

Ashley R. Olsen

POETRY and ART

## I Seek the Daffodil's Glimmer: A Poetic Literacy Autobiography

*Ashley R. Olsen is a first-year graduate student at the University of Montana Phyllis J. Washington College of Education, where she studies literacy. She received a B.A. in English and Religion from Saint Olaf College and a B.A. in Elementary Education from the University of Montana, and currently teaches second- and third-grade in Potomac, Montana.*

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### Introduction

English Language Arts has remained for me a bright spot across the K-12 curriculum and beyond. A refuge from the math and science disciplines, where I felt lost and inadequate, English courses allowed me to escape into other worlds, relish rich language, and discover my voice as a writer. The realm of creative writing took a backseat as I entered college, where I focused on literary analysis; but creative writing was my first love. For as long as I have been reading, I have attempted to make sense of the world through writing.

In reflecting on my experience within English Language Arts, I realize that poetry has continually reemerged and grounded me. I did not foresee a collection of poems, but writing poetry became the only way to conceptualize my literacy narrative.

This short collection takes the reader from my fourth-grade writing class, where I met with frustration over creative writing tasks, to a middle-school bathroom stall, where I wrote poetry during eighth-grade ELA. The collection concludes with reflections on my college English experience, where I learned to navigate and interpret various linguistic and syntactical shifts that occurred across centuries. A Eurocentric course of study, which defined my early experience with survey courses in the English department, eventually expanded to include more diverse voices as I entered upper-level seminars.

Dialogue became more open-ended and marginalized voices pressed against defined boundaries.

In sharing this brief autobiographical collection of poetry, I attempt to make sense of this universal longing for voice in the most authentic way that I can - through the lens of my own experience. I close with the image of a radiant daffodil. The daffodil signifies the bright glimpses of hope that literacy offers us in all its modalities.



## Tale of a fourth-grade skeptic

A mark of 'p'  
Progressing, I think that meant  
Written in ink, probably red  
I was no mathematician, but I could write a story  
Or so I thought  
Another meaningless, arbitrary symbol on a surface  
Which to my nine-year-old mind might as well have  
been a fraction  
"One wintry day..." that story began  
Not my beginning, but some pre-fabricated generic one  
The words tethered to the page, never to come unstuck,  
like an accidental stroke of oil on an otherwise empty  
canvas  
But unwanted paint strokes can be subsumed by  
swaths of rich color  
Unlike these words  
Finish the story, my teacher had told me  
But that wasn't my story to finish  
I didn't want to write about a wintry day  
Or a spooky night  
Or a glorious summer morning, or whatever someone  
else had preconceived  
I wanted to exchange the canvas for a new one  
Didn't creators of such tasks know that every word on  
the page casts a die?  
Takes up room that other words might have inhabited?  
They stifle the creativity which they aim to spark  
Because creativity doesn't require sparking  
But demands space  
The snowflake border  
Surrounded the page waiting to be filled with my  
words  
So I filled it with something I cannot recall  
Something of no consequence, but  
Something which constituted all the life I could manage  
to breathe into that feebly constructed phrase  
Because who cares what might have happened one  
wintry day?  
The memory books we created captured the work of a  
year  
An assortment of complete-the-story's  
And sprinkled in were rare works of true originality

My favorite pieces were these  
Ones with middles and endings not determined by  
Someone else's beginning

## Finding voice

My own beginnings took flight from  
That cavernous self  
I sat in a school bathroom stall to find the quiet that  
would let me  
Craft every line to capture some essence of  
truth  
For humanity's sake  
I never did much capture truth, but I became more  
human for trying  
Let your voice emerge from the reverberating silence of  
whatever space it calls home  
Write to call it forth from the depths of you  
Words on a page may turn to nothing or hint at  
something that cuts across the edges  
Bigger than you and me and the words you find to piece  
together  
Mere vehicles for truths too vast to capture  
Let your voice emerge and join the cast of others  
Create harmony and dissonance  
But let your words be more than noise

## A farewell to Chaucer

The realm of roods and Beowulf,  
Of tales of the knight, the scrivener, the friar  
Chaucer's words ought to have grasped me, I suppose  
But I spent most of my time trying to decipher Middle  
English -  
A linguist's dream  
I stood trembling in my professor's office, aiming for  
perfection  
    As I recited the verses from one of Chaucer's tales  
    I pronounced every word precisely  
    And so what?  
Read and analyze the Dream of the Rood  
But please, by God, get it right  
Read to understand its form, its structure  
To accurately interpret  
Restrict your voice now to the form of the sonnet  
Ten syllables per line, but mind your stress  
For goodness' sake, don't break the rules  
No more than fourteen lines to craft your verse  
And if you fail you shall incur a curse  
Of a poor grade  
There'll be no place for you in whatever cloistered  
circles still revere such Eurocentric texts  
I suppose I am okay with that  
Because I suppose I am okay with breaking form  
What is it, after all, but human construct?  
Arbitrary boundaries that exist so we can press against  
their margins?  
And as for Chaucer,  
I bid to thee farewell in couplet form  
Though do not think your poems merit scorn  
Your form, its place within the canon rests  
Yet now the canon's shape it now attests  
To broad'ning scope, including diverse voice  
And for that, ah, all should indeed rejoice.  
Hallelujah.

## The daffodil's glimmer

Read, discuss, write

    We performed Shakespeare and read Jane Austen,  
    Immersed ourselves in the verses of Byron, Keats,  
Blake, and Wordsworth  
And so could see the boundaries subtly shift,  
In language and in form,  
In who has the power to speak  
A canon evolving, jubilate!  
A prelude, perhaps, to a course called Declarations of  
Independence in 19th century American Literature  
A prelude to Louisa May Alcott and Rebecca Harding Davis,  
to Kate Chopin  
    A prelude to Frederick Douglass  
And on and on to forecast the endless litany of voices that  
shape our becoming  
Daffodils danced that semester  
And recollections gleaned meaning through that  
Host of bright golden flowers  
    Which helped me make sense of this beautiful  
dance of life, its choreography  
    Bound and freed by memory  
Wordsworth told me to quit my books  
And I've been doing so for above a decade now  
I still pause at the sight of daffodils  
My gaze a grasp at bright glimmers of hope.