bellow, Jimmy Carter, Laura Bush, and other influential thinkers of our time. I think that my best work as a teacher is to be a prolific reader so I can keep providing students with essays, and then to open the door, uphold a respectful atmosphere in the classroom, and give them the gift of time.

The First Days of School

Amy Savarese

I will never forget my first days of school as a “real” teacher. My teaching assignment at the time was to teach gifted English, math, reading, and spelling to third, fourth, and fifth grade students in the morning at one school, then to teach gifted English and reading to a group of eighth graders in the afternoon at another school. The thing I remember most is that I had no idea what to do, or where to start. Because I was the only gifted teacher in both schools, none of the other teachers could be of much help. Sure, I had the teacher manuals and the benchmarks, but what should I do first? Since I was not certified or experienced in teaching gifted, the gifted coordinators allowed me to observe and talk to a few experienced teachers at other schools. This helped me begin my growth as a teacher. The next three years would be a whirlwind of learning what works and what doesn’t work for me, sharing ideas with other teachers, attending as many workshops as possible, and looking for ideas in books and on the internet. I feel I have grown so much in my short time of teaching, yet I know I have so much more to learn. I have discovered for myself that teachers never stop learning.

Under the Layers of Grease

April Schmidt

No one ever told him he should wash every day, so Drew has greasy hair and an oily face. Drew is sixteen, in tenth grade and in the band. He wears his heavy band jacket to school everyday, even in the ninety degree Louisiana heat. Because he is a trumpet player, he always has his mouthpiece with him. Sometimes two or three are either resting on his desk or he is rolling them in his lips. Drew is just a bit smaller than most boys his age and somewhat annoying. He annoys the other students too. I don't know what it is about him that bothers them. It's as if his very existence represents something that no one wants to be a part of. Drew's grades are not anything spectacular, but he's not stupid.

One morning, before class, Drew asked me if I had anything to eat. Teenagers are always ready to eat. Looking in my desk drawer, I found a pack of cheese crackers that had been left over from something, I don't remember what. I gave them to Drew who ate them whole. He remarked, matter-of-factly, how hungry he'd been because he hadn't eaten anything since lunch the day before. Again, it didn't seem like it was because he didn't have anything to eat, but because no one had made sure he'd eaten.

Drew was the type of student whom teachers often mistake for lazy or worthless. I admit, there were days when I wished he'd just go away. It was always a struggle for me to get him to do his work. When he did do it, it showed great promise. Sure his writing was a little unpolished and his answers weren't in complete sentences. These were superficial problems; the knowledge was there under the layers of grease. I could see this sparkle in him, deep down. He was capable of making A's! He was capable of so much! Why was he making F's?

Drew lived with his aunt. I met her at a football game one night. She said that Drew lived with her because sometimes his mother's boyfriend lost his temper. I didn't pry. She told me that sometimes when he was upset with her, he would refuse to eat dinner, like a small child who inflicts pain on himself because he knows it will upset his parents. Having insight into Drew's life made me more compassionate toward him in the classroom. Sometimes I'd give him longer to do an assignment. I always made sure to pack an extra snack in the morning, just in case. Despite all this, he still made me angry – refusing to do his work, incessantly talking to Brian, who sat behind him, and always trying to play cards during class. It was almost enough to make me believe that he was not worth my time. I knew he was perfectly capable of doing the work and doing it well. Why was he refusing to try? Why was he giving up on himself? He knew he could do the work too.

He used to tell me, "You think I'm stupid. I'm not stupid. I know how to do this."

"I don't think you're stupid," I'd respond very patronizingly, "but you don't ever do your work so, how do I know?" Then he'd do the assignment and do it well and turn it in to me saying, "I told you I'm not stupid." This was more frustrating than when he didn't do his work at all, because it was there. He was capable of doing it.

When the counselor came to the English classes, I helped Drew salvage his pathetic schedule for next year. He realized that he was not going to graduate with his class and asked for my help. Seeing the sparkle in him again, I decided to give it another shot. We sat there for the full sixty minutes and devised a plan. He'd have a full schedule, no fun stuff, and he'd have to pass everything – the first time! He left my room excited and encouraged for the future. He even asked if I'd be his buddy for the next year to ride him and make sure he was staying on top of his responsibilities. I, with a smile and small laugh, agreed. I'd be his buddy.

The next few weeks were on and off with Drew. Some days he was productive and some days he wouldn't do a damn thing, it didn't matter if I jumped up and down while singing

Yankee Doodle Dandy. I didn't give up. Somehow Drew managed to squeak through the next term with something like a sixty three or sixty four, the borderline between passing and failing. As I was skimming his grades, I noticed that he'd not made up that Shakespeare test yet. I also noticed it was sixth period – band. The band director was a reasonable person, and being exam week I knew he wouldn't be missing anything if I pulled him from class.

“Man, I ain't taking that test,” he said when he caught on to what I wanted. I was pulling him from his one sacred place, so I knew he would resist. I persisted.

“Drew, come on,” I said. He refused even more vehemently this time. Anger was rising in my chest.

“What do you mean, you're not taking it?! Do you know that most teachers would not even let you make it up! Much less come and hunt you down!! FINE! Fail then! I'm through! Just fail!” The band director came over when he heard my anger; it was too late. I was already storming down the hall, muttering obscenities to myself.

Back in my room, I was just warming back into the flow of grading and bubbling in grade sheets still mumbling occasionally, when the door squeaked open. Drew sulked in, his head hung in shame and his shoulders lowered to complete the stance of regret. He came in and walked to my desk. I just looked at him.

“You want your test?” I said.

“Unh huh”, he said. As I handed him the test, I asked him why he was giving up on himself. He didn't say anything but shrugged his shoulders. A thought entered my mind.

“Are you living with your mom again,” I asked. He nodded in confirmation, still not speaking.

“Oh,” I replied. Silence. The clock ticked, the computer hummed, I watched as Drew boiled inside.

“I don't even know why I went back there! No one there cares about me! I come to school with dirty clothes and no lunch money. No one even talks to me. I don't talk. I walk around not talking to see how long it will take someone to notice that I'm not talking.”

As he spoke the tears welled in my eyes, my face grew warm and my nostrils flared. I quickly turned away from Drew and looked at my computer, pretending to be doing something important, really just fiddling with the mouse. I didn't want him to think I pitied him. When I had pushed the tears down and he had stopped ranting, I gave some explanation about living for you and not for others. As the words came out of my mouth I knew they were no consolation. The only consolation I could give was to listen, with a genuine concern, to what he said.

Drew ended up passing my class, barely. I also recommended him for peer facilitation next year. Hopefully, there, he will be encouraged to do his best, and find the motivation he needs. What he does with it now is in his hands, but I can still listen. And, I'll be his buddy.

Telling Their Stories: Emilia

Vicky Tangi

It all started with hurricanes. In my adult English as a Second Language (ESL) class, we make lessons out of whatever is in our midst, incorporating reading, writing, speaking, and listening experiences out of local culture, politics, foreign policy, home economics, crime, and the weather. For several weeks last fall, the weather dominated our classroom. Students took turns explaining how they would protect their homes and families from the likes of Isadore, Kyle, and Lili, should they achieve hurricane status and sweep across our city.

Emilia, a woman from Russia, was disturbed by the local practice of taping or boarding up the windows as protection from storm damage. She said there was a much simpler way that was just as effective and easier to remove, using newspaper strips and buttermilk. Intrigued, I asked her to bring the components and demonstrate this in class, to be followed by a written description of what she'd shown us.

As Emilia tore strips of newspaper and dipped them in buttermilk, she told how the Russian government, during War World II, had issued advisories over the radio to protect the windows from damage during air raids, along with instructions in how to do this. Criss-crossing the wet strips over a sheet of plexi-glass she had brought with her, Emilia continued to explain that these strips remained intact for the duration of the war. She was delighted to teach all of us this simple and economic means of withstanding wind damage, and wrote a really good process paper afterwards, which would have been enough.

The second World War began 06/22/41. The Germans bombing Russians cities and villages, the glasses from the windows to breaks. Government appealed to the popylation with a request to glue up the windows with paper. We prepared strips from New-paper and tipped it on the glass with buttermilk.. This stripes stayed there all war. (1st draft, later revised and edited)

Teaching us a frugal method of saving the windows opened a door for conversation about much more than weather and conservation, as Emilia began to tell us about her childhood evacuation to Siberia during WWII and how it shaped her life. The intense classroom discussion that followed led to other students telling their own stories, many of war, evacuation, and refuge. They also discussed and wrote about U.S. involvement overseas, as we collectively held our breath waiting to see what would happen in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Emilia, her memories flowing like water, followed her classroom sharing with eloquent papers in which she recounted hiding in the woods when the soldiers came and then enduring the month-long train ride to the vast barrenness of Siberia.

Once in the evening a few bombs hit the forest close to our building where we lived. The teachers put the children in blankets and brought us to the bushes. We stayed there a long time. 4 months later in October the German soldiers came close to Moscow, and all mothers with children were evacuated to Siberia. The trains ran very slowly. We got to Sverdlowks in one month and from Sverdlowks to small willage Kirga—in 1 week. This time was terrible. We were hungry; we didn't have warm clothes and shoes... (1st draft)

With her sister and grandmother, Emilia was placed in a peasant home, while her “intelligent, beautiful mother,” with long red fingernails, and wearing the high heels she had worn from home, was sent alone into the forest to tend a fox farm, feeding horses she was forced to slaughter to the

captive foxes. Emilia herself, suffering from malnutrition and serious illness, almost died. Emilia's classmates and I were enthralled as she read to us, apologizing profusely about her grammar, any errors of which were overshadowed by the power and beauty of her words.

Other students, even the ones less likely to volunteer personal information, became willing to share their stories. As time passed, Emilia wrote an epilogue to her story, which she read to us. Almost three decades after the war, she made a pilgrimage to Siberia to the village where she had lived. Traveling alone, she got off the train at dawn, not knowing exactly where she was headed, but knowing she had to find the people who had sheltered her. Ultimately, she was welcomed into the home of the now adult daughter of the family she had lived with. This woman told Emilia that they had never forgotten the sickly little girl who was not expected to live and the beautiful woman with the long red fingernails and high heels, sent into the forest alone to live with the foxes. Emilia's voice was clear and rich as she read to us this account that she had never before written about. Apologizing for the emotion she had difficulty containing, she said, "I can't explain this, how important it was for me to go there." She did not need to explain, as her narrative, with her own style of syntax and vocabulary, told us all we needed to know. It also told me how vital it was to Emilia to tell this story at all, and to be able to tell it in English.

Energized by her ability to use this strange and still new language to recapture memories and express feelings long suppressed, Emilia continued to write, asking her grandchildren for help with English spelling and grammar. Suddenly captivated by the family stories, they developed a thirst for all she could give them of their unique heritage.

Other students gained inspiration from Emilia's courage in embracing the task of telling her stories on paper. The overall level of writing in the class improved as students began to slowly free themselves from fear of grammar errors as the greater urgency was to tell their stories.

Because of health problems, Emilia is no longer able to attend English classes. However, her words continue to fill page after page of the book she is writing for her grandchildren. At her recent sixty-ninth birthday party she tells me, "Because of your classes, I can write. But I don't need your help anymore. I can do this on my own."

Yet she expresses concern about the writing component of the citizenship test she will take, nervous that her grammar won't measure up. I tell her in all sincerity that she has nothing to worry about.

This evening we hear the news that she has taken the test this morning and passed. A new chapter to be added to the book she is writing in English. Another story to tell.

Perks

Lisa Watts

When I started teaching fifteen years ago, I thought the students who walked in and out of my classroom would just disappear and cease to exist for me at the end of the school year. I don't remember seeing much of my teachers after hours when I was in school, and I certainly never thought about them, so I just assumed my students would trot on off to whatever future awaited them without giving me a backward glance or a stray thought. Perhaps it's because I live and teach in the same small town where I grew up, but I see former and current students all the time outside of school. My husband teaches at his alma mater just a few miles down the road, so we share this experience. Sometimes I won't see former students for years at a stretch, and then something will bring them back into my life for a brief period and I remember what it was like to teach them. I've learned over the years that these encounters are professional and personal perks.

The professional perk is that students want us to know how they're doing; they take pride in telling us they're graduating from college, getting a promotion or buying a new house. With the exception of wedding invitations, the personal perks are more spontaneous. Whenever we run into former students, Brad and I somehow end up with lagniappe, like free entry to the movies, a surprise appetizer at a restaurant, or a discount on salon services. These kinds of perks are especially gratifying because I work with people who won't patronize certain restaurants because they're afraid their students will spit in their food.

I received the most recent perk just this week when what should have been a simple ceramic tile installation took an unexpected turn toward construction. The tile guys discovered an unpleasantly soggy floor in the fifty-year-old hall bathroom accompanied by an even more unpleasant odor due to mildew and advised us to call a carpenter. This is how Jason re-entered my life after more than a dozen years. Because my memory tends to freeze students at the age they were when I taught them, I half expected to see a rebellious, angry, fifteen-year-old boy standing on my front porch. Instead, I saw a twenty-something young man who was pleasant and courteous. Jason bumped us up on the priority list, and he charged us half his usual labor rate. Jason gave us this perk simply because Brad and I had been his teachers, and he made skillful repairs in a timely manner. In fact, he came over on a Saturday to finish the job so the ceramic tile could be installed Monday morning.

I've always felt that I was a failure as Jason's teacher. He was capable of quality work, and sometimes he demonstrated that in class, but his temper was unpredictable and resulted in impulsive behavior. On any given day he could be the best kid in the class or the worst, and our tangles were frustrating for me and unfortunate for him. I've often thought that if I'd been more experienced as a classroom teacher I could have done better by Jason, that I could have been a more positive influence on him. Then something like our floor debacle lands Jason on our doorstep, and I see a man running his own business, married, and by all accounts happy.

Obviously this incident qualifies as a personal perk because of the speedy results and the price break, but I wonder if I shouldn't also count this as a professional one. Jason serves to remind me that my students go on to be productive people, sometimes because of what I do in the classroom, and sometimes in spite of it.

On Desire

(from “A Philosophy of Affect in Writing”)

Jeff Wiemelt

It’s really all about desire, I think. We need to *want* to write. Deeply.

Let’s see. I’ve read, used, or at least visited, what, some couple hundred books on writing and teaching writing over the past ten years? I’ve taught some 15 sections of writing theory and methods. That’s probably 200 teachers and future teachers I’ve worked with, and I don’t even want to think about how many pages and pages of tiresome lesson plans I’ve read. I’ve run the conference circuit, and I’ve endured endless departmental committee meetings on our goals for teaching writing and how to hold our students accountable to every academic nicety we can think of. “They better not use a comma in that citation!” And “How we gonna know they didn’t plagiarize if we let ’em choose their topics?”

But no one speaks of desire. Wait! There’s Nat Goldberg, and Julia Cameron, and Anne Lamont, and perhaps a few others we can find on Amazon or at the big bookstores. (Not many men on that list. Curious.) I did a little research once, trying to learn which are the most popular books on writing. What do people buy when they’re not required to buy what they’re told by teachers? It’s Goldberg and Cameron and Lamont. It’s the books about *desire*. These women know something about desire and writing. They know something we’ve all forgotten. Or something we’re scared to remember. (Perhaps especially we men.) We don’t order these books for our classrooms very often.

Desire is dangerous. We can’t control it. Maybe that’s why we don’t let it in our classrooms, out of fear.

I don’t know how to define desire. I don’t know how to teach it. But I know desire when I see it. I see it in my 6-year-old’s illustrated three-line stories about scary ghosts and growing old and war. Our children live and walk and learn in desire. But we drive it away from them. Our schools are too crowded already.

I know desire when I feel it. I felt it once in 1976, in the one great idea for a piece of writing I ever had. I remember I lived that idea for a year: I breathed that idea. I ate and drank it. I slept on it—I fucked that idea every night. I think I got a B- when I finally turned the paper in. I don’t remember that part so well.

And I feel desire now, as I rework this piece for our Project anthology. I feel it move my hands across the keyboard as I write these words, compelling me. I desire to shout these words I’m writing—no whispered secrets here—strip myself bare for the readers in my group, dance for them. And I bless my partners for this gift they’ve given, from the grace of their collective will.

Just twice then I’ve known desire. It visits us in moments, I think, and then it’s gone. We can’t ever possess desire really, only touch it for a time, nurture it, grow with it, then let it go. My desire is a gift now for others waiting.

I’m at a committee meeting. Pick a meeting, because this is a recurring nightmare. “What about *desire*?” I ask. Maybe I’m just wanting to stir things up a bit. Maybe I really *hate* what we do to our students. Our children. Colleagues’ eyes just roll or look away. Their sniggering moves us on to more important concerns. “This term’s exam,” they wonder, “is there too much to write about? Do we know where they’re gonna go with this topic?” Bastards.

Maybe I really *hate* the people I work with. I mean, it’s my kid they’ll want to suck dry one day.

Desire’s a conflicted emotion, I think. It runs deep in starts and stops. It touches hearts and souls, treads softly in rationality. (Best not to wake *that* beast!) We can’t track desire. I don’t

know if we can teach it. But I know desire is not demand, and we can't command its presence in our classrooms. Desire grows from within, compels us to move and grow and desire again. Desire doesn't end in fulfillment but in new desire. It feeds upon itself. The best thing we can do for desire is to give it a space to unfold. Build a climate of grace in our classrooms' collective will. Then get out of its way. Let it grow.

Nothing works without desire. Nothing makes sense without it. Not the writing process guides. Not the sterile style sheets. Not the format models. Not the compulsory peer response sessions we micro-manage into solemn lifelessness. Not even the damned period that falls at the end of this sentence.

Writing starts with desire. I mean real writing, not the stuff we do in school. I don't know what it is we do here.

It all starts with desire. Shame on us if it doesn't end there too.

MARATHON MUSINGS



My Dinner at Bacco

George Dorrill

DISCLAIMER: The following is not a work of fiction: I lack the imagination for that. All of the events described herein happened, at least to the extent my memory does not deceive me. However, the names of all the participants have been changed to protect the innocent, for they are all innocent, save the miserable author of this piece alone. Also, the year these events happened has purposely been left obscure; the reason seems obvious. Nothing written here must be construed in any way to reflect unfavorably on the food, service, or ambience of the restaurant Bacco, a real restaurant, rated 31st most popular in New Orleans in the 2003 Zagat survey and awarded four stars by Tom Fitzmorris.

There exists a photograph. It was taken at a table in a New Orleans restaurant called "Bacco." It shows on the left a young man eating soup. He blocks a woman sitting behind him. In the right foreground a beautiful young woman is smiling at the camera, her left hand holding a wine bottle by the neck, her right arm around another smiling woman. Between the women and the young man, towards the back, sits an older man dressed in a black coat and a black tie. He looks very solemn, like a dyspeptic Buddha, unsmiling, his eyes nearly closed. The picture is framed by a low, vaulted ceiling. What follows is a cautionary tale, attempting to explain how that older man came to be looking the way he looked. Most of it was taken from a journal written by that man on the day following the night that photograph was taken, at the conclusion of a New Orleans writing marathon.

Thursday night around 7:30 in the aftermath of the poolside bacchanal, Christy asked me if I had any plans for dinner. I said, “No, I’m going with the flow.”

“A group of us are going to Bacco’s. Edie and her son and Carol and some others. It’s a five-star restaurant, but because it’s slow in summer, they have some \$10 entrees.”

“Sure, why not?” I said. I had absolutely no plans for the evening, and it sounded as good as anything else. Besides, I had a secret love for Christy, a fantasy love, and enjoyed very much being in her company. She also knew I would be attracted by the idea of \$10 entrees, because I am known as a notorious cheapskate.

“We made reservations for eight for eight o’clock,” Christy then said.

“Won’t it be a problem to add extra people to the reservation?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “It’s a slow time, and I’m sure there won’t be any problems.” She told me we would meet in the lobby at eight.

Well, I had to move quickly. I was still in my wet tee-shirt and bathing suit and it was twenty to eight. I was in a wet tee-shirt because after Maybry jumped in the pool with her street clothes on, a parade of people started jumping in the pool. I forget who was number two, but I think I was number three. I had been in the pool earlier and was still wearing my bathing suit. My tee-shirt had ink stains on it from earlier in the day, and I thought the pool water might take them out. Besides, I had lent Charlie my other SLWP tee-shirt and figured I could wear the white one the next day if I rinsed it out and hung it up to dry.

Another thing: I was more than half looped. Much more, it turned out. I had started out with a gin and tonic around 4:30. When Anton or Aaron or Tony or whatever his name was, the waiter, came around asking if I wanted another drink, I said, “Sure, a G and T.” I had Roland’s drink ticket and thought I might as well use it. After I finished the second G and T, I went back to the room. I had poured what was left of Yasuko’s gin—about eight ounces—into a water bottle before I came to the hotel and had brought a bottle of Yasuko’s tonic water. I fixed another G and T and went back to the poolside.

Things were popping. We were supposed to meet at six, but Henry, our leader, was talking to Linda and Wanda, and we never had the meeting. People were drifting in, sitting by the pool cooling their feet. The waiter was doing his thing. Feeling guilty that I had used his drink ticket, I bought Roland a rum punch. It was getting on towards seven o’clock and I had finished number three, so I went back to the room and finished off the gin by fixing G and T number four. By then, things were jumping at the pool. Literally jumping. After I jumped in, Tine jumped in with her cell phone and Henry jumped or was pushed.

What I haven’t written earlier is that Roland in a way started the whole thing. Earlier in the marathon when we were at Molly’s, Henry asked us what we wanted to do next. I said I would like to go back and take a swim at the pool and Henry said, “Sure, why not?” Roland said he would like to take a dip too, but he hadn’t brought a bathing suit. Henry said he had a pair of shorts he could wear. So Roland went up to Henry’s room. He was up there a long time. I thought they were smoking dope or something. Finally Roland came down and went in the pool. He was the only one in the pool for a long time.

None of the girls brought bathing suits or would wear them. Girls are funny like that. They are very self-conscious about how they look in a bathing suit. The comic strip *Cathy* constantly deals with that issue. Guys don’t care. I don’t care. I was so happy when Maybry jumped in the pool. Last year, Christy was my fantasy lady. This year it’s a kind of combination of four ladies who sit across from me. Maybry most of all, but also Doris for her flashing eyes and coruscating wit, Ellen for her sweetness and her little pregnant belly, and Joanie. I can’t define what it is about Joanie, but she is very attractive to me.

I had written about Maybry earlier that day. This is what I wrote:

I love Maybry madly. Last night on Seinfeld was the episode when Elaine talked dirty on Jerry's tape-recorder. When George found out that it was Elaine who was doing the dirty talking, he couldn't get her out of his mind. Yesterday at Carol's presentation, when Maybry read about playing foosball with her boyfriend and that it was so hot that she had taken her tee-shirt off and wrapped it around her head and played in her bra, I couldn't get that picture out of my head. I felt exactly like George Costanza.

After I read that, the guys in our all-guy group were all ragging me, except Gus, Edie's son. Roland was the worst.

Anyway, I've gotten off topic. I was explaining my process of getting looped, and had gotten to G and T number four. It was after G and T number four that I had jumped into the pool. And then I had had my conversation with Christy.

So I was rushing back to my room to shower and change clothes to go out to this fancy restaurant. Then I did something to seal my downfall. Thursday morning before we left Hammond, I filled some of those little plastic mouthwash bottles that you get at hotels with Herbsaint. I was rooming with Roland and I didn't know his views about alcohol, because whenever he read, it was always on religious topics. So I thought I could drink surreptitiously. Yasuko was irritated with me for doing that when we were in a hurry to get going, but I didn't want to take a liquor bottle.

Anyway, right before I took my shower I poured one of those bottles of Herbsaint into a glass, diluted it with water, and drank it down. Big mistake. I hurried to shower and get dressed. I made it to the lobby shortly after eight. Christy was sitting there with Gus, Edie's son. They were waiting for Edie. When Edie came down, she apologized for being late. She had brought Jeanie, Henry's wife, down to introduce him to Gus. Henry was still in the pool. Christy called the restaurant and said that we would be late and that there would be two extra people. The restaurant said there would be no problem.

So we set out, our group of ten: Christy, Edie, Gus, Carol, Maybry, Linda, Tine, Maureen, Lilla, and I. I was feeling o.k. but drunk. We walked up Chartres Street. I had no idea where or how far away the restaurant was, but I didn't care, for I was following the crowd and assumed they knew where they were going. We walked up Chartres past St. Louis Cathedral. Edie said we had to go up a block to Royal, so we turned right at St. Peter Street and walked up a block to Royal. We walked up Royal, past the antique shops, to Iberville. I couldn't believe how far we had walked. Christy had said it would be a ten-minute walk. When we passed the Bank One at Royal and Bienville, I knew we had walked over a mile, because when I had asked the lady at the front desk earlier in the day where the nearest bank was, she had looked in the phone book and found the Bank One at 200-something Chartres, the one we had just passed. When I asked her how far away that was, she said a mile, because the hotel was at 1234 Chartres, and ten blocks equaled one mile. We were almost at Canal Street, the end of the quarter, and there was still no Bacco, so we went down Iberville back to Chartres and started walking back down Chartres. I couldn't believe people would set out for a restaurant without knowing its address.

And now I was starting to feel bad. Very bad. I was tired from all the walking and my stomach was upset. I was quite nauseated. Like Jerry Seinfeld, I am rarely nauseated. I was also very sleepy. I had gotten one hour sleep the night before, because I had to get up at four o'clock to take Yasuko to the airport for her annual trip to Japan. We finally arrived at Bacco, on the street we had left for the wild-goose chase on Royal, between Bienville and Conti. The sign said "Bacco Italian Restaurant, One of the Brennan Family of Restaurants." My heart sank. When I am asked to list types of restaurants in order of preference, Italian restaurants come way down on the list. I should have figured with a name like "Bacco" it had to be an Italian restaurant, but I just didn't make the connection.

We had to step up to get into the restaurant. Big glass doors. A very sleek, modern look. Beige colors mostly. *Very* noisy, *very* crowded. Of course we'd have to wait. I was at the back of the line, so I couldn't hear what the maitresse d' was saying, but she seemed very nice and apologetic. She was modern and sleek, too, like the restaurant. She took us to the bar and lined us up against the wall. I didn't know what was going on and didn't care very much. She started bringing chairs and setting them against the wall. I asked Linda, who was standing next to me, if she wanted to sit down. She indicated that she did not. When the maitresse d' had brought three chairs, I sat down. I was very tired. Carol sat down next to me. After a while, she leaned over to me and whispered, "See that woman at the bar?" I saw a woman at the bar, an older woman, sitting on a bar stool facing away from the bar. There was an attractive younger woman with straight black hair on her right and another older woman on her right and two other women facing them and talking. "That's Margaret Atwood." I recognized the name, but I hadn't read anything by her.

After a wait of some minutes, we were seated. Unfortunately, I found myself seated at one end of the table and Christy at the other. With the noise level in the restaurant, I could have been in Timbuktu insofar as communication was concerned. When the menus arrived, I determined to stick to the \$10 entrees and not order anything else—no appetizer, no soup, no salad, no dessert, no beverage other than water. Of the six \$10 entrees, most of which were various types of pasta, the least objectionable seemed to be the half-broiled chicken. (Actually, it was half a broiled chicken, but my chicken seemed half-broiled to me.) I did avail myself of the bread and olive oil. I am a charter member of the clean-plate club, but for one of the few times of my life, I did not clean my plate. I ate a little of the chicken and none of the vegetables. I was feeling very sick to my stomach. I got up several times to vomit. It irritated me that each time I got up, one of the wait staff came over to fold my napkin. It also irritated me that every time I took a sip of water, a waiter topped off my glass. I don't like being observed so closely.

The bathroom was kind of an oasis for me. It was much less noisy, cooler, and largely uninhabited. There was even a teach-yourself-Italian tape playing. I could learn Italian as I was trying to vomit. Unfortunately, I was never able to, although I spent most of my time at Bacco in the men's room. Luckily, it was very near our table. At the table, I believe I fell asleep several times: at least, I am told I did. I may have snored. At some point I took my jacket off. When the bill came, after several hours, there was a great commotion at the other end of the table. Like many fancy restaurants, Bacco does not split bills. It was a very large bill, for there was much wine drunk at that table, none of it by me. I love women very much, but I feel one of their least attractive qualities is dealing with bills at restaurants. My share of the bill was \$10 plus tax and tip; I threw in a twenty-dollar bill and had done with it.

There is not a neat way to end this narrative, for at this point my memory becomes very hazy. My last memory is waiting by a cast-iron fence with Linda, who had evidently gotten very looped indeed at dinner. She had taken off her shoes and was walking barefoot. The memory makes no sense: we must have been back on Royal Street, but I can't think of why we would have gone back to Royal Street, which was not on our direct route to the hotel. Maybe the ladies wanted to look at the windows of some more antiques stores on their way back. There is a footnote to this tale. The next day I learned to my bitter regret that while we were dining at Bacco, another party of our group, including pregnant Ellen and pregnant Doris, had gone to Coyote Ugly and danced on the bar. I could have been with that group, if fate had taken a slightly different turn. It remains only to state the moral of this sad tale. I can think of no better way than to quote the words inscribed on the temple of Apollo at Delphi: "mēdēn agan," nothing in excess.

Café Du Monde—Memories

Laurie B. Heck

Café Du Monde—what memories! It is overcast right now, not sure if the weather will hold or a downpour will come soon. Memories of my childhood come to mind. A trip to the Quarter was never complete without a stop at Café Du Monde for an order of beignets. Memories of Donnie enter, my brother, my protector, swiping my last beignet then using his straw to blow the excess powdered sugar off the table and into my lap. We shared many moments together in this city. We shared many things: friends, dreams, the past, the present, the future. We played, fought, teased, and laughed. It's raining now.

It was raining that ill-fated day long ago. But the rain was cold then, ice cold. It was a Sunday and the weather had taken a dramatic turn for the worse. The temperature the day before had been in the seventies, but that day, it was dropping fast and forecasts called for freezing or below by nightfall. It was the weekend following Thanksgiving Day, 1976. Ricky and I had been married for a little more than a month, so when Donnie, Mike, Lyle, and Chico asked him to go camping, he declined to stay home with his bride.

We were at my in-laws' house when Mr. Pete, Mike's dad, called to let us know that the campers had not yet returned and he had become extremely concerned. The next time he called, he told us he had called the authorities. All I kept thinking at the time was that I knew my brother, and he was not in danger but was somewhere goofing off as usual. That is what I kept telling myself, Mr. Pete, and anyone who would listen. By dusk, friends, relatives, deputies, and the Coast Guard were searching for the campers in the rice fields between Madisonville and Bedico. Ricky went with my father to help search, and I went to my parents' house to be with my mother.

There were numerous phone calls: messages, updates on progress, no progress, notifying relatives, and prayer requests. Sometime between nine and ten that night a call came in: "Mike and Chico had been found. Lyle was home too. Nothing yet about Donnie." The waiting, praying, and crying continued. Mom did not get any sleep; she spent the whole night pacing, clutching her rosary and praying. I would pray, then somehow, I dozed off only to see Donnie's face. He was slumped over wearing what looked like a dark green poncho. I think I knew at that moment that he was not coming home but I did not want to think that way so I would begin praying again. Then I would doze off again, see Donnie that way again, and start praying again. This cycle continued throughout the night.

The sun had risen a couple of hours ago and still there had been no word. The night had seemed liked days. Suddenly, we saw Dad's white van approach and pull into the driveway. I ran outside hoping to see Donnie with them. What I saw, heard, and felt changed my life forever.

I looked at my dad; I could tell he had been crying. Ricky came to me and without a word just hugged me hard and would not let go. I heard my mom yell "No!" I don't know what I said; all I know is that I felt like someone had reached inside my chest and ripped my heart in half. I felt the burning, stinging of raw flesh so painful that I did not know if I could live on. I did not know if I wanted to. Someone tried to tell me that the pain would go in time. I don't know if the pain actually goes away or if one just gets use to it and it seems to fade. All I know is that I lost the one person in my life who knew me better than anyone: my confidant, my advisor, my protector.

The funeral was a blur, though I remember the multitude of mourners—a tribute to the type of person Donnie was in this life. Although I cannot physically touch him, hug him, see him, or

hear his voice, I know he is still watching over me. He has let his watchful presence be known. Donnie, my brother, is my guardian angel.

The rain has stopped. We are going to walk through the French Market. As I get up I notice a sight from the past, and I just have to laugh. Powdered sugar is on my navy blue shorts, but I did not order beignets today.

July 8, 2003

2:45 p.m.

Rebekah Allen Hoffpauir

Coffee shop, again. Lunch, like my writing, felt uninspired. Turkey sandwich, French fries. The walk from Decatur, up Pirates Alley and down Royal felt good. Rain on umbrella, feet soaked, missed all the coffee shops we were looking for except CC's, which we desperately wanted to avoid for a more local venue. Passed several pedestrians who walked, heads bared, through the rain, ignoring it, unbothered by it, but not really rejoicing in it—just numb to it. Arrived at hotel. Changed shoes after performing a ballerina's warm-up with the air conditioner as “bar” to cool and dry my hot, soaked feet. Checked the map, again, to see why we had missed the coffee shops. Returned to slosh through the streets, but this time equipped with flip-flops.

In place of House of Brews, the coffee shop we'd wanted earlier, we found Mirror, Mirror. I wonder if Mirror, Mirror will meet a similar fate—is our Narcissistic tendency any stronger than our caffeine addiction? Pressed on toward the 600 block of Decatur en route to Royal Blend, our second choice. Came across an artist at work in his studio, combining his knowledge of archaeological digs and ancient culture to create “found art”—some frescoes exact copies; some, like the red monkeys, inspired by art unearthed in ancient, faraway places. Wishing I had \$2,300 for his *Monk in Meditation*, I moved back into the rain again.

Made it half a block before Karen spotted a store full of French products. Wished I had \$7.00 to spare for Provence Herbs milled into gorgeous soap bars. Dreamed I was the kind of woman who kept a sparkling bathtub—oh, if I could add the claw-foot tub to the dream—again, the kind of woman who kept a sparkling bath so she at any time could luxuriate in warm water with her French-milled soap. Maybe in another lifetime.

Made it finally, to Royal Blend, where I discovered a French Costa Rican blend, brewed to perfection I am sure. The blend, I mean its name, was close enough to inspire again the Costa Rican French horn player memory—the memory I've brought here to New Orleans to permanently forget, to gladly forget. The memory I ripped out of this very journal this morning and deposited in the Hotel Richelieu's trashcan, hoping the maid would carry it away. I take my sunglasses from their perch on top my head, won't be needing those today.

Coffee's cold. Vicky's, I glance over to see, remains untouched. Perhaps, she, like I, feels the dance of the violin moving her, inviting her to write with it. Writers writing, doing what we put off in life, recording life. A couple takes the table beside me. I wonder if they wonder what we three women—Karen, Vicky, and I—are doing here in the breeze of a ceiling fan, writing madly, alone, at tables. Wonder if they realize the power of the pen. Wonder if they hesitate to speak for fear they become the subject of the writing. Wonder if, unbeknownst to me, I've “met with” a writer somewhere else, he's studied me, and recorded me.

Ah, narcissism. Perhaps Mirror, Mirror will do better than House of Brews.

Café du Monde

Karen Ollendike

Visiting Café du Monde in the New Orleans French Quarter is one of my favorite childhood memories. Every summer when we came down to stay with my grandparents, we took a day to drive across Lake Ponchartrain to visit the Quarter. We always started our journey by taking the streetcar down St. Charles to Canal Street and then walking to Café du Monde where we began “eating our way” through the Quarter. Outside on the patio of Café du Monde, we ordered hot beignets and steaming hot cups of coffee and chicory and cocoa served in thick porcelain cups. No one seemed to mind when I got powdered sugar on my face and my shirt and shorts from the hot, powdery beignets. It was on their faces and clothes as well. Even though it was ninety+ degrees with one hundred percent humidity outside, and we could feel the sweat rolling down our necks and backs, and bead on our noses and foreheads, we didn’t mind. We were ready to continue strolling through the French Quarter taking in all of its sights and sounds and tastes.

One of the most delicious smell and taste treats was Central Grocery. Opening the door and stepping inside was like entering a foreign country. Shelves were packed from floor to ceiling with olives from Greece and roasted peppers from Italy and all sorts of strange and exotic foods from here in Louisiana and around the world. We bought Luzianne coffee and chicory to take back to our home in Texas, and shared a Muffuletta dripping with peppers and olives and juicy cheeses and salamis. We topped it off with sweet pralines from Aunt Sally’s, and when we were so full we could hardly walk, we lazily browsed through book stores and antiques shops along Royal Street and looked at the artists and their work around Jackson Square. We always stopped in to visit St. Louis Cathedral before we left. I remember how my eyes had to adjust to the dark, and that it was wonderfully cool inside, and so beautiful and majestic. It was a magical experience, this annual pilgrimage to New Orleans, where no one seemed to be in charge, and everyone had a good time.

When I became an adult with children of my own, I tried to recreate those magical days in the French Quarter, but the chemistry wasn’t the same, and though I tried, I could never recreate the lazy, relaxed feast of the senses that I experienced as a child. As an adult and a parent every trip to the Quarter seemed rushed, stressed, and hectic. I gave up after many failed attempts on finding the magic again, yet to my surprise, it found me this weekend while participating in a Writing Marathon with a group of writers from the National Writing Project.

We had gone to the French Quarter for two days to write. There was no agenda, no plan, except to be inspired to write as we had never written before. My writing experience before this summer was limited. I wrote a lot when I was in college and graduate school, but now my writing consists mainly of sporadic journal writing, occasional letters to friends and family, or short, work related documents. I realized as I began this writing marathon, inspired by my new writing institute friends, that I really wanted to write, and to write well. It seemed like the more I saw and heard others writing, the less I could write.

Moving from place to place, writing down my thoughts, feelings, and impressions of what I saw and experienced, I felt the magic of the French Quarter again. I went to Café du Monde, and sipping a hot steaming cup of café au lait and watching the people, I knew that there was hope even for me. Writing is something that requires time and thought and honesty. I had that as a child, that magical time where I didn’t have to carry the burdens of adulthood, when just being me was enough. I realized it wasn’t lost forever, only buried deep beneath “trying to do the right thing.” I am committed to finding it again, and with the wisdom of experience, I will take time to think and reflect honestly, and to write. The New Orleans Writing Marathon was a

beginning, there the magic of the French Quarter recaptured my heart. I know I will be back again soon to reflect, and to write.

Reflections of the Marathon: Where stories come from...

April Schmidt

Melanie's writing prompt on the seventeenth of June, the second day of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project was the word *desert*. This led me to a memory of several summers ago. I wrote about my friend Sonny and his stinky body odor. It was a hit. The writing was timed and we only had ten minutes; I had to stop after writing only two pages. There was so much more to tell, so many adventures, so much. I hated to stop writing when time was called. What about New Mexico and the boys and Scott and California and Huck and Amy and the poison oak in the red wood forest and that bird that sounded like a monkey dying an agonizing death and my friend Linda's one eye staring at me in the morning and Sonny's drug binge and Linda's pregnancy paranoia and the car how much I loved the car, and the iced coffee and Seattle and that breakfast place with the whole wheat waffles? I had to tell about all that too! Why did Melanie call time? Damn it! So much was stuck in me. It started out but was stopped. I was experiencing false labor pains. I wanted badly to get this story out, but I was stuck. Most of all Scott was stuck. I needed to tell about Scott, so pure, so beautiful. Sure it happened years ago and I didn't even know Roy then, but I was afraid of where it would take me.

I heard at the institute one day, that in order for your reader to have a true experience when reading, the author must have a true experience while writing. Well, it went something like that, and I don't remember who said it or where it came from, maybe Melanie. People do that, always trying to own a word or phrase. We don't own them; no one does. They belong to the atoms and particles that are disrupted when the word is spoken. They meld with the atmosphere and become one with existence. I was afraid to have a true experience because I was in a relationship, a wonderful relationship. I was afraid of betraying this relationship, this bond. I knew I could not get the story across the way I wanted to unless I revisited and relived those old emotions, but wouldn't that be betraying Roy? How could I do such a thing? How could I want to do such a thing? Meanwhile this story was eating at me from the inside, feasting on my trepidation, distressing my sleep, weakening my nerves, impeding my thoughts, and causing panic. I was a mess. All I could think about was that summer and those three days. I had to stop this, and stop it right then. I'd put too much time and energy into this relationship; there's no way I'm going to let it go now. No way. This story was just going to have to stay repressed forever. How absurd.

The New Orleans Writing Marathon rolled around and the first day sucked. I couldn't write anything! The first five pages of my journal were steady bitching front and back. When I can't do something I'm expected to or when I feel threatened, rather than getting shy or running, I get angry – the kind of anger that is not controllable, when your blood temperature rises and heart beat races. Once I released some of the anger and fear, I was able to enter into the writing mode, slightly. I sketched out some character, wrote about the Mississippi River, and the inescapable heat, but it was all contrived bullshit. When Diana suggested we get a beer, I was elated, being all too happy to focus my attention on something other than the filth that was flowing from my pen. We went to *Molly's on the Market*, a regular among my friends and me and one of Richard's favorite writing spots. At *Molly's* I wrote a little more. The arctic winds pushing through the metal slats of the air conditioning vent cooled my body and my anger. Soon the biting insults of the morning dissipated into calmer, more pleasant writing. Despite the cooling air, my writing was still crap. I still felt the distance of a foreigner in a new land. Well, what better way to blend into New Orleans and escape my writing woes, but to get slap ass drunk? A "Big Ass Horny Toad" Margarita it was! Sixteen ounces of Hornitos Gold tequila with a splash of triple sec. It took me about two hours to drink that damn thing, but I did it. More members from the group started trickling into the bar (as Richard touted it during the institute). When we

arrived at the bar there was Diana, Mary, Shannon, and I. Then Jeff, Laurie and Karen O. wandered in. At some point I looked up and saw George, Melanie, and Richard. It seems that *Elimidate*, a pseudo-reality TV show that exploits the dating scene and the obsession humanity has with seeing other members of the race humiliate themselves, was filming in that very place on that day. Well, what a treat for a drunken writer, such as myself, on the verge of an intense personal revelation? Even Roop Raj, a local news station anchor, was there. The rest is fuzz. There was enough stimulation for a lifetime of writing, but all I could think about was the story. The one I was trying to repress, to conceal. It wasn't working.

Emboldened by the margarita, the chaos and the security of knowing that Roy would not be hurt here in this place, I began to write the story. I start with the date, July 9th, the time, 2:45, the title, Desert. Then the story demanded control. I became the outlet for the story to be released, to be born. The words rushed through the collapsed flood gate and didn't stop for seventeen pages, until the story was out and told. I didn't own this story, it owned me and could no longer be confined. The freedom was insurmountable. No more negative thoughts, no more bitching, no more judgment.

Jeff had been furiously typing away on his laptop as the chaos in the bar grew. He announced that he wanted to share what he'd been writing and hear what we had to say as well. I thought, "Okay, I've gotten this far why not go for it? Besides I'll let the margarita read for me." So I read it. I let other people hear the secret, manipulative story that was hidden in me, the awful evil betrayal of my loved one. As I read I noticed the faces of my colleagues and friends. It wasn't so evil or betraying. It was beautiful and appreciated, freeing and reassuring. Why was I so afraid? This means nothing. I didn't lose anything. I still love Roy, more than ever, more than anyone! Nothing was taken from me. I gave up what I was for what I could become, and I've become something better. I am more assured, confirmed in my love rather than put off. All the monsters I was afraid would come if I let the story free were not there. They hadn't come and taken anything away, except fear.

Writing was over for this day. I made a few *Elimidate* observations, but the journey to the peak was achieved, and now it was time to set up camp. That night, I had a wonderful dinner, enjoyed with friends, and slept like an infant that has worn her tired little body out from crying.

The sun gently danced into the ancient hotel room the next morning; the shower was invigorating; even the Croissant D'Or looked different, prettier, and more valuable. Then I wrote, and wrote, and wrote, and I wrote well. No more potty-mouth crap. No pessimistic bitch fest. Beautiful stuff. I needed to read again, to unburden the words that were in me. I found Jennie, Rebekah, and Karen E. They were not in my group but were eager to listen. So I read, and I enjoyed it. I wasn't nervous that they wouldn't like the story, because it was no longer my story. It didn't belong to me once it was put on paper. It just was what it was, and I was merely the conveyor – not the creator. They were pleased. I read it at the read – around. Melanie made that face she makes when she's enthralled with what's being read. Her face with squinted eyes, furled brow, and tightly pursed lips, always reflects the emotion that the story wants to tell. I knew it was good.

Marathon Reflections: Sometimes it takes a while

Vicky Tangi

Sitting on a bench in a park by the French Market, I am watching a pigeon take a shower in a fountain. Lacking other inspiration, I write my impressions of what I think he's up to. This is the second day of the writing marathon, and I am frustrated that my writing is not what I had expected it to be. If anything, it seems to have deteriorated in quality from the roll I had been on for several weeks. I am occupying my mind with pigeon antics, when I look in the direction of a voice calling me. Three young women, seated on a bench across the way, are intrigued by this bizarre group of adults sitting all over the park writing. They want to know what's going on; this doesn't fit their notion of rational behavior.

"Do people, like, just come here to *write*?" one of them asks. "I mean, I see a whole bunch of people just sitting here writing."

I explain that we are a group of writers visiting New Orleans to do exactly that. They are visibly impressed. They want to know if we are here to write about New Orleans. I tell them that some of us may incorporate the city into our writing, as New Orleans has a way of washing over you, insinuating her way into your thoughts and, therefore, your writing, but that we are really just here to write anything we need to write about.

"Do y'all, like, write *books* or something?" another one wants to know.

I tell them that some of us have, or will, or hope to, but that being a writer is much more than creating works for sale in bookstores, that writers do all kinds of writing, not necessarily for pay or publication, but simply because they must. It feels good to say this, to make a formal statement, stake my claim, somehow legitimizing what I have always known in my heart, but before joining the SLWP, did not have the courage to admit to others outside my immediate circle.

The girls get up to leave, smiling and chatting among themselves. I feel like their day is brighter because they have met a writer in a park full of writers, here in their city because their city is where people go to write. We have each given something to the other.

I continue watching the pigeon, who has come and gone several times. My writing begins to take shape. I have a story now. The pigeon and I and a whole group of park pigeons are characters in a story that I have just written. It's time to move on.

Thinking that my body cannot tolerate any more sugar or caffeine, I go directly to the Café du Monde and, against my better judgment, order café au lait and beignets, simply because I must. I'm on a mission now. I want to recapture something of a childhood visit with my family when I was eleven years old. The round table, vinyl-covered chairs, and ceiling fan are all the same. Coffee and sugar and hot grease co-mingle their aroma with the street smells of rotting garbage and the river scents of mud and fish. Just as always. The cacophony of voices and accents blend into one sound. The clatter of cups and saucers and spoons and trays, the boat whistle and horses' hooves and cars all unite. I begin writing something, anything at all that I can remember. The heat and humidity, enhanced by sugar shock and caffeine overload, are sufficient to transport me.

It's working, and I'm here with my parents, my sister Cesca, and my little brother Robert. We are across the street from the Café du Monde, standing beside the horse-drawn carriage. I am so hopeful that Daddy will let us take a ride, but I know better than to ask. We've already had breakfast at Brennan's and café au lait and beignets. We've even been promised dinner at Antoine's. That should be enough. Daddy takes a picture of his three kids, living out his dream, his fantasy of this day—we have stepped into the pages of all his favorite books, and we have become characters in the book he will never write. Mama is happy that he is happy. Cesca, the

middle child, is laughing, as always. I, the eldest, am serious, as usual. And Robert holds his little hand in mine.

Children cannot understand what's at stake in terms of fervent parental desire to provide something magical for their children, that it's more about grown-up needs than kids' needs. That day in the French Quarter as a girl of eleven, I did not know the significance of what was happening, only that my father was joyful in his gift to all of us. In real time, I savor the moment of past time, while we were all innocent of the knowledge that this would be our last vacation as a family of five. That mid-autumn would mark a point of no return for the least of us, snatching him away with the speed of one stranger's split second of inattention, his brakes failing without warning, not even fully aware of the small figure in the dark. With no one holding his hand. For just a moment longer, I hold the future at bay, gently touching the sweet memory of the day my father took his family to New Orleans. I'm not writing anymore, not even thinking, just holding on, just for a moment more.

There, it's done. I can go back to the hotel now to rejoin my summer fellows. We will share our writing in the Paul McCartney suite. I don't know what to read, as my marathon writing has disappointed me. Richard tells us that sometimes we won't see it till later, but that being in New Orleans together, writing our way through the French Quarter, releasing ourselves to the city so that she can take us under her spell, will give us something magnificent. It may take a little time, a little distance, but we will see it. He's right.

Park Bench at the French Market

Lisa Watts

I smell coffee and beignets, and I can hear the whistle from the *Natchez* as it prepares to make its first journey of the morning downriver. This is a quiet spot; it's a tranquil, shady area that entices me to sit and breathe in the French Quarter. Maybe that will change as the morning grows and more people begin to stroll through, but right now this park is peaceful. The oaks, crepe myrtles, and magnolias invite me to rest a moment.

The sun filters through the trees over my right shoulder, and I glance over to see what kind of tree it is, expecting an oak or crepe myrtle. I'm surprised to see a palm. What landscape designer thought a palm tree belonged in south Louisiana? We're all about swamps and bayous, not coconuts and sand. Our breezes might be brisk at times, gale force even, but the wind that blows through my hair doesn't carry the smell of salt and suntan lotion. This wind is ripe with the smell of fish and rich vegetation, and I lean into it with gratitude, pausing to let it fan my blouse away from my sweaty skin. Not needing to understand the science behind Nature's primitive air conditioning system, I close my eyes and give thanks for it like the faithful who kneel toward Mecca. No, the palm tree is as out of place here as an ex-husband at a family reunion.

While the oaks, the crepe myrtles, and the magnolias spread their branches, comfortable with their surroundings, the palm remains straight and tall. He leans toward the river, desperate to escape from this dark, rich soil and plant his feet in the sand where they belong. He must be painfully aware that he is merely tolerated in this shady park.. He will always be treated politely, with the stiff formality that accompanies manners without warmth. The palm tree will always be company, never family.

I feel a special affinity with this palm tree. Just as he is an alien in this lovely park, I am also out of place. I am a pine tree among magnolias. My own roots are planted deep and strong in ordinary soil. I could never flourish here; the soil is too exotic. The French Quarter is splendid and lush, an extraordinary woman who remains beautiful and appealing despite her age. She is gracious, and I have been made welcome, invited to linger over cups of café au lait and drink in the richness of the Quarter. But I know that I am company.

Laughing children and running feet break my thoughts. I watch as they dash by, using the park's pathway as a shortcut to the Riverwalk. My own journey to this place is almost over, and it has been illuminating. Having enjoyed my experience here in the French Quarter, I will return to the place where my roots are set.

A History in a Moment

Jeff Wiemelt

Day 1.

At Café du Monde.

It all comes down to food, really. They say you'll never understand New Orleans, the Quarter especially, until you understand the food. It's always about the food, sitting down for coffee to decide where to head for lunch but never getting past yesterday's breakfast discovery. Thinking back to croissants and café au lait, which only serve to take the edge off a day's long wait for the dinner yet to come. It's all about the food here.

I'm thinking this morning that our Writing Project's all about the food, too. I discovered this first the other day when I was thinking about Melanie. Here's what I had to say, part of our morning's freewrite describing a bowl of fruit:

Fruit. Melanie's a bit of a fruit, I think. Hope she takes that as a compliment. She's funny. Her disabilities with words beginning with "e," her dysfunctions as a dancer. God, her dancing. Her arms and feet move in precisely the wrong places and at exactly the wrong times. Most folks fall down more gracefully than that. But there's Melanie's charm, her beauty. It just doesn't seem to matter to her. Or it does. I think Melanie's gift is to see the beauty in all things. To find a passion in the moment, embrace it quickly, and then to let it go just as quick. I admire her for that. I'm much too slow, too deliberate, too careful to let myself find much passion. Maybe that's why I'm here this summer. To find the passion that's missing in my teaching, my professional work, my writing. There seems so much of it around this room. Not all the time, of course. I see folks having ups and downs. But not Melanie. She's our passion-fruit.

Melanie's not alone. Some of our folks have even self-identified as food types. I think it was the afternoon after I wrote and read about Melanie that Karen revealed herself as our "hot pepper chicken." I think that's the most honest thing Karen's told our group this summer. And Karen is all about honesty. Karen has passion and fire. She's burning, ready to explode. But she's been careful so far. Cautious. Unwilling to really let herself go. She writes about passion, and truth, the fire inside. But she's not telling us the whole truth of it. Not writing from the truth *in* it. Not yet. And she seems desperate. I told Karen this morning before starting our walk, "Today's your day. Say something important." I'm walking with Karen today because I want to be there when it happens. Karen, let it happen, let it burn.

At Molly's at the Market.

I've heard raves about this place. Richard, our Project Director and guide, swears it's a writer's heaven. I belly up to the bar to order our first round, spotting a Yeats poster on the wall across from me. "Cast a cold eye / on life, on death. / Horses, pass me by." As I'm reading, the fellow next to me, draped over the remains of what surely isn't his first or third Bloody Mary today, leans over to whisper a line from Rimbaud, "Devil cast me away with your fiery eye." I'm polite, and intrigued. I ask him to say it again, but he can't. "It comes out different every time," he warns. Then he won't leave me alone. Pulls a book from his pack, throws it down too violently on my keyboard, and demands I read a page. Now I just want to be left alone.

You can't understand New Orleans until you've met the people. I won't say "know" the people. It's way beyond knowing. It's all about the moment where you find them. Everyone is a

new place in time. A passing moment. I reach out, want to put my arms around it, and it's gone. "It comes out different every time."

I'm wondering how much of what I know about my Project partners is a passing moment like that? Fleeting impressions, characters in an unfolding story? One partner that's settled, I'm certain, is Diana. We met Diana and her group when we wandered into Molly's. Most of her group moved on to find something to eat. Diana stayed. She's solid, fixed. And she also scares the hell out of me! Diana read a poem for us a couple weeks back. Called it "Motherfucker." Two or three lines of just about the most intense verbal castration of an ex-husband I can imagine. Mostly, I think, it's the way she read it to us. Diana enjoyed that too much. It scared the hell out of me. This morning I asked Diana if she would write with me today. I thought a long time before doing that. I thought I wanted to see what she has close up, touch a piece of her certainty for a time, the certainty of that anger. I couldn't go through with it, backed out at the last minute. She's too hot, and she scares the hell out of me. The moment has passed, and we've moved on.

Day 2.

La Marquise.

I'm sharing breakfast with my friend George this morning at the Marquise. George revisits the place as a fond memory of his first marathon here in New Orleans, two or three years ago. He seems pretty certain there's a magic in this space, and maybe apprehensive that the magic's moved on. But I don't think so. In the Quarter people pass with the unfolding moment, but these kinds of places endure, endure the people and the passing of time.

The Quarter hides many secrets like this one, protective of its deep history. Our moments in the Quarter always come ready-packed with this history. George and I sit opposite each other, both writing from corners of the hidden courtyard we share. We're alone here, but not really. We're never really alone in the Quarter, always joined by the history. It's a guarded history, memories carried in the bread crumbs protected by jealous sparrows that flit just out of reach. It's in the crumbling brick wall that frames George writing, envelops him. Our moments stand still in time here, like the heavy brick displaced above George's head, falling, but held fast by the creeping, leafless vines that guard that wall. George is oblivious to all that, now a part of the history.

I'm inside for another café au lait. I wait behind a mother and her young daughter, hair so short that both could pass as boys if not for the almost formless summer dresses they wear. I see a roach move across the floor, the great grand mother-of-all-roaches, a Quarter roach, the kind that carries the weight of a world on its shoulders. You just can't know New Orleans until you know these creatures. My roach searches its way to the cash machine that sits so uncomfortably here, moved back into a corner as if to hide itself in the shame of its moment. The young girl watches with me, and our roach, and we share a smile. How can such a little girl understand this roach belongs here with us? We let it guard our moment, and the history we share together. I nod my head to tell the middle-aged Asian woman that's sweeping the floor around us. She sees it too, and smiles, and continues to sweep.

I'm back at my table now, and I wonder that the birds never sing in the Quarter. The history they guard is too important for song. The heavy brick still holds, suspended above George's head, and I understand that George too belongs here in the Quarter. Always quiet, guarded, George sits frozen in time, enveloped in the secrets of a history too important for words. If Melanie is our passion, the heart beating life into our group, George is our soul, our reflective presence. George is reflection without a focus. Our light moves through him, then bends back

and distorts to create an image that's something new, more wonderful. George suspends us in time, moves us back into our history, then guards the secrets we whisper to tell.

My eyes wander across this scene. I find new images, new moments in passing. Cut back into the wall, above an old wooden doorway closed fast upon time, rests a decayed plaster statue that George tells me are monkeys. I don't think they're monkeys, or not just monkeys, and I wonder that they seem to sit so comfortably on George's shoulder. The old brick wall weighs down upon that shoulder, the vines that hold the heavy brick are George's vines. I wonder that George can bear the weight of our soul, every day keep us suspended in our moment, protect us from falling. This is holiness, I think. And the birds are singing now.

My time is passing. In an hour we'll meet back in Richard's room to share what we've written over these past two days. I don't want this to end, and I feel like crying. I've been writing hard here, trying my best to come to some kind of understanding of our writing group, the partners who've walked with me, the time and the space we've shared. I've written to understand the Quarter, its places and people and food, its history and its presence. I started with an idea, a feeling that coming to know my group this summer is a lot like coming to know New Orleans. But I've learned I can't really know either by trying. That knowledge needs to come more directly, experienced in the moment. It comes to me now as we walk down these streets together. And it walks with me still, a soft arm upon my shoulder, a warm hand within my hand.

SLWP Summer Institute 2003

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