

Louisiana State University

Writing Project

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Anthology

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Where Summer Lives

Alica Benton

The road stretched out long and winding before me. I had just crossed the rickety rickety bridge. That's what we called it when we were kids. The bridge was made of wood and was always missing a few slats. We were eternally terrified that the big station wagon loaded with kids and trunks of clothes for the long summer vacation would do the bridge in. My daddy would drive over the bridge real slow adding to the drama and anxiety we were already feeling. The bridge would wobble and make creaking sounds, boards would pop and the tires would grind. When we finally reached the other side we felt like we had cheated death. And in our minds we had. We had escaped. We were almost there – the place where summer lived.

The wooden bridge is gone now. The thrill is too. It has been replaced with concrete pillars and asphalt... and I drive on. I catch a glimpse of it around the bend. I get a lump in my throat. There she is on my right. The place where summer lives.

She is sitting in the valley, old and worn.

Waiting.

Waiting for summer.

Waiting for the end.

Waiting for me.

Life had been good.

Life had been hard.

The years had taken their toll.

This is the day the little white house will be torn down.

My mama was born in that house. She grew up in that house with her 12 brothers and sisters. She had a horse named Clara that she kept in the barn. The barn is already gone. It fell years ago. At night people would come and steal the wood. Aged barn board is worth a lot of money. Thank goodness the house out lasted the

barn. My Papa and Granny sat on that swing and listened to the crickets sing at night. My uncles sat in weave bottom chairs on the front porch and talked late into the night. The front porch is one long smooth block of concrete. The perfect place to sit and cool your legs in the summer time. There were many jacks tournaments played on that porch. I won a few games but no one could beat my mama. She was the jacks queen-still is. A tear rolls down my cheek. Not for the loss of the house but for the loss of my childhood memories. They are in that house and soon that house will be gone. But not my memories. Those I hold in my heart. I will always remember that this is the house where I spent my summers. This is the house where I learned to fish, braid hair, play jacks, spit watermelon seeds, milk a cow, and catch a chicken. This is the house where my favorite cousin, Jeff, taught me to put ketchup on spaghetti. This is the house where my aunt did all of her quilting and my granny did all of the biscuit making. This is the house my papa would come home to with a block of cheese, a tube of bologna, and a pack of crackers – enough to feed everyone. This is the house with the open steps where all the cousins would sit for dinner – there wasn't enough room for us in the kitchen- that was just for adults. There was a pecking order though, older cousins at the top and younger cousins at the bottom. This house holds so many memories. When the house is gone I fear my memories will slip away. I remember when there was no bathroom or running water. You had to use the outhouse or at night you could use the piss pot. Only my papa called it a piss pot. Mama made us call it a pee pot. Piss is not a proper word. There was a pump at the sink in the kitchen and every morning my granny would fill a silver bucket with water and put it on the side table in the kitchen. Beside the bucket she would lie a white dry cloth and a matching silver ladle. If anyone wanted a drink you used the ladle to sip water and put it back for the next person. The house smelled like coffee day and night. I don't drink coffee, but I love the smell. I guess because it reminds me of this house.

There are so many sights and sounds and smells that bring me back to this place. I guess it will never truly to be gone as long as I hold it in my heart. I never got to take that trip but this is how I imagine it in my mind. If I could only have seen the little white house one more time.

Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed Something Black

Katy Black

Late Last Night

You came home late last night ... past 4 am. I didn't even know. I was sprawled out, face down on your side of the bed, sleeping and probably snoring. My hair haphazardly pulled into a ponytail holder that is hanging on for dear life. But you weren't there ... I drifted, drifted ... waiting for you to come home. The world sleeps but you are awake. Like a silent, watchful night owl slipping silently through sleeping neighborhoods.

At a moment's notice you spring into action, chasing the man who is hoping to outrun his consequences. Chasing him through the black woods, the speedometer creeping. Faster, faster, faster ... I roll over in our bed, reaching out, reaching for you. But you are reaching for him.

Our digital clock from my college days blinks red, assuring me the alarm has been set. Your lights flash blue through the dark forest, smashing all sense of tranquility. You can't catch him. First chase you've lost in 5 years...

Hours later, you return home to your wife, tangled in the sheets, impossible to unravel without waking her. You decide to sleep on top of the covers, wrapped in the fuzzy blanket you agreed to allow in the bedroom despite it shedding like some purple cat ... You wake up with me two hours later, the alarm signaling like it promised. You take a deep, exhausted breath, eyes blinking, purple fuzz fused to your scratchy skin like Velcro...

... Without request, you gently wrap my hurt toe and pack a sandwich for my lunch, leaving off the mustard. You see and remember the details. I love that about you. After a restful seven and a half hours I quickly kiss each of your sleepy eyes, right then left, then slip out the front door. As I walk to my car I see your police unit in the driveway and stop suddenly. It's muddy, scratched up, long smears of dirt and leaves. A dent along one side. Telltale signs I am learning to

read all too quickly. My stomach tightens. I didn't know you came home late last night.

They Would Come Get You

"They would come get you."

The words echo in my ears. We are riding in the car after Tania's dance recital, it's late for a school night, but her face when we arrived made it worth it. We are driving in the country, through a misty sunset that is hard to enjoy because of the clouds and the conversation. We are having "the talk." An exchange I know we need to have, but it came so fast. I think about the wedding present wrapping paper still crumpled in the kitchen trashcan ... a mix of pastels and various shades of white. We are newly married, less than 2 weeks ... He repeats it again, "*You know they would come get you.*"

How do you prepare for the worst day of your life, which may never happen? I decided to plan for it ... reasoning that imagining it in my head would help. I picture myself plopping down in the middle of my deepest fear and looking at it head on. I reason that if I know what to expect, the cues, the stage directions, I'll know how to be strong; I'll be able to coast on my preplanned moves. I will be able to be what he needs me to be in that moment.

When we started dating I took my potential role as a police officer's wife seriously. So I did what I always do when I take something VERY seriously ... I ordered books off amazon.com. The books had titles like

I Love a Cop,

Because I'm Suitable: The Journey of a Wife on Duty,

Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement, and

Bullets in the Washing Machine.

They explained the life my future husband and I would face. The text by the PhD psychologist detailed the emotional toll of 12 hour stretches of hyper attentiveness, and the resulting lethargic crash upon his return home, letting me know that a catatonic husband who refused to move from his overstuffed chair on

his days off was not uncommon. The practical book that outlined the physical toll of a rotating shift that switched 4:00 am - 4:00 pm to 4:00 pm to 4:00 am multiple times in a week. The overzealous Christian wife who explained that I shouldn't be mad if he seems to be asleep all the time, that I should simply quiet the house, turn down his bed sheets, and just be thankful I knew that, at least at that moment, he wasn't in a life threatening situation.... I threw that book across the room, and refused to pick it back up for days.

So here we were in the car. Having the conversation about what it would look like, what steps I needed to take if that day happened.

The day the man with the shotgun, who tried to take the lives of his wife and two young daughters, turned his anger on my husband,

The evening a traffic stop to help a stranded motorist left him vulnerable on the side of the road to a teen swerving as she reached for her phone to text her boyfriend.

Or the night the resulting crash from a high speed chase to catch a drug dealer smuggling drugs through town on the way to the city left my husband with a new life ... I turned back to face him in the car and noted out loud that at least we lived in fairly small town and thankfully he didn't see as much violence as a police officer in a big city. He gently pointed out that in a small town things were less active, but there were fewer deputies on the road and his nearest backup is often far away. *"If I need help, 20 minutes is a long time to wait ..."* I sighed and glared out the window as the rain dripped down the pane.

"They would send someone to come get you, even at school. You wouldn't be alone. They would drive you back." The words echoed in my ears as I imagined his Sergeant, tall like a giant, standing, defeated, in my principal's cramped office, awkward, waiting. His black gun and handcuffs stand out against the children's books and love notes. I am four doors down, obviously reading with my students.... The secretary knocks gently on my classroom door and asks that I come to the office.

Seeing the stricken look on my face, my new husband reassures me that his being injured on the job is not likely, especially since his sergeant promised to

keep him safe during a toast on our wedding day. I smile and turn back to face him in the front seat. And he's right, I probably won't lose him to an on the job injury... My text by the PhD psychologist says that I am much more likely to lose him to depression or suicide. The cover of that book is red, an endorsement rings out, *"If you want to make it through to retirement, wear your vest, wait for backup, and read Gilmartin's book."* High praise, I suppose. This one is actually my favorite of the pile. A psychology major myself, I find comfort in the familiar language and practical solutions in which my role is more than a passive dutiful wife, just along for the ride. The long hours, horrific situations, and constant "on edge" lifestyle have an impact that many officers don't see coming, Gilmartin had written ... Mine will see it coming I had vowed as I read, and we will have a plan. I dog-eared the page resolutely, the bent corner meant to remind me of my promise. I turn to him in the now dark car, *"And what about the emotional toll. What if I see you slipping into some dark place and I can't get you back? What's the plan for that?"* ... *"Take my phone and call Cowboy Mike. Tell him everything."* ... He will know what to do, I thought. I remember our wedding day, warm but breezy under the ancient oak trees that stretched toward the sun. Cowboy Mike was calm that day, and therefore so was I. His purposeful yet peaceful demeanor while praying over us before the ceremony and the eagerness in his voice as he pronounced us husband and wife, the feeling of security washes over me and I sink down into it... I look back out the window and think ...they will come get me ... call Cowboy Mike ... Yes, that is enough planning for tonight ...

Their Moment of Need

I was debating with him on the phone about the number of China sets to add to the registry. How does anyone expect a bride to make a decision about what plates she intends to serve Thanksgiving dinner off of when she is finally old enough to play hostess? I'm supposed to choose something classy, timeless, colors that are compatible with all seasons. We planned to have this exhilarating conversation over dinner, but he was called into work, which left me eating green beans and pasta alone. In a zealous attempt to keep our wedding "to do" list on track I asked that we still have the conversation over dinner, despite his being at work ... *"What do you think would be best? The blue or the ivory?"* ... I could hear his police radio crackle to life. I know that whoever is on the other end takes precedence over my

conversation and so I quiet, waiting like a crouched lioness, ready to resume my argument for four sets of ivory instead of eight. I am not listening to the radio since I don't yet know their police lingo and can rarely interpret their often thankfully mundane calls about alarms and cows in the road. I hear my fiancée take a deep breath... thinking he is ready to resume our spirited debate I jump back in to explain that if we register for too much China we won't have enough room for it. He cuts me off abruptly ... *"I need to go ... now. I love you."* I start to ask, but he is gone.

In the seconds before he taps the red button, disconnecting us, I hear him accelerate his unit; the words, *"completed suicide"* crackle over the radio. I guess there isn't a code for that call. Knowing that I can't bother him by calling back or sending a message, I helplessly put the phone down and do the only thing I can, say a prayer and return to lesson planning ... He texts a few hours later. *"I love you. Sat with the mom for a long time. Nothing we could do. I love you."*

I imagine him, sitting on a dingy, floral couch, his black uniform foreign in an otherwise bright home. The middle-aged woman frozen next to him unable to process the nightmare that has just happened in her own home. Her phone clutched in her hands, phone calls waiting to be made, yet she is paralyzed, unable to command her finger. Maybe if she doesn't move, doesn't say it out loud, it didn't happen. It is the worst night of her life, and he is there with her. She will never forget this night. She will never forget his face. He is the first one to tell her those words she will hear over and over in the days to come ... *"I am so sorry for your loss."*

These are the moments, combined with the countless others, that make me love him through the fear. The conversation with the runaway teen that returned home, the stolen heirloom ring returned after a full confession, the handshake passed between two men who have been to the edge of hell and made it back because of each other. Some nights, when he comes home late after a tough shift, he holds me differently, tighter, as if holding me keeps him from slipping into the dark abyss that has engulfed someone he tried to save that night. After a month of marriage, I am realizing how little I do know about how to do this The books were a good start, but we have to work together to create a life that celebrates goodness and happiness ... We have to, so the dark things don't swallow us whole.



Reunited

Randi Singleton Foval

As I sat watching my students in the school lobby on rainy day carpool I noticed a familiar person cautiously walking between kids anxiously awaiting their carpool number to be called. I thought he looked like a 40 pound lighter middle school crush I had in school. Without ever seeing this person's face, I shrugged off the memories and continued working on my never ending "to do" list of copying, stapling, and organizing for the week ahead. I had decided to stay late at school that same day. I loved blaring a worship station on Pandora and getting things done in my quiet, and sometimes spooky, classroom. My Christmas tree had just been set up and decorated by my involved room mom. The scrawny tree twinkled with red and green lights. As I sat at my desk, I saw that familiar person pass my room. I took a chance and yelled, "Matthew Foval?" Much to my surprise, the person yelled back, "Randi Singleton?"

As he walked into my classroom I immediately got that middle school giddy feeling again. He walked across the room to hug me. He was trying to get a technology task done for his boss, so he quickly ran to complete it. As he was leaving my building, he stuck his head in my classroom looking for me. My room mom had set up the Christmas tree in a place where I was hidden while sitting at my back table. I poked my head around the tree and told him I was sitting at the table stapling Christmas "fun" packets. As his six foot, two inch frame walked to my table he said, "How are you Miss...?" As he walked towards me I saw him looking at my ring finger and I quickly told him my last name was still Singleton.

He sat in the child's size chair for 45 minutes as we chatted about how our lives had changed since the last time we saw each other, five years earlier at our high school graduation. Before he left, he asked if he could walk me to my car. I quickly declined because let's be honest, a teacher cannot stop working just because a handsome man asks to walk her to her car. We left each other with a kind "*See ya around!*"

It would be several days until I saw him again and in the mean time I would stalk his Facebook and Instagram to find out anything I could about what he had been up to. Several days later, we ran into each other in the school courtyard and I invited him to my class's Christmas party. The parties are always over the top and since he would already be on campus I told him to stop by and get a plate of food- that is a way to a man's heart right? He asked me for my phone number, and I ecstatically put my phone number into his phone and pressed "call." I was excited to have his number as well. Much to my dismay the call never connected, and I never got his phone number. The Christmas party came and went and there was no sign of him. That afternoon, however, I received a text message from him asking how my party was and if I had any plans that night. The text messages quickly turned into a phone call that landed me a date with this fella. The whole conversation took place in front of my extremely attentive mother. Sushi and a comedy show would be my last first date – thankfully we got our Christmas bonuses earlier that day. He picked me up at 7:00 in his 1998 maroon Astro Van. I laughed on the inside... I've always dated people with really nice cars. I climbed in the passenger seat and said "*Nice ride.*" He smiled and we laughed. As he drove me to a local sushi restaurant, I thought "Hopefully I can stomach this." I hadn't eaten sushi in years after eating an order of bad sushi from a grocery store. We sat down and ordered drinks and our entrée. We talked about what we had done over the past 5 years – starting a band, jobs, family, past relationships- all while he

laughed at my rusty chopstick skills. I loved how he hung onto every word I spoke so attentively. We finished dinner and headed to Chelsea's Café where a friend of his was having his birthday party at a comedy show. "*Oh great!*" I thought, "A night filled with drunken men laughing over raunchy jokes." Much to my surprise, the crowd was small and consisted mainly of families of the comedians. We laughed at the mediocre comedians then I was ready to go home. The night was young but I had just finished an exhausting day of Christmas parties, spirited parents, and eager students. When we pulled into my driveway, we both knew that there was chemistry between the two of us but for the first time on a first date with someone I actually liked, I ended the night not with a kiss but with a hug and "*Thank You.*"

Eight months later, I married Matthew, the man of my dreams, my best friend. I can't imagine being married to anyone else. He supports and encourages me. He challenges and pushes me to be the best person I can be. While I may not appreciate his socks and shoes being left by the front door every day, I wouldn't rather have anyone else's shoes sitting right next to mine.



The Day in the Life of a Teacher: Let's Grow Those Dendrites!

Deborah Lobell Major

I have been a 5th grade teacher of science for 9 years. My students will never cease to amaze me. One day during our cooperative learning sessions, I overheard a conversation amongst one particular group, about which I could not help but to laugh. The group consisted of one girl, Breanna, and two boys, Sean and Daniel. They were assigned to read informational text using Predicting, Questioning, Clarifying and Summarizing strategies to complete a project. The assigned topic was organ systems. This group chose the central nervous system focusing on the brain. First, they read the text, making predictions and determining what they thought the text would inform them, based on headings, pictures and captions. They then read the text, asking questions as they read. Next, they were to discuss as a group and answer the questions.

It was during their discussion of the answers to their questions, I overheard this conversation.

Sean: (looking amazed) *Did you know that your left brain controls your right side and the right brain controls the left side?*

Daniel: (raising his left hand) *So, when I raise my left hand, my right brain is telling it to?*

Sean: (lifting his right hand, with a quizzical look on his face) *So my left brain is telling my right hand to lift. How come I can't feel my brain telling it to lift?*

Breanna: (looking inspired) *So, if I slapped you with my left hand, my right brain is telling it to slap you, and I won't feel it?*

Teacher: (thinking silently) *Those dendrites must be on vacation.*

Teacher: (curiously) *How many brains do you have?*

Breanna: (assuring) *Two. A left one and a right one. Did you know your left brain tells your right hand what to do. So, if I slapped Sean with my right hand, I could blame it on my left brain.*

Teacher: (smiling and thinking) *I could have fun with this.....*

Meeting Cathy

Alicia Peters Tate

Our parents were divorced when I was four and Kelley, my sister, three. It's been nearly two decades since I have seen them together, unless you count courtrooms. It took me a long time to understand that my parents weren't going to get back together, but when I finally arrived at this conclusion, I did so with resignation. There were some private nights of sobbing into FooFoo, a large, cream and brown, stuffed dog that had moved from home to home with me, but no tantrums in my parents' presence – at least not about their divorce. I didn't fight against their decision to completely destroy the world as we had known it. I was innately assured (as all children are) that my parents knew what was best for our family.

Every other weekend, from the front seat of the dark blue Honda Civic she drove, Donna, my mother, wouldn't stop calling my dad an asshole. The moment

we pulled out of the parking lot adjacent to his loft apartment.

He wasn't giving her enough money.

He didn't send us home in the same clothes.

Where did he think he got the right to want to see us more?

And there were times I would question (inwardly of course) why my dad had rented a loft apartment when he had two little girls? *Maybe he was an asshole.* I thought the loft was exciting with the one room way up in the air with no walls; there was a swimming pool and a tiny playground with swings and green twisty slide; all within walking distance of his front door. My dad having a girlfriend also assisted in increasing my understanding of the word *asshole*. That is what my mother called him many times after Cathy, his girlfriend, who was a checkout girl at the K-Mart, became a part of our lives.

My sister, Kelley, and I would learn about Cathy at Kelley's sixth birthday party. ShowBiz Pizza was a real treat for a birthday celebration. Our mom, like most single parents, didn't have extra income, so having Kelley's party at ShowBiz Pizza was exhilarating. The lights, the token-fed electronic arcade games, the tickets that had to be hand counted at the prize-counter; the animatronic, gorilla pianist and his accompaniment of woodland creatures and the hot, gooey, cheese pizza that was served at a table my mother wouldn't have to wipe clean all made ShowBiz heaven in my young mind. This was a birthday to remember.

As we were placing pointed, paper party hats around the orange laminated booths, my mom's good friend, Ms. Rachel, came rushing into the ShowBiz, her

daughter, Christina, trailing behind as she burned a path towards my mom.

“Donna, you will never believe what happened at the check-out in Kmart!”
Ms. Rachel eagerly blurted out to my mom.

Before Ms. Rachel took the time to survey her audience the words rolled out of her mouth.

“I was buying a gift for Kelley, and the girl at the check-out asked Christina who the gift was for. Christina told her ‘For my friend Kelley’, and the check-out girl got really excited and told us that was her boyfriend’s daughter! Did you know John was dating somebody?”

For a moment I digested the words spoken in front of Kelley and me. I wasn’t sure what dating someone meant.

Based on my mother’s reaction it wasn’t decent and she was obviously unaware that my dad had been dating. Ms. Rachel was not the intended victim of the look my mother responded to her story with, but she certainly was the receiver. My mother gave *the look* – the look was meant for the woman my mother had never met, and whoever Cathy was my mom was not ever going to like her.

I know my mother hated this woman with everything inside of her thin, angular body. This look my mother would give would make anyone recoil with a glance. Your stomach would knot up and you knew things were going to get bad. My mom’s teeth would clench tight together and all the muscles around her mouth would work at holding her lips in a pursed position one centimeter out from their normal resting position. All the raw emotion comes from her eyes, the

upper and lower lids slide together at the corner and her pupils fix you with a gaze that radiates disgust. I don't know where my mother learned this look.

A few weeks after the birthday party our dad would take us to meet Cathy in the K-mart check-out line. He had taken us to the store to buy Mother's Day gifts for our mom.

Cathy was exaggeratedly tall at 5'10" and had long red hair. It was a shade of red that only comes from bottles, but when you're little those sort of details don't matter. She was young and liked music with lyrics that sounded strange and grown-up to my seven-year old ears. On the wall in the room she ended up sharing with our dad in his loft was a corkboard bulletin board that had a variety of concert tickets and pinback buttons of Spuds MacKenzie and rabbit profiles that I would learn years later is a famous logo for a popular magazine for men.

I know my dad wasn't a lot older than Cathy, five years at the most. But with his premature male patterned balding and obsessively mannerly demeanor, Cathy seemed closer in age to us than to him. I don't remember them getting married; not because I have a poor memory of the time, but because no one spoke to Kelley or me about the marriage.

One weekend Cathy was my dad's girlfriend; two weekends later and freshly returned from their honeymoon in the Caribbean she was his wife. It's as if their marriage just entered into existence when they went out to grab a gallon of milk and came back with a wedding license too; maybe there was a special being run.



Reading Experiences 1

Mary Vaughn

I have always been an avid reader. My parents didn't get many opportunities to read to me as a child because there I would be, at five or six years old, perched in their laps reading a story *to them* as if they hadn't heard of *Cinderella* or *Snow White* before. They wouldn't get the chance to read because I was set on reading to them. My parents would listen to my stories, that were an even balance of reading and rambling, and eventually tuck me into bed, hoping that I would soon be fast asleep, I would scamper out of bed and grab a book, probably one of the *Berenstein Bear* books—my favorite. I quickly learned that reading did not put me to sleep. On the contrary I would continue reading well into the am.

I feel for kids who will not feel the anticipation of waiting for a new *Harry Potter* novel every year. *Harry Potter* and I literally grew up together. I had to have serious discussion with my mom about taking me to midnight releases. Like seriously? I could have been doing drugs, coming in late, or dying my hair magenta. Going to Walmart at midnight was a small investment in a positive,

productive pastime.

Once I got the newest novel I would devour it. Within the first day or two I would finish it, no thanks to my parents and teachers nagging me about eating dinner and doing homework.

I remember in the fourth book Harry participated in the triwizard tournament. In the second “game,” though there was nothing trivial about the challenges, an item was taken from each contestant. There was a song that gave a clue about what was stolen and how to get it back. I sang the song and took my sister’s glasses. I may have stomped on them too for good measure. She didn’t really appreciate the song. My mother didn’t either.

I always have my ears open for new books. I hate when I get sucked into a novel and find out at the end that it is a part of a series. Seriously?! I wasn’t looking for that kind of commitment. The last time that happened was with *Miss Peregrin’s Home for Peculiar Children*. Here I am getting all invested in the characters and the plot only to be hit with a “to be continued” at the end.

Talk about being led on. After all of the ups and downs I have been through with Harry Potter, Katniss Everdeen, and Sookie Stackhouse, I have got to go through it all over again. The months of waiting. I don’t need to date, I read!

Weird reading experiences don’t go away when you start teaching literature. Oh no, they get even more interesting...

At the beginning of my first semester teaching ninth grade English I allowed

my students to vote on a book for the end of the year. Two classes chose *Feed*, by M. T. Anderson. I sent home a letter in January and discussed the novel with the chair of the English department and the principal. Months have passed and my class has started reading the novel. One day I receive a call from Susie Q's mom.

Mary: Hi

You must be calling about Susie Q's grades

Mrs. Q: Hi. I don't want Susie Q reading *Feed*.

How convenient. Susie Q doesn't read what I assign anyway.

Mary: I am sorry to hear that. I allowed students to vote on a text to read and her class chose that one. Why don't you want her to read it?

Mrs. Q: We are Christian.

Mary: Oh, Okay. I am as well.

Mrs. Q: I found a curse word in the book.

Susie Q curses more than I do, and does so while wearing skinny jeans that surely must be painted on her body.

Mary: In the letter I sent home in January I explained this concern, but Susie Q must not have given it to you. The novel was approved by the principal and is a national book award winner.

Mrs. Q: We don't read stuff like that—we're Christian.

Mary: Okay. Well I am glad you are taking an interest in your students' work (*in mid-April, but hey who's counting*). I can definitely assign a different book to her

I—

Mrs. Q interrupts: Well her friends in another class are reading the *Hunger Games*. I took her to see the movie too. I think she should read that.

Mary: Mrs. Q I have no problem with Susie Q reading that, but you mentioned that you are Christian. Do you know what that novel is about?

Mrs Q: No

Mary: 24 children are locked in an arena and fight to the death as the nation watches.

Mrs. Q: Oh, no, she can't read that. What about *Of Mice and Men*? I read that in high school. It was short.

Mary: Sure. Now you know that *Of Mice and Men* has curse words and racial slurs. I can definitely use it and work with her resource teacher to help her. Some other texts that fit with the themes in—

Mrs. Q interrupts: Yeah, she can read that

Mary: Okay. Well thanks for calling. Don't hesitate to reach out with any other concerns.

~A week or two later Mary (me) has a conversation with the resource teacher~

Resource Teacher: How did Susie Q do?

Mary: Not so well. Did she read it?

We're on a family vacation to Kosciusko, Mississippi. My, my sister Erin, and my

grandmother are on the back seat while my parents are up front. Erin and I both brought books to sustain us on the two and a half hour car ride. Grandma just stares out of the window—she has advanced Alzheimer’s, but somehow has retained the ability to read expressively, though with no comprehension. When we pass signs and advertisements she reads them out loud, then returns to her silence.

The car is quiet as Grandma begins reading, “Well don’t you play hard to get?” I asked. Eric smiled. He knew how to play. How to play really good. He pulled his chair close to mine and rested his hand on my thigh.”

Funny, that doesn’t sound like any road sign or advertisement. I look up from my own book for a moment and glance outside of the window. There is nothing but the long stretch of highway before us, flanked with forest.

Grandma ma continued, “I clenched my knees together, but it was too late. I couldn’t believe Eric would go this far in public, but I hadn’t the nerve to stop him. I grabbed the sides of the chair and unconsciously drew myself closer to him, teetering on the edge.”

Dad nearly veers off of the road. “Someone get that trash away from Mema! What are y’all doing reading something like that anyway?”

Erin grabs the novel, a woman with face framing curls and red lips peering

up at her from the cover.

I smiled. “It’s not my book!”



My Story

Melissa Gulden

While I was going to college, I was fortunate to begin working in the cosmetics industry. I worked at makeup counters, like Clinique and Benefit, then moved up to business manager for Lancôme, then, when I moved away to Las Vegas, the ultimate makeup artist’s dream: I became a MAC girl.

So what does this have to do with teaching? Well, there was one piece of advice that I never forgot: one of the trainers said we are all in this business together. Our purpose is not to hide our tips and tricks, but to share them.

My job was to make people feel good about themselves. I put glitter and false lashes on women at 10 in the morning—it was Vegas, after all—and I loved that final look in the mirror, when the magic had been created and they saw themselves in all their buffed and bronzed glory. I would happily tell them that they, too, could recreate this at home with a few simple steps. Maybe they weren't trained as I was, but I gave them the tools to recreate that magic at home.

That is our job as teachers. We are facilitators to guide students to be able to recreate some of the things we show them. We should share our tips and tricks with our colleagues, so that they will have an easier time. Why keep it to yourself? Show your students the struggle of writing, step by step. If you go in there with a polished piece every time, they will see writing as some magical thing that happens overnight, that they will never be able to do. If you share the process with them, they will learn to embrace and even value the struggle. Remember: YOU are the best writer in the room. Your students deserve to see you write alongside them.

I was accepted into the summer institute for the Northern California Writing Project in 2010. I had only been teaching a few years at that time, but I already needed some inspiration and a re-boot. I had switched from 9th and 10th grade to 8th grade, and I wasn't sure how to handle middle school. I was eager to hear suggestions from some fellow educators. My cohort was around 20 people: from kindergarten teachers to community college instructors looking for ways to get students to transfer level. I was one of the only secondary teachers in the group, but learned from everyone.

We were all given the book *Living the Questions*, about teacher researchers. This interested me in many ways because I had always grappled with the notion of going back to school to earn a PhD, but I didn't know whether I had any nagging questions. I didn't realize that the questions you struggle with every single day in your classroom warrant research.

Every time a lesson falls apart is a chance to unearth a research question and start collecting data. Our days are full of opportunities for research and all

we'll be left with at the end of the day is regret if we miss them all. We'll read an article in a journal and think, 'I could have written that.'

In Elizabeth Berg's novel *The Pull of the Moon*, the main character notes how much those missed opportunities can haunt us,

"I am so often struck by what we do not do, all of us. And I am also, now, so acutely aware of the quick passage of time, the way that we come suddenly to our own, separate closures. It is as though a thing says, I told you. But you thought I was just kidding." (143).

The director of the writing project gave me a copy of two books that would change my life: *Write Beside Them* and *Just Girls*. I left the institute with research questions, as well as a completely revamped way of teaching writing in my classroom.

Warning: This is not for the status quo teacher. I spent hours in the library, looking for the mentor texts Penny Kittle mentions in her book; I made copy after copy, and created a folder of how I would incorporate this "new and improved" writing workshop model into my class.

As is the case with many of you, my colleagues weren't on board. They didn't want to use their summer time to meet and plan. So I went at it alone. For me, any time spent on creating a more invigorating, challenging and productive classroom is a good way to spend time—summer or not. This is a year-round profession to me, not just 9 months of the year. I eat, sleep, breathe reading books to recommend to my students, as well as books to help me: teacher books, YA lit, non-fiction, blogs, online articles websites. I scour the Internet for inspiration and never stop learning and trying to be better. I also write for a magazine and bring that struggle and process of writing into my classroom. I firmly believe you cannot be an effective writing teacher unless you write. Bring your own writer's notebook and show your students—the buy-in is much greater when you model for them what you are preaching. I want my students to know me—to know my stories. I read them drafts

of writing because I also want them to know I value what I am asking them to do enough to do it myself. I use my writing to show them how to respond in a

productive way to help me better my writing, so they will respond to each other in the same constructive ways. I want my students to understand that I am what I teach—a reader and a writer.

Which brings me to why I'm here, at LSU, working on a PhD, and not still in the classroom.

I was tired of feeling like the only one at my school who lived the question. I wanted more, but didn't know what that was. I had looked into many programs, but LSU is one of only a handful of schools that offer a specific English Education PhD. And they offered me a great opportunity. I postponed a year after my acceptance, but after a particularly difficult teaching year, I decided I needed to leave and see what else was out there.

Here's the thing about the grass being greener—it often isn't. No disrespect to my professors and advisors—I have been given many opportunities since I have been here (this being one of them), but I realized in my heart that I am a classroom teacher, with a passion for teenagers. I need the daily buzz of the high school hallways, the football games, homecoming, prom, graduation. Consoling my students when they don't get accepted to their first-choice college, celebrating with them when they do. I need the daily interaction with students—MY students, whom I get to know on a deep level throughout the year. I want to see the struggles and witness the triumphs that come from being 14 and trying to figure out who you are and where you belong in this world. And then watching them grow into capable, independent young men and women. I'm the coach, advisor, mentor to 150 students a day and I miss that in my soul.

But I am here for a reason. I am here to live the question that I came up with during the Northern California Writing Project Summer Institute in 2010. Being a Teacher Consultant for the National Writing Project is a title I carry with great pride and responsibility. It is a grassroots organization based on learning from other teachers the power of teaching writing. You don't have to be an English teacher, you just have to be a teacher who wants more. My hope for all of you is that you will come up with your own question that drives you,

that spurs you on to become better in this challenging profession, even during these times of uncertainty.



Small Tribute (for my mother)

Kim Skinner

"I'll go first," she always said,
"I'll show you how it's done."
So we would bike and cookie-bake,
And growing up was fun.
Every room of Life's Great House
She visited with zest;
Sunny rooms and darker rooms

Found her a willing guest.
Swiftly sped my growing years,
Till suddenly one day,
She saw a door unseen by us,
And quietly slipped away.
Now strong among the memories,
With me when my granddaughter plays—
"I'll go first," she always said,
"And I'll show you the way."

Reflection

Margaret-Mary Sulentic Dowell

You speculate,

wonder,

question.

- wanting to know the whys

- looking for the truths.

Causing me to ponder,

reflect,

ruminates,

deliberate,

contemplate,

struggling

to formulate worthy responses and carefully crafted replies

to future generations of teachers.

2014 Invitational Summer Institute Participants

Alica Benton is the mother of two and a teacher at the Dunham School, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Katy Black is a kindergarten teacher at Children's Charter Elementary School, a public charter school, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Randi Singleton Foval is a teacher at Parkview Baptist School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Deborah Major is a 5th grade teacher at Devall Middle School, West Baton Rouge Parish School System.

Alicia Peters Tate is a teacher at Runnels School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Mary Vaughn is originally from Mississippi; she successfully completed her master's degree at Louisiana State University in 2014 and now teaches high school English in Texas.

Melissa Gulden is a graduate of the Northern California Writing Project, California State-Chico, and a doctoral candidate at Louisiana State University.

Kim Skinner, originally from Corpus Christi, Texas, is Co-Director of the Louisiana State University Writing Project and Assistant Professor of Literacy in the School of Education, Louisiana State University.

Margaret-Mary Sulentic Dowell, originally from Iowa, is Director of the Louisiana State University Writing Project and associate Professor of Literacy and Urban Education in the School of Education, Louisiana State University.

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