

One Appreciative Reader

by Nettie Farris

for Bronwyn

You have to know me for a long time to see animals in my eyes

—Maureen Morehead

If you were to tell the story of your life, where would you begin? I would start here: I am five years old, and we are sitting on the floor at the front of the classroom. The kindergarten teacher is holding a large cardboard clock. Big hand. Little hand. Big Hand. Little Hand. I am surrounded by children. We are learning to tell time. Big hand. Little hand. I am alone. I am not thinking about clocks, minutes and hours. I am thinking about me and what a miracle I am. I am thinking about the wondrous fact that these large thoughts that coalesce to form me are located in this small body wearing a red plaid dress trimmed in rickrack. I am thinking it very mysterious and amazing that my thoughts are utterly separate from the boy who sits on my left, from the teacher who sits before me on a piano bench holding a cardboard clock.

Now we are coloring a picture with leaves and a squirrel. It is autumn. My place at the table faces the window. Today we have a substitute teacher. Her name is Mrs. Cross, and no one likes her. She stands next to me. “Look out that window,” she orders. “Do those leaves look green?” I feel myself shrinking. It is autumn. The leaves outside are red and brown. But the leaves inside my head today are green.

I hated school as a child.

Now I am an adult, and I am sitting in the stacks at the college library where I teach, reading my own thesis (a collection of original poems) completed for my Master of Arts degree in English a decade ago. It is evening, and the library is very quiet. I have recently weaned my third (and final) child, and though he still fills my arms (he is nine months old), a gaping hole has suddenly appeared at my breast. It is winter. I am lost and alone. I am reading my own poems (all written before I had children) in order to remember who I am. I am reading the library’s copy because it seems more official. There’s something about taking it off a public shelf. Look: I’ve been approved. See the signatures on page ii? *Leon Driskell. Sena Naslund. Philip Alperson.*

Sitting in the stacks has not always felt so comforting. Graduate studies overwhelmed me. I remember drifting through the bound periodicals, searching for references for a

research paper on Chaucer. I couldn't read Middle English. The professor spoke extremely fast. I was lost. I had nothing to say about Chaucer. I had to get out of the stacks.

Sometimes even now, walking through a college library will make me dizzy and weak. All those books crying out to be read. *Pick me. Pick me.* And every time I sit down to read one it's heavily annotated. Someone has been here before me! I'll never get caught up. I must be the only person on campus who hasn't read this book. The Public Library is much more comfortable. Familiar. I go there often with my children. It's much smaller, and I know my way around. And the books—for some reason—I perceive the books as a gift, and I don't feel obliged to master them.

I prefer to master my own experiences and curiosities. I do this through writing. Recently I read an essay by Anaïs Nin titled, "The New Woman." Nin begins the essay by answering the question of why one writes:

I believe one writes because one has to create a world in which one can live. I could not live in any of the worlds offered to me—the world of my parents, the world of war, the world of politics. I had to create a world of my own, like a climate, a country, an atmosphere in which I could breath, reign, and recreate myself when destroyed by living. (95)

A powerful answer. I too have often felt the need to recreate a world in which I can live, because the world out there, created by others, has always been too bright, too loud, too fast, entirely overwhelming, and seemingly meaningless. The world tends to unravel me, and I need my quiet time to think, to weave together my own meaning.

First Woman, the Stars, and Coyote

Once the world was brimming
with significance,
and the moon's fullness
only added
to its splendor.
Now her protruding roundness
merely torments me.
I remember the kind silence
of tenderness.
I am standing in this desert,
alone,
quietly working,
a blanket of jewels about my ankles.
The sky is the color
of turquoise
and these stars,
which I am gently placing,
with care, are silver. *Oh, coyote,*
how could you? Such impatience,
flinging them out all at once.
Even my blanket is unraveling.
Now coyote is gone,
and in his wake,
just this: disarray
and wild abandonment.

Sometimes I simply need a container.

Importantly, though, I think, Nin argues that this creation of an alternative world is not a solipsistic act, and is temporary

as human beings, we need nourishment to sustain the life of the spirit, so that we can act in the world, but I don't mean turn away . . . We do not escape into philosophy, psychology, and art—we go there to restore our shattered selves into whole ones. (102)

Several years ago, I distributed one of my poems to my writing class. I rarely share my work with students because it's so personal. But they were writing personal narratives about a place and I wanted to focus on images. Here is the poem:

The Juniper Tree

All morning I have sat beneath the juniper
peeling this one

perfect apple,
its skin flushed with crimson.

Even the fruit itself harbors minute
traces of color,

a multitude of thin
threadlike trails of vermilion

moving silently inward.
The snow, today, piles up around me

like a mournful white sigh
but winter herself

refuses to share
her diaphanous secrets.

Look: I have cut myself on the knife,
and one drop of blood

has quietly fallen;
one miniature red radish takes root

in the snow. I think I could sit here all day,
under the juniper. I think I could sit here forever.

After distributing the poem, I talked about beginning with a striking image (for this is the way that I begin writing), and I said that when I had first read Grimms' fairy tale, "The Juniper Tree," I found its opening—the snow, the apple—very striking, especially since it's so similar to the opening of "Snow White." So I centered the writing there, and the poem grew as if from a seed. However, one particularly articulate student, in writing about this exercise, described the poem, my poem, as solipsistic. I found

this description disturbing. (Did she not see that drop of blood?) Though the poem itself may project a solipsistic experience, the act of writing it, I like to think, was not, especially after sharing it with an audience. I like to think of the act of writing, of the artifacts of writing, as a bridge that helps me to cross the water from my own world, which I've created, into the *real* one, shared by others.

Similar to Anaïs Nin's conception of the writer, I think that the primary responsibility of the instructor in a writing classroom is to create an environment in which learning can take place. Last year I discovered John Dewey. (I know he's been around a while, but I'm slow.) In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey tells us: "We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment" (19). As instructors, we set the tone, provide the materials, create the assignments, structure and time the events, and lead by example as readers, writers, and critical thinkers. I like to think of the writing classroom as a bowl, which holds and nourishes our students for the short time they're with us and encourages them to grow at their own pace, in their own way.

Summer, and I am an undergraduate sitting in class, waiting for Introduction to Short Fiction to begin. A tall, gangly man bursts into the room, coffee and cigarette in hand. He is stomping his cigarette butt out on the floor! Who is this man? Where is the short sedate woman who is scheduled to teach this course? *Am I in the wrong class?* While the flattened tobacco and ashes on the floor are offending my prim little accounting clerk sensibilities, he proceeds to ask us why we are here; what is the purpose of education? What a ridiculous question! *I hate my job—the dance department failed to get its accreditation—I think I'll major in English.* This isn't the right answer.

Little did I expect that Leon Driskell would ultimately transform my education. First he taught me to read. Certainly I could read words as they flowed down the lines of endless sentences, but until I met Leon Driskell, not one teacher had ever demonstrated for me how to find meaning in a text. Isn't it incredible how all those little details add up to something? He introduced me to images. And he taught me to write, though I never had a single writing course under his tutelage. He taught literature largely through writing, and I think that nearly every piece of writing assigned in his courses was discussed in conference. What he demanded of his students was simple: conviction stated with clarity. I find it remarkable that, while I've acquired many of his values, my voice is purely my own. Most important, however, was his leap of faith. He seemed to assume that I had something to say worth hearing, and I would eventually manage to say it. I must say, at this task he was quietly patient. And he was enthusiastic about every sentence I wrote. I think that until I met Leon Driskell, not one teacher had seen any potential in me.

With just one appreciative reader, I can exist in the world.

I've been teaching composition for a long time, and though my paycheck does not indicate so, I consider it the most important job in the world. However, I haven't always enjoyed it, and there came a time, after the initial new teacher enthusiasm wore off, and after my share of unpleasant experiences piled up, when I made the decision that I would either change professions or construct my classroom so that I enjoyed being there. After teaching in a computer lab one semester, surrounded by machines and mechanical distractions, I remembered that I need to get to know my students in order to feel comfortable in my own classroom. I don't talk to strangers. The first thing I did was to incorporate in-class conferences in my syllabus and scheduled these while peer revision took place. Incorporating conferences during class time was a practical measure. I teach late at night and most of my students are unable to hang around

outside of class time. However, these conferences take a lot of time, and while I'm talking to one student I'm losing touch with the rest of the class. So now I use that time for whole-class workshops on student drafts. We all sit in a circle and chat. I devote as many class meetings as possible to this activity, at least enough so that each student can submit one draft during the term. It's so democratic. I think John Dewey would approve. The environment of the writing workshop allows students to teach themselves and each other. It's an indirect teaching method. Though I try to follow the format I was trained to use, in which the instructor speaks last, my students keep butting in. Rarely do I have the final word. I don't have the heart to remind them of the proper procedures. I seem to have trouble with rules.

I've also adopted portfolio grading. I assign just one holistic grade at the end of the course. This gives students a bit of time before their writing must add up to something. It allows them time to flounder. The most significant change I've made, however, is the way in which I read student drafts. No longer do I feel that I need to rewrite them myself. I try to be an appreciative reader. It's such a relief. For me and my students. Now I try not to look for problems as much as I do potential. Sometimes this takes a great leap of imagination. However, sometimes a draft in which the writer is apparently struggling proves to be more of a learning experience for the class as a whole and the writer in particular than would a more polished draft. I do wonder—Why did it take so long for me to remember this lesson?

As an undergraduate, I wrote an honor's thesis on Marsha Norman. As part of my research, I found a published interview in which Norman discusses her Pulitzer prize winning play, *Night Mother* (Mootz). At the end of the play, the protagonist commits suicide. In the interview, Norman is discussing the concept of saving one's life when she is asked what she does to save her own life. She says something to the effect that she writes to save her life. I too feel that I write to save my life. The stakes are enormous. I don't think most of my students are here to save their lives. They just want to learn how to write a competent essay. However, I hope that they will perceive the class not as an obligation, but as a gift.

Hey Leon—I know you're busy up in heaven and all that, but look—I've got this new batch of poems I've been working on, and they're really good. I think you'll like them. I've been studying Oscar Wilde. This one's my favorite. It's a gift . . .

The Remarkable Rocket

Summer has arrived,
and the Finnish princess
misses winter.
She is pale as a cocoon,
though her eyes
are painfully beautiful.
The roman candle fails

to soothe her,
for even at such spectacular
height, he is still
five lifetimes
away from the moon.

And the firecrackers—
those boys—

are merely noise.
They speak without thinking.
The rocket is too emotional
for explosions.
She has drenched her feet
with weeping.
And the princess,

she is nervous as a bird,
but in her eyes,
look: the white sky—
firefly—
a subtle flush
of ermine and violet,
thumping, thumping . . .

I think I could sit here all day in the classroom. I think I could sit here forever.

Works Cited

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