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The cornerstone of the National Writing Project is the Invitational Summer Institute. As a starting point for the 2018 Invitational Summer Institute, Sassy and Margaret-Mary, 2018 co-directors, selected a common text, Dawson & Yagelski’s (2016). The Teacher-Writer: Creating Writing Groups For Personal and Professional Growth (Language & Literacy Series). New York, New York: Teacher’s College Press. Under the auspices of a National Writing Project 2017-2018 SEED Invitational Leadership Institute Grant, in the early summer of 2018, eight educators came together to share themselves, their expertise, and construct knowledge about writing practice.

Creating community within a group of disparate educators who come together for a short space of time during a summer demands awareness, attentiveness, and sensitivity to the individuals who comprise the group. As facilitators, you quickly come to understand the lived experiences of the individual group members. Establishing community means you consider differing philosophies, you encourage participants to respect the viewpoints of others, and as facilitators, you try not to overwhelm or over teach. Negotiation and comprise is a delicate dance, to listen and learn from one another in a shared space that nurtures and encourages growth and development.

Based on the National Writing Project tenet that teachers should be writers themselves before being teachers of writing, we came together for 10 days to explore writing and (re)discover ourselves as writers. As a group, investigated writing research, we shared writing recommended practice, and we explored ourselves as writers with sister institute attendees. Through participation in the Louisiana State University Writing Project, another leadership cadre of local educators was developed who in turn, will act as writing experts and facilitators of writing at their jobs, schools, and districts.

As a site of the National Writing Project http://www.nwp.org/, the Louisiana State University Writing Project’s Invitational Summer Institute 2018 was a success. In these pages, peruse writing from 2018 Institute attendees. Take pleasure in these pieces and the individuals they characterize.

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The Bee’s Knees
Bianca Benton

My name means “the white one”
Or beautiful or fair
In medieval times, fair skin equated to beauty
But I can’t relate there

Beautiful? Yes.
White? No.

I’m unapologetically Black
Most definitely, absolutely
That part of Bianca, holds so much value
That is if you really knew me

Trina demands Bianca
Rodrick argues Brandi
But on September 2nd, 1993
Bianca, completed the family

My family names all of the children
With that they’ve never been subtle
“Bee” is the norm, all happy and smiles
It’s “Bianca” when I’m in trouble

Bee with two e’s, B.B, Beez
Yes, it’s all the same
But as a young Capulet would ask,
“What’s in a name?”

B represents beauty and being bold
With that I’m unstoppable
What to do? I could never be told
I illustrates individuality
Introvertive, intelligence
There’s nobody I know like me
I’m my own person in that sense

A is for adamant
I learned from Trina to be firm
At times, I’m uncompromising
But all I have, I’ve earned

N is for natural
Happily nappy
My unruly curls and kinks represent me
And makes me ultimately happy

C is for cognitive
Mindful, is what I’ve always been
Careful in my speech
But crazy with my pen

A represents authentic
Always, learned that from my pops
To be genuine is embedded
And very difficult to be taught

So conclusively, that’s Bee
B.B, Bianca, or whatever you choose
To know me is to love me
Now I ask, who are you?
There is nothing more liberating than finding your voice and having the courage to use it.

~Portia Henderson, 2018

Reunited and it Feels so Good
Portia Henderson

I have missed writing. I used to journal often. I’m not quite sure when I stopped. Maybe when life was at its hardest, which of course is when I needed it the most.

If writing were a person, I wonder if they felt betrayed by my absence? For we were once what I would consider friends. Then out of nowhere, I abandoned them.

I say them because I do not want to assign a sex to Writing. It would be an interesting analysis as to discover why I would choose one sex over the other, but I digress.

Writing would surely feel betrayed as I did not offer a chance for them to comfort me during the hardest times of my life, such as 7 years of infertility, overcoming insecurities of the new roles I had to grow into, and my miscarriage. Of course there were many joyous occasions.

But..... Writing was not invited to share in. Some of those occasions include: my wedding day, graduating with my Masters in Social Work, obtaining my first job, the lovely apartment we started in, the purchase of our first home, the passing of my LCSW, going to Hawaii, visiting South Africa, the birth of our two children, being admitted to and the journey through my
doctoral program, and so much more. Writing would probably feel the most pain because of the years of lost material and creativity.

Although writing may feel all those things if they were real. Writing would just be happy I was back. Like the prodigal daughter. Welcomed home with open arms. Received in His rightful place. Welcomed back in a party form, which for me has been the Writing Project.

Being a part of the writing project has helped connect my soul back to my writing. It has allowed me to connect and find my voice. While I still have room to grow. I am excited to see where this journey will lead. Reunited and it feels so good!
Trudy
Susannah Jaques

If I close my eyes, I can still picture it perfectly.
Me, standing on the driveway.
To the right, your white carport.
There used to hang a red Little Tikes swing.
You would get mad at my dad for pushing me until my feet hit the ceiling.

Straight ahead, a perfectly manicured back yard.
Brick pathway, giant old oak, and a stark white picnic table.
Easters were my favorite back there.
So many places to hide eggs, wiping the sticky dye on my new Easter dress.
The smell of barbequed chicken and your warm potato salad.

Those were the best days.

If I close my eyes, it’s a blur now.
Signing a book to enter, walking upstairs to a locked ward.
Typing in a code 1-4-9-2, and hearing the doors unlock.
The humid, sticky air
carrying the scent of whatever they were serving you for dinner that day.
You would smile when you saw me,
even though you had no idea who I was.

I wondered if everything was gone.
Memories of piano lessons, fudge cake,
dinners so long I would dread them as a child,
trips to New Orleans, the city park carousel.
All the things that reminded me of you,
you had forgotten about.

You’ve been gone three years now.
Your memory left you much longer than that.
That sick disease taking you away from us,
one memory and name at a time.

Now what I have to remember you by,
your ring and memories.
Both which I cherish more than anything.
The very thing you lost, keeps you alive to me.
Growing up
The first day of school
Had its own share of fun.

Not for seeing friends
Or buying new supplies
Or even wishing the year done

I had a different reason.

A test
Would this teacher
Could that one
Shouldn’t she

Pronounce my name correctly?

From “Rachel” to “Raquel” to “Rochelle”
I heard it all.
Sitting in the back
Where all the “Ws” sat
I listened.
Then snickered with my friends

As this teacher
that one
and she

All butchered my name like it
Died and covered the counter
At Tag’s Meat Market

Every year,
I patiently corrected each one
And smiled

At this teacher
that one
and she.
Honestly, it really didn’t bother me.
For I knew I was more than those letters
But coming together, maybe not, for you see

I was named after my beloved grandmothers
And I certainly inherited more than their names
Maybe that’s why I gave my daughter the same.

Well, sort of

Starting in the middle
And going back to the original

She is “Kathleen Rachel”
Or “Katie” for short.

No test needed
No snickering between friends
No first day of school fun

Just the past, the present, and the future
All rolled into one.
Where I’m From
Amy Lew

I’m from the dirt and the dust,
from the rain and the mud.
I’m from the beach and the swamp,
from a church camp somewhere in between.
I am from Amazing Grace--how sweet the sound.
I am from “If ya want it, you better earn it yourself!”
I am from the smell of down home country cookin’ in Mamaw’s kitchen.
I am from Lew’s hard-working, never-a-dull-moment livin’.
I am from doing a rain dance
to a frog dance-- with usually no in between.
I am from Momma cooking on the fireplace,
to takin’ a bath in a sun-warmed #2 washtub.
I’m from makin’-do in a pinch, to
“puttin’ up all that food is a cinch”.
I am from pitch black and bull frog croakin’ nights,
to locust buzzin’, sun-scorchin’ dancin’ devil days.
I am from a long line of southern farmers at both sites.
I ‘m just a farm girl, tryin’ to work the maze.
(life)(story)
Laura Williams

[begin story]

i look back.

i miss a little girl who doesn’t exist anymore,

just like

i miss how simple those days were.
i miss an ideal, an idea, a memory.

[regret? sometimes.

hold to it?

... maybe]

i want to tell that girl i was
it’s alright, it’ll be alright,
you’re not wrong.
you’re not incomplete.
you’re not broken
and it’s not your fault
you don’t understand.

it’s not a problem to be fixed. [hindsight is the worst]

i want to tell that girl i was
even when you’re almost thirty,
you’re still looking for who you are
but you’ll get there, baby girl,
you’ll get there. [30 now wtf]

i want to tell her,
you’re not broken for what you can’t do [remember]
you’re not broken for what you don’t feel [remember]
you’re not broken for what you don’t understand.

baby girl, you’re not broken in the least. [remember]

i used to wonder
if my clever little sister was smarter than me.

but if my brain worked like my sister’s,
smart

would i have learned to write,
to read,
would i look around the world and see
unwritten poetry,
who would i be?

[my life’s philosophy]
my mother says i am
a romantic with the soul of a poet—
so i’ll find my truth for myself
and i’ll be content
because stories are what i know
and telling stories is what i do
and questioning in order to create
is what i was born for.

[mo(u)rning]
dreaming.
asleep or awake?
yes.
always yes.
minutes days weeks,
months are gone
but it feels like just yesterday—
the pain turns to a memory
that hits suddenly,
in flashes like lightning,
in waves like thunder.

i wonder:
will i ever stop expecting the worst?

[scent: smoke
feel: oh god it hurts
hear: glass shatters
taste: ash
see: he’ll never be there again
hear: sirens and sobbing
you’re crying.
stop crying.

it’s a dream.
you’ll wake up.
you haven’t woken up.
you’re not dreaming.]

[relief?
healing?
what is healing?
when am i healed?]
we sit around the table long into the night, 
cups refilled endlessly, nibbling on fruit and crackers, 
telling well-worn stories and ancient in-jokes—
they haven’t been funny in years but we laugh every 
time.]

(things i believed when i was five:
daddy’s as tall as a tree
and mama’s always right
and i’ll always be bigger
than my baby sister
and my big sister will always
be able to help me
and my brother’s the best
and the dog lives forever
and one day,
one day,
i’ll know what to do no matter what,
one day when i’m grown up like you.)

[grown up:
no fucking clue what to do.
take a breath.
keep going.]

[what
who
why am i?]  
[remember]

write that i wrote.
write that i never stopped.
write that someone somewhere
will read what i have written
and write that they will remember.

[and...
scene]
Margaret-Mary’s Wandering Thoughts While Writing into the Day
June 2018

A staple of an Invitational Summer Institute is a practice called “Writing into the Day.” Designed as a free write also intended to build writing stamina, “Writing into the Day” is how most institute days begin. This was one of Margaret-Mary’s. Like the accompanying spoon photo, it’s been polished a bit.

As a child, I was told that I named after a great aunt whom my mother adored. She lived a glamorous life, my mom used to tell us, residing in Los Angeles, California, having left the Midwest after high school to pursue her dreams. Her name was Mary-Margaret. And she used to mail Polaroids back to my mother, Dorothy, in her letters. As my mom read the letters to us, full of news and events on Mary-Margaret’s life, we poured over the photos, looked at her trendy clothes, her stylish hair, and her husband, George’s pink Cadillac with fins. She was glamorous indeed in the style of the early 1960’s, smart dresses, matching shoes and purses, and cat’s eye glasses, typically topped off with a pill box hat, all against the backdrop of California palms and sunshine. She was exotic and mysterious.

“She was born with a silver spoon in her mouth,” my mom used to say. I had no idea what that meant, but as a child adults often said things I didn’t understand.

As a little girl, I was repeatedly told that I was named after her. But in seventh grade, my dad died suddenly from a heart attack. In the space of a few moments, my life was turned upside-down and shifted radically. Life became even more chaotic as my older sisters and younger brothers were thrust into the glare of a big, Catholic funeral in a small, Iowa town. The day before the funeral, I was reading my father’s obituary in the Waterloo Courier, when I stopped dead.

“Mom,” I yelled, “come look! They got dad’s family stuff wrong!”

She leaned over my shoulder listening as I read that my dad’s mother’s name was Mary-Margaret Ramuter. “Yes,” she said, “that’s right.”

“But Grammy Anne is dad’s mom…” my voice trailed off at her raised eyebrows and pursed lips.

I waited. She paused. I waited some more.

Then she began, “Your dad’s mother, your real grandmother, died of tuberculosis when he was 9 months old. Grandpa Nic married again; he needed a wife to care for the baby and help raise the other two boys. Your grandpa married Anne four years after Mary-Margaret died. That’s really whom
you were named after, but Anne was jealous, so we tried to make her feel better
and never mentioned that Mary-Margaret again.”

I was incredulous. “But what about the silver spoon? I want to be like Mary-
Margaret in California!” My voice had turned into a wail. Tears leaked from my
eyes.

My mom smiled, tenderly, she pulled me close, and enveloped me in a hug. As
she rocked me, she said, “Well, Mary-Margaret in Californian did send you a
silver spoon when you were born. She assumed we had named you for her…”

She unwrapped her arms from around me, stood, and disappeared into her
bedroom. A few minutes later she returned with a small pink flannel object.
Inside was a silver spoon with my name on it. Engraved, my silver spoon had a
diamond in the handle.
Although we often hear it from others, we never realize or want to accept how much we are like our parents.

All of my life, I have known this to be the case for me. Her face, is my face. Her personality, is my personality. She named me Sassy, not that you can recognize this in a baby; but I think, more so because that was her and I would carry on her legacy. Brash. Direct. Blunt. Observant. Possibly cold and distant at times. I had to grow into the name. But, after some time it truly became me. The more I morphed into a younger version of my mother, it seemed the more proud she was of me. It was as if she lived vicariously through me.

Always proud of every accomplishment I achieved, attended every ceremony, graduation or event; I was her mirror. And then, she became sick. I was not prepared for that change. She was always the strongest woman I knew. Nothing could stop her; she always overcame any obstacle. But this... This would be different.

There was no battling the disease that was ravishing her mind, memory, spirit, and body. My mother always had words, expressions, sentiments and thoughts for every situation; but that was long gone. It was as if I was watching myself die. It was a long 5 year journey. I grieved and cried every time I visited her. To see my mother {myself} in this state of deterioration was unbearable. But, at least I was able to grieve with her, for her, for myself.
And then, she was gone... Everyone kept waiting for me to breakdown. I repeatedly had to explain that I had grieved for the loss of my mother every year since the diagnosis. Her transition was actually a relief. I did not have to see her as a shell of herself anymore. I did not have to see the person who always uplifted and comforted in dazed, blank stare. I was fine. No regret, no anger, no grief. I knew she would have never wanted to be here in that condition, so for me her death was okay.

Ironically though, for the first few months following her death I could not look at myself in the mirror. I would be startled when I would wake up and go to the bathroom because looking back at me was my mother, not myself. I've always known I look just like her, but since she is no longer here I see it more. My facial expressions, my mannerisms, my movements... they are all her.

But now, I have embraced being her twin. I am her legacy, and she will always live through me. Sometimes I do or say things and laugh, because I know that's her being channeled through me.

My mother, myself... Who knew this entire time we truly were one in the same.