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Ode to an English Major

I am a writer. It is not my occupation or a significant form of income for me, but something more, something deeper; it is my passion, my calling, and my purpose. It is who I am. Nonetheless, I might never come to this understanding without the early encouragement of my first- and second-grade teacher, Mrs. Hunter, and my family's never-ending support. Some of my earliest memories surround my writing, and even predate it. I came to reading late compared to many of my peers in school. I could barely write my own simple five-letter name at six years old. I graduated kindergarten without being able to read, despite the fact that I was an eager student in so many other areas of school.

In kindergarten, I felt drawn to the colorful blow-up dolls used to introduce new letters of the alphabet—a blue plastic uppercase letter “B” wearing a bowler hat and covered in bright bubbles, or a pale pink letter “P” spouting eyeglasses and curly yellow hair—but I could not yet make the connection between individual letters and words. I skimmed through the pictures of the books scattered through the classroom but my eyes skipped over the bold black scribbles at the bottom of the pages without recognition. As many critics note, the connection between reading and writing for students cannot be understated. I do not remember the day in first grade that the switch—finally! — flipped, but I do remember my ecstatic enthusiasm for reading once I came to it.

I jumped from perusing the white baskets of thin early-reader books marked with a green “easy” dot on their spines to the yellow and then red “advanced” books with full plots and storylines beyond “See Jane jump.” It wasn’t long before Mrs. Hunter introduced me to the *Magic Treehouse* stories, and then I was off, zooming through time and space with Annie and Jack on their magic time-travel adventures to ancient Egypt, to the bottom of the ocean, or to Renaissance Italy. The characters in those books became some of my earliest friends. As the youngest in a family of six, I spent many hours by myself when my older siblings and parents were preoccupied and too busy to play. It was an easy jump for me to move from reading stories to making up my own. I made up tales and told them to anyone who would listen: to my family at dinner, to my attentive, patient dolls, and to Mrs. Hunter through the composition notebooks she handed out to every student.

Every morning between “welcomes” and before math time, we had time to write. I remember the feel of the yellow #2 pencil in my hand and the sound of the graphite scraping across the wide-ruled paper of my notebook as I crafted silly slant-rhyming poems anthropomorphizing colors, describing the adventures of naughty little gray mice, or my brief stint dip into hymnal-like poems centered around my Sunday school lessons. At the end of every week, our journals were handed back to us with comments and affirmations written in Mrs. Hunter’s careful hand. I lived for the moment I opened my journal to see what my teacher thought of my latest story. Her praise buoyed me through the tedious math quizzes and boring history lessons. I beamed with pride when she commended my writing and imagination to my parents at student-teacher conference night. It was Mrs. Hunter who asked if she could submit my poem, “Yellow,” to a nation-wide writing contest for elementary students. The day I held my first published poem, I *felt* like a writer. It felt like a stamp of approval, something on which I

could hang my proverbial hat that gave me purpose, direction, and *voice*. I moved more confidently in the world knowing that my voice mattered.

Now, I recognize my privilege in the unique opportunities presented to me. Mrs. Hunter cared about my success as a writer. She was the first person to give me that title—to empower me with that title. Mrs. Hunter’s belief in me from such a young age helped me internalize my passion for writing. From there, I never stopped writing. Throughout the rest of my school years and education, I threw myself into the study of language and writing. My parents showered me with books at my birthday and Christmas. I spent my meager chore money on five-dollar particle-board bookcases that I filled with trade paperbacks with cracked, white spines and my own journals and diaries in which I preserved my earliest attempts at novels. One summer, a great-aunt of mine whom I barely knew gifted me with a notebook printed with a sleek white Westie stamped on the cover, and a pack of twenty-four glitter pens because she said she’d heard from my grandmother “What a little writer” I was.

I was lucky—privileged—enough to have parents who supported me when I said I wanted to go to school to study English. I often heard, “What are you going to do with that degree? Teach?” from the mouths of my aunts and uncles, grandparents, and other adults. At the time, I gave some halfhearted affirmative, though my heart wasn’t really into the idea of teaching just yet. I originally went into university on the English-teaching track as a means to subconsciously satisfy the doubt that lingered in the back of my mind. What *would* I do with an English degree if not teach? I slogged my way through two of the required teaching courses over the summer while longingly watching my fellow students outside barefoot in the grass playing Frisbee or napping in the sun. On a whim, one day in the student union building I plugged in a few numbers and played around with the course generator that helped students track their pace

through their degrees. I blinked, then blinked again when I compared the two different course sketches I'd generated, but the information on the screen was correct—I could graduate with more than enough credits and all my required curriculum in just three years if I dropped the teaching component of my English degree. I went for it. I accelerated my coursework and graduated an entire year early with a Bachelor's in English with dual concentrations in Literature and Creative Writing, and a minor in Spanish.

My final year and a half of university was a blur. I rushed from class to class, chugging quad-shot mochas that tasted like burned chocolate and made my heart race as I sat in lectures and discussed Transcendentalism and Buddhist hermeneutics and its impact on American poetics. I stayed up until two in the morning multiple times every week finishing forty-page short stories about robots that looked like humans, and queer retellings of fairy tales like “Little Red Riding Hood.” A short story I submitted in the early hours of the morning it was due was accepted into the on-campus magazine as an “Honorable Mention” —the first piece I'd had published in years—and I rushed to tell everyone I knew until I noticed that the first line of my piece had a typo. I felt exhilarated, and drained, and like a shell of a human during midterms and finals week, but I could not help but feel that I would have made my five-year-old self proud when I posed in front of the university clocktower in my cap and gown and held aloft my (fake) diploma as a certified English major.

I did not graduate university and immediately “use” my degree. I did not graduate and immediately get snatched up by a major publisher who offered me hundreds of thousands of dollars for my hurriedly scribbled stories and midnight musings. I moved back home and went to work at the same bakery I'd visited when I was little. I woke up at three in the morning and brushed cat litter off my bare feet before going to bake bread. I made \$9.50 an hour and paid

\$200.00 in student loans every month. But I never once regretted my English degree. With that degree—and thanks to the bakery—I eventually became the manager of a local nonprofit art museum. Over the course of the last year that I worked at the museum, I drafted stories and poems and an entire memoir in the back storeroom in between greeting patrons. From my work at the museum, I eventually moved to Oregon state and took a job working with writers and authors through the free writing workshops I hosted at the public library. I learned alongside my fellow writers as we all listened, hopefully, for that one idea that would crack open our writing. I listened to others share their most intimate, vulnerable stories and felt brave enough to do the same once in a while. The more I shared, the more free I felt. Writing liberated me, as I saw and heard from the other writers I came to know through the library.

I came to writing in part because it was something I was “good” at—something that my teacher and parents praised me for. Growing up in a community and culture that emphasized goodness in very stark, dramatic terms, I feel “safe” with my writing because it secured me in a place of praise—until it didn’t. One day, something I had written and gotten published made my mother cry when she saw it come across her Facebook feed. My sisters berated me through a barrage of texts from two states over, asking me how I could say those things about our mother who had given us so much, who had supported me through so much?

I sat on the floor of my bedroom sobbing as I phoned my therapist and told her the worst thing—the thing I was always so terrified of happening—had happened. I felt unloved and unloveable in that moment, and so angry with myself for ever writing that essay or sharing it. I deleted the piece from my website and social media, this piece I was so proud of sharing only moments ago, and swore off writing ever again. But, three weeks later, I picked up my pen and I wrote it all down; how I had made my mother cry, how I had cried, how I could do it differently

next time. I know I can never stop being a writer. It's part of who I am. I feel the most like myself when I write and share with others, and when I help others come into their own as writers themselves.

I now turn back towards teaching with renewed interest. I want to do for future students what Mrs. Hunter once did for me; I want to give someone the world as she gave it to me when she introduced me to writing. I want to be one of the teachers that helps guide and mentor the future generation of English majors. I want to instill in them the same empowerment my writing has given me, so that when someone asks my future students, "What are you going to do with an English degree?" they will feel confident when they reply, "Anything I want."