

Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 1

August 2014

Read for the Stars

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Recommended Citation

Chaba, Francesca E. (2014) "Read for the Stars," *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 1.
Available at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol1/iss1/1>

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Read for the Stars

Writing Process

Since this is a literacy narrative, most of my writing process involved self-reflection and recollection of my earliest literacy memories. At times, this was difficult, because I had some disjointed or unrelated memories which were difficult to put into a cohesive narrative. I had only one draft of this paper, but after a peer review session in my ENG 100 class, I made revisions for clarification purposes and to correct some minor grammatical oversights.

Course

ENG100

Semester

Spring

Instructor

Prof. Laura Elizabeth

Year

2014

Francesca Chaba

Prof. Laura Elizabeth

ENG100

Spring 2014

Read for the Stars*

I do not recall a time in my life when I was unable to read. My grandmother dedicated her life to teaching small children, and although I was born further into her life than I would have liked to be, she taught me, just as she taught my sisters, how to read at a very young age. My earliest literacy memory was from around age three, when I was sitting in my car seat and observing my surroundings. “Mommy,” I said to my mother who was in the driver’s seat, paying cautious attention to the road around her, “are we in Pitts-ford?” She looked into the rearview mirror. “What did you just say, honey?” she questioned as she attempted to move into the lane next to us. “I said, are we in Pitts-ford?” She looked confused. “How did you know that?” she spat out, slightly raising her voice. “It said it on the sign,” I said, rather nonchalantly, as I didn’t understand why she was so confused. From that point on until the end of the car ride from Pittsford (the usual pronunciation) to my home in Greece, New York, I was forced to recite whatever was written on every piece of signage on the twenty-five minute ride.

From that point on, my parents, grandparents and older siblings were unable to do the typical protocol of spelling words instead of saying them, because they knew that I would understand when I had to go to the D-O-C-T-O-R to get a S-H-O-T or when they needed to go shopping for P-R-E-S-E-N-T-S for my birthday. I feel that my somewhat premature literacy enabled me to lose pieces of the wonder of childhood. Since I could read so early, I was able to distinguish between the handwriting of different members of my family, which was a blessing

and a curse during Christmastime, when I was really surprised to find out that both Santa Claus and my mother had a very similar style of writing.

For this reason, standard kindergarten lessons bored me, and I was offered to skip that year of school, but my mother didn't want me to be so much younger than the other students in my grade, so I stayed. I missed a record seventeen days of school that year, and I probably would have missed more if the school nurse hadn't called my home and told my parents that I was in jeopardy of not progressing on to the first grade. Although thoroughly unimpressed by letter books and phonics worksheets, I did really enjoy the social aspect of school, even though I did, and still do really dislike the idea of getting up so early in the morning. I didn't really wake up until at least after snack time. Despite having a modest bedtime of 8:00 p.m., I still would remain awake in my bedroom reading books until all hours and would remain asleep in my bed well past the time I should have been bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and on my way to school. While all the other kids were pouring over their Dr. Seuss and *Goodnight Moon*, I was whisked away to "extension," which was an accelerated reading class for advanced students. I was able to continue reading books that I was more comfortable with and quickly progressed through the different levels of provided short stories represented by different colors, like olive green.

My ability to read scored me one of the lead roles in our classroom Thanksgiving play, as Squanto, the Native American who helped many of the settlers upon their arrival to America. I was thrilled about my foray into the performing arts and rehearsed for anyone who could hear me. After several weeks of dedication, the day of the performance arrived. I can remember processing in the church hall through the center aisle in my homemade, albeit incredibly stereotypical, feather headband and braided pigtails. I stepped on the stage along with the other kids, some dressed like pilgrims, some dressed as my fellow tribesmen, and some even as

vegetables. I was originally very upset not to be awarded the highly coveted role of “flower,” which was only bestowed upon the luckiest girls. However, I was soon reassured that I actually got to speak in my role, as opposed to the flowers who simply twirled around the stage to a dainty little piano song about rain and the growing of crops.

I walked up the steps and took a cross-legged seat in the middle of the back of the stage on the aged, white linoleum. Ever the professional, I watched and sang along to the songs when I was supposed to and remained silent at the appropriate times. In spite of our hours upon hours of rehearsal, many of the children were too shy to recite their lines in front of the audience of friends and family, who were lovingly supporting their children, with a steadfast row of parents with camcorders behind the seats. Finally, it was my shining moment. Just as the song about how important it is to make new friends ended, I stood up, walked to the left of the microphone and listened intently as the boy who was given the role of Captain John Smith recited his brief monologue. Then, as the final sentence left his lips, I, in my loudest, most confident, five-year-old voice, proclaimed my one glorious line to the audience as I gestured emphatically to either side of the stage around me: “Pilgrims! Meet my Indian friends!”

The show ended, Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks came and went and before I knew it, preparations for kindergarten graduation ceremony were underway. Still reeling from my acclaimed performance, I was obviously hoping to land another starring role, like the person who lead the alphabet song, or better yet, the person who got to recite the Pledge of Allegiance (they also had to instruct the audience to stand and remove their hats). I remember anxiously waiting for the take-home folders to be passed out on the day that my teacher, Mrs. Bronowicki, handed out the parts. It was a very democratic process, no audition or anything like that; there were a certain number of parts and a matching number of children. I did not follow the rules when I was

told not to open the folder until I got home. As soon as the final bell rang, I raced up the stairs of the converted convent to the pick-up room where my grandfather was waiting for me. I practically flew into his car, ripped open my backpack, and pulled the paper out of the thick manila envelope. It read: “Frankie Chaba role: letter ‘e’ sound in the word ‘elf.’” I was devastated and felt incredibly betrayed. How could they do this to me? I was such a good reader, and I only got a minor role. He brought me to visit my grandmother whose health was declining due to a serious fight with pancreatic cancer. She put things into perspective for me, as she often did. Just because I had learned to read before the other kids didn’t mean that I should be put above them. Everyone deserved an equal chance in the spotlight. I grew more okay with this harsh truth, and graciously took a back seat in this particular production.

I graduated from kindergarten in June of 2001, and I lost my grandmother that July. My parents began making arrangements promptly. I can remember walking up to my mom, who was sitting at the kitchen table, with a pen and paper in hand writing out who would bring up the gifts and perform the other voluntary parts of the mass. I looked in her pained, bloodshot eyes and asked her if I could do a reading. I could tell that she wanted to say no at first, but she looked at me, now six years old, and hugged me and said yes.

In my navy blue dress with a tiny silver butterfly pin, I carefully and quietly observed as the priest and others spoke about my grandmother. Then, it was time for me to read. I walked up the steps to the altar and stepped up to the microphone. Then, I, in my loudest, most confident, six-year-old voice recited Psalm 23, a verse which I picked out as I felt it was incredibly applicable to the relationship I held with my grandmother.

I have my grandmother to credit for my literacy, amongst many other things that she taught me in the short time we were able to spend together. It is because of her that I was able to be truly confident in my abilities and never ever shied away from showing them. I am well aware that undoubtedly throughout my career in school, other students probably thought I was a know-it-all, or a show off, but I have no problem with contributing anything to my class that I feel confident about, not because I want to make other kids feel bad, but because that's the kind of person my grandmother taught me to be, and I can say in my loudest, most confident, nineteen-year-old voice, that learning to read at a young age had its low points, but ultimately shaped me into the person that I am today.

***This essay received the *Best Writing of the Issue* award.**