

A Tribute to Melanie Plesh

by members of the
Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project
and Friends

Writings by Melanie

And

Writings for Melanie

May 26, 2016

From the *N.O. Advocate*, May 21, 2016

Melanie Anne Plesh, 63, a lifelong resident of New Orleans, died on Wednesday, May 18, 2016. She leaves her son, Timothy Lachin, her brother, Dwight Plesh, and her partner, Janice Becker. Melanie's encounter with the classics as a young person liberated her. From the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus she adopted the credo, "suffer into truth." She dedicated her life to transmitting Dante, Shakespeare, and Homer to students in the Louisiana public school system. For over twenty years she co-directed the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project. In 1999, she traveled alone to Russia to visit the grave of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. She was an accomplished equestrienne. Her horse, Penny, occupied an important place in her life. Melanie was beloved by all who knew her. Her intelligence and open heart will not be forgotten.



Writings by Melanie Plesh



Adolescents are people on the verge of discovering the indistinct nature of the universe. I like that. I like to point out some of the questions for which there are no simple answers. I like to force them to look into themselves to find out what they believe in. Once they've become sufficiently shaken up and find themselves at sea, where the waters are gray, I throw them a raft on which they may take a stand, survey the situation, and decide the best course of action. The raft is the essay form.

Step one is to confuse them. I spend three or four days reading and showing items I've been collecting over the years: newspaper articles, editorials, comic strips, passages from literature, pamphlets, photographs, art objects, etc. I have the students respond to each item by writing their opinions (theses) and three reasons why they believe their opinions are correct (support). It is not necessary for me to solicit oral discussion. Students remark aloud with various comments, noises, outrages, pounding of desks, etc., to make it sufficiently clear that they do not all agree with each other. I love this part. They are coming alive.

Next, they choose three topics from their lists that are meaningful or significant to them. I show them the essay form and have them flesh out into rough drafts the three topics they've chosen. This is a struggle for some of them because it is here they are asked to really explain their ideas. I love this part because it often happens that they write themselves right out of their theses and into the other camp. I console and comfort them, support them, but secretly (and often not so secretly) I applaud their ability to think critically, and to change their minds. I allow some noise and conversation during this phase because they have their own informal ways of helping each other to crystallize ideas.

The last step is to choose, with the help of a partner, the best one of the three rough drafts. I show them the revision process and give them a list of typical writing errors (run-on sentences, avoid colloquialisms, etc.) for which they proofread. By this time, most students have taken their work personally and have gained some strong convictions. They turn all of their work in and receive two grades: one grade reflects that all work was completed, and the other grade is for the final draft and reflects depth of argument and that the students followed the revision and proof-reading guidelines.

Essay writing is a creative outlet in that it allows students to take a stand, survey the universe, and to be heard. I tell them that by conforming at least to the form their messages take, they have a better chance of being listened to. They do have a great deal to say. It pleases me to be involved in my students' evolution as humans.

Melanie Flesh Lachin

This essay by Melanie was part of her application to SLWP in 1992. Summer Fellows are asked to describe a classroom practice, and this one of hers is as fresh today as it was back then.

Walking isn't about miles
nor about appointments dealing with time.
Walking doesn't get me far
but it gets me deep,
depth bigger than distance
further reaching
it's a richer trip
reaching sideways.

My trip is flesh on flesh
a tender subtle circle dance
an encompassing and a boundless
flowing through
language with no punctuation,
it's swimming through the earth
iron and magma all.

Melanie Plush Lanti

This poem was one of two poems submitted as writing samples by Melanie as part of her application to SLWP in 1992. It was typewritten on thin typewriter paper. This may be the only copy.

She wears her colors
boldly, largely,
limbs so big sleeves
flap miles from skirts
sleeves purple on the left
pink on the right
snaking button brackets white
holding colors together in swollen rivulets
of only air
the belt a distinct edge
seems black, that horizon
a slight black edge, and sharp
a brilliant delineation
a distinct separation
for the skirts.
She wears her green skirts well,
passing the rich chiffon blue over
and over
silk
ahh, beyond comprehension
diddled in beige lace waves
like petticoats hanging out
flung out
purposely
daringly
the ocean woman can can
here, says she, here are the frills
I toss at you, around.
Cluck your tongue at my
gaudy fashion
it's fine
I laugh for the pleasure of it
for I love my colors.

Melanie Plush Lacti

This poem was one of two poems submitted as writing samples by Melanie as part of her application to SLWP in 1992. It was typewritten on thin typewriter paper. This may be the only copy.

From “The New Orleans Writing Marathon” in the National Writing Project’s *The Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Winter 2002.

<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/315>

Melanie Plesh's Writing Prompts

Melanie's writing prompts are usually simple words that act like Rorschach tests upon writers. They tend to shake up writers and produce the unexpected. Unlike Natalie Goldberg, whose prompts give more direction ("Choose a color" or "Who are the people you loved?"), Melanie just speaks a word or phrase without context and says "Write for ten minutes without stopping." While she spends significant time thinking of prompts, she asks writers to ignore them if they wish. Most writers find the prompts "weird" at first, but still, they seem to open up writers to thoughts they did not know they had. Here are some of her prompts for our daily writing over the last several years:

Ask for Omar	Appearances	Paint
Bellyache	Go . . . on	Wait
This side up	Permission	Next
Proof	Night and day	Sudden stops
Slow dancing	The question	Underneath
Sugar	Stop	No
Prisoners	Lemon juice	My
Reverse	Outside	North
Three	Sub	Daily bread
There	Butcher	Bliss
Rust	Perfume	
Provocative	Sassy	

“It’s not the word that matters, it’s just a place to start,” says Melanie.

From *Voices of the New Orleans Writing Marathon*, SLWP, 2003.

https://www.southeastern.edu/acad_research/programs/slwp/publications/voices/voices.pdf

Love

I am in possession of the first thing I ever remember writing. It is a black patent leather Barbie diary, on which Barbie, in yellow capris and in her signature open toe high heel mules, is holding a quill and an open, empty notebook. The words “Barbie Diary” are printed at the top of the picture, under which I wrote, “Duh.” I was quite the wit at thirteen.

Inside is mostly a life in code. For example, I wrote, “daddy is sick,” but it meant daddy is drunk and his door’s shut and we all hope he stays asleep, and we’re staying very quiet, and damn the person who telephones, and double damn it when we hear his bedroom door open. Though I didn’t exactly tell the truth, I didn’t completely deny or ignore the situation either, which tells me that even then I knew my life was worth something and had to be noted. I think keeping those diaries was a way to declare myself present. And even though I often deny this, I believe it shows that I treasured my life, and that I had hope.

Diary writing evolved into letter writing, and though I don’t have much evidence of that time, I do have a painting from my friend Dorothy of me sitting on my porch when I was in my early twenties, writing letters to friends about things like the light or the smell of the lake. I felt strange mailing the letters because they weren’t exactly reporting what I thought letters were supposed to report, like news and human affairs. When I sat with paper and a pen on my porch it felt like I could see the world better, that suddenly the rain and the Catalpa tree had to be written about. I remember feeling that the world was too beautiful to ignore or skim. I thought it had to be shouted aloud about.

In December of 1981 I bought and wrote in my first permanent notebook. I was in a crisis, and I remember stopping without a conscious plan at the drug store at the corner of Robert E. Lee and Canal Blvd in New Orleans, where I bought my first black and white composition book, and scribbling in it in the parking lot, in pencil, “It is Christmas. I hate this world.” My two-year old son, Tim, was in the car with me. I didn’t know then what was happening, only that I was troubled, and that somehow writing would help me. I don’t know how I knew.

And now, sitting here in the year 2003, writing this essay, preparing to walk through New Orleans with a pen and paper, I’m beginning to understand why writing matters. It matters because it gives my spirit an avenue to come closer to my flesh. It gives me a way to paint my feelings, to give words to thinking, to see. Writing is a friend to me.

I think the world wants to be noticed, and loved. Through writing I can love the world out loud, and can thank the Stars the Gods the One for my life, and for yours, and for the beautiful complexities.

Writing is an act of love.

—*Melanie Anne Plesh*

Richard,

I have been carrying Melanie's love manifesto in my pocket, reading it to friends and family. I cry every time--partly from missing her, but also from the deep truth of her witness. She helps me understand what I'm doing as a teacher, writer, citizen of Earth. She keeps on teaching me, and will for the duration.

—*Kim Stafford (May 21, 2016)*

From *Voices of the New Orleans Writing Marathon*, SLWP, 2003.

https://www.southeastern.edu/acad_research/programs/slwp/publications/voices/voices.pdf

Essaying New Orleans

I moved into a French Quarter neighborhood the weekend before the New Orleans writing marathon occurred. The Saturday was a blur of business. But when I awoke on Sunday morning in my new home, New Orleans began for me, and so it is here, on the Sunday, that I begin my marathon. The following are excerpts from my notebooks.

Sunday

This is the first morning of my residence in the Faubourg Marigny, sitting on the sofa I dug out from the chaos of the move. The screen door is hooked. A guy pushing a grocery cart just walked by and as he passed my door he was singing, "How wonderful life is while you're in the world." He didn't see me.

I'm hearing gongs: a few, then nine, then two. Now the sound is so much in my head I don't know what I'm hearing, or even if that's what this phenomenon is.

I look prettier in New Orleans. There's a gleam to the hair on my arms. I have a color I didn't have in Covington. I'm enamored of my house and the environs. And for the record, I believe the bathroom mirror is this house's eye, and through it the house is courting me. And my tub has claws. And every room in the house has three-prong jacks except the one room where I need them, where the computer is.

Vince came over and we ate beans at the Praline Connection. He had red with a smothered pork chop; I had white with two perfect pieces of fried chicken. Tim is here right now, 9:45 PM, playing the piano. I think he had to come over to see that I'd really done it. And so I have.

Monday (at Southeastern Louisiana University)

Morning. Writing with the advanced institute. Mirrors. There's something about seeing as a writer and it's not really about the world. It's about ourselves. Bucket Man for instance is alive in a certain way in Richard's eyes, and not like he'd be alive in another's. But also I think writers animate the world. Bucket Man was just another guy with a bucket, but in Richard's eyes he became a guru, a sage, a seer. Richard could see him because Richard was looking into the world. I think maybe writers don't judge, that writers say what they see. I think the more a person can do that the better a writer she is. Because that leaves it to the reader to interpret. Maybe a writer lends her eyes to another, lets a reader see through a seer's eyes. That is a kind of reflecting, a mirroring, because I see then translate the sight into words and this is what the reader gets. But then I have to think about why anyone should bother reading what I see. Because who am I? But then again, who was Dostoevsky?

Evening. After speaking to thirteen telephone company people in three days I still do not have my internet/email service working. I have been out of touch with cyberspace for three full days, seventy two full hours. I'm mad as a bastard, but am also becoming a martyr. Thirteen people. It's a study in being assertive. But I also can't help but think there's a good reason in the bigger picture for me to be without my email/internet. But I won't tell Bell South that. The bastards.

There are so many issues. The cats: Princess wants to go outside. Orange had his balls cut off. And on top of everything else, I sneezed just now six times.

I feel devastated by the limits of my body. I'm too tired to hold my eyes open. And I have to be presentable at eight in the morning for the gas man. It's midnight now.

Wednesday

I feel the hot breath of New Orleans on the back of my neck, her damp sweet bitter sex, her invitation. She's enticing me, teasing me, asking me to fall in with her, daring me to roll over and kiss her. And if I were to roll over I'd find her smiling with great red lips and danger in her black eyes. And she'd sprout tendrils that would grow toward me, entangle me, root me to her, tendrils that would take me out of this bed and into the elements. And I would not want to be extricated. I would want to be taken.

There are six people in my house, including me, writing. It's a way to bless my house. Last night Gary and Barbara came here and we howled a prayer for this new living of mine, and now six writers are together here, writing, blessing my house again. It is clear what I am. I am a writer. And it's the moment, finally, to start thinking about Penny. No, I want to start with Brendan. I want to speak with Brendan first and give him this story. I want him to know that there are ways to find hope, that there are saviors and that there is salvation for those whose heart is mutilated, whose hope is gone.

When I was thirteen years old, in the year 1965, my father bought Penny for me, a seven year old brown roan with black hair, black legs, and a white star strip and snip on her face. On her chest there was a deep scar where a fair amount of flesh ought to have been. She ran into a tractor, her former owner told my daddy, when she was a filly. I can't imagine how she didn't die.

It was Good Friday when she came. She died in July of 1992. She was everything to me. She was stability, love, safety, power, generosity. She taught me those things. She gave me the opportunity to learn to take care of a life. I couldn't take care of myself or my own life, but I could and did take care of her life. Morning and night, for 27 years, I took care of her life. And the rewards for doing that, the rewards, were that I stayed alive. And I learned what love was. And I still can hardly bear my life without her. When daddy bought Penny for me, that's when my life began. And now I'm here thinking Penny is behind the move.

I'm outside again, now by the river. Walking alone is an important part of the marathon. It gives time for impressions and ideas to sift down and find a sticking place. To be alone with myself. I lost my group when I stopped at the Natchez, transfixed, absolutely hypnotized, by the person standing on the uppermost deck in a yellow hooded raincoat, standing, playing the calliope in the rain. But not terribly well. A puff of smoke per key. And then it began to rain hard, and I stood there in it under my umbrella, letting my feet get wet, staring at that calliopiist. That's how I lost my group and began to see the river, the green and white Rivco tugboat, its black enameled engine, and on the levee the monument to immigrants, and the name Romeo Celli acknowledged there.

I keep looking, looking, but I'm not seeing. Because I'm looking in the wrong direction. Or rather perhaps I'm just not catching the entire arc of light. When I look out at the outside world my gaze gets absorbed. I'm not waiting long enough to receive back the reflection. I'm moving too fast. I think that I feel a little hopeless and so don't let my gaze linger. I'm missing the world. I'm letting it slip by me because I just can't sustain. My attention is scattered. I'm looking at the many things and cannot see anything. Penny gave me an identity and a place. She

took care of me, though really, I think she equipped me to take care of myself. However, she did have the power of the hoofs which I didn't have.

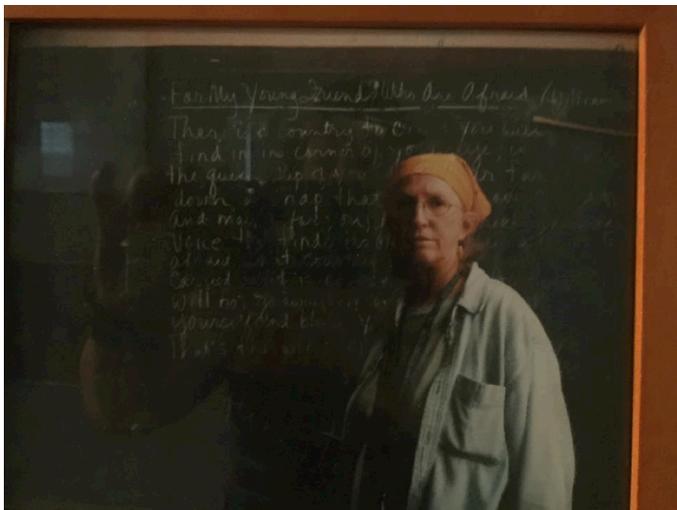
When my daddy was a kid like I was, and abandoned like I was, he had a horse, Buddy, and I think that's what made him understand I needed Penny, even against Mother's biting objection.

Kim asked if he should put the milk that was in the creamer back into the jug, and he returned the sugar to the kitchen, and he turned the coffee pot off. These are the things that worry me, things that I fear I've forgotten. It's as though he knew what would worry me and erased those worries.

Thursday

It's 7 PM. I'm sitting in the evening, the sun falling behind a gray and white mansion on Royal Street that I see out of my kitchen window. I just heard a ship's blast on the river. I'm in a port city and I'm a port city woman. I hear the train. I was convinced that I couldn't live in a place without church bells, and yet I don't have them here. I have trains and boats, but no churches. Maybe it's a sign that I need to seek them out.

I love this world. It's crazy to love it, but I love it. I love the iniquities and the striving for morality. I love that St. Louis Cathedral is in the center of what people past and present have called an immoral city. I love the noises of the trains and boats that indicate movement, and that remind me that this is a city for travelers. I'm a traveler. I'm not happy enough to read about the world. I have to be in it and touch it. This is not a city to feel stuck in. Maybe my traveling hunger came because of the trains I grew up next to, and the river I always knew about. I wonder why daddy moved here from southern Illinois, a child born in a place far away from the sea, where people don't recognize oars. It occurs to me that my daddy might have lived like Odysseus, except that he fell for the sirens. And maybe I have too.



From *Katrina in Their Own Words*. SLWP 2006.

Escape from New Orleans

On August 28 I led a car caravan of two on a 52 mile/8 hour trip to Hammond, Louisiana. My vehicle was a little bare-bones Nissan pickup truck, standard transmission, without air conditioning. Behind me was my neighbor and his dog. In the little cab of my truck were my big-boned friend, Leonard; my feral cat, Orange, trembling in a big plastic cat carrier which Leonard had to hold the entire eight hours on his lap; my other cat, Princess, who broke out of her pillow case twenty minutes into the flight and so ran loose the rest of the seven hours and forty minutes; and me, the driver. I had one pack of cigarettes, a thermos full of tepid white wine, a roll of toilet paper I'd intended to bring to school the next day, and nothing to eat. Leonard had boiled eggs and an onion. There was one big bottle of water. While I was driving, I attempted to pour water into my cupped hand, open the prison-like cat carrier door, and force the water upon my panting, traumatized Orange. He wouldn't drink so I touched his lips with the water as best I could. I was afraid he would die of thirst.

Katrina was coming but, ironically, there was no breeze and the temperature was in the 90's with at least that much humidity. Since my air conditioner and defroster didn't work we had to have the windows open, but not open so much that Princess could jump out, which I feared she would do the entire ride. We crawled the 52 miles, off and on. My brakes had been becoming bad for a few weeks before the storm but rose to their peak of badness during the evacuation. It was metal on metal every time I touched the brake. I didn't tell Leonard about this. He was already scared enough. I was scared too, but somebody has to drive.

In the bed of the truck were the things Leonard and I thought, in our emergency, to bring: pillows and two changes of clothes and canned food from our cabinets and all the booze in our respective houses. Two hours into the trip the rain came, first as sprinkles, then as downpour. We stopped in the heaving pre-hurricane rain when we first possibly could, at the north end of the twelve mile bridge over Lake Pontchartrain. The birds in the sky, the few we saw, were moving erratically and that scared me. I took pictures. They looked like foreign birds, vulture-like but not vultures. Maybe freaked out cormorants. I don't know. Bony though.

My neighbor, George, in his Lincoln with his dog, Panda, was the second in the caravan and he followed me. At the first point of solid ground on the north shore of the bridge I pulled over onto the shoulder so Leonard could urinate and I could attempt to protect the paper and cloth in the bed of my truck from the elements. It was an ordeal keeping Princess in the cab, keeping air inside to clear the windshield, and letting Leonard out. But we did it. Leonard urinated on the other side of the truck while I unloaded the vulnerable things from the cab into George's Lincoln and tucked in all the rest. I thought about suggesting Leonard ride with George but they didn't know each other and I felt responsible to each, not just to get them to safety but also to maintain decorum. In retrospect I see the relative absurdity of decorum.

I didn't urinate for eight hours.

I had to make a lot of decisions. The first one after our one and only stop was whether to get in the far left lane to take the west ramp of I-12 or whether to continue north for a while. I chose the left lane, through three lanes of drivers as stressed as I, and George made it work by bullying his Lincoln between cars, making a space for my truck in front of him so I could get back in the lead. He can shoot the bird with the best of them. When I changed my mind (and could only communicate the change via turn signals because we didn't have cell phones) he

made a space across the lanes of traffic all the way to the right and I slipped in. I changed my mind again an hour or two later and he took us through again.

The rain got thicker. The windows were somewhat open because we needed the air for clearing the windshield of fog and for breathing, so we got wet. While I drove in the mess of rain and terrified evacuees I, over and over again, continued to try to force the cats to drink, which they never would do. They panted with their tongues out and their mouths wide open for eight solid hours, and for eight solid hours I was afraid they'd die.

I don't know anymore how many hours passed during the various phases and events of the ride. Eventually, around dark, I got on a relatively untraversed two-lane country road. The rain came so hard my windshield wipers were so ineffectual they may as well have been off. As I drove I had to constantly wipe the windshield with the toilet paper so I could see. I also had to keep my eye on George to be sure I didn't lose him.

We arrived at David's in Hammond at 7 p.m. in a gale, my clothes soaked through. There were wads of wet toilet paper everywhere in the truck.

I don't know much of anything else. We had a radio. Reports were dark talk of many thousands people dead, of a destroyed city, things I could not wrap my mind around. I stumbled from task to task, for days believing it was only a matter of days. I worried mostly at that point about my students because they lived in some of the most severely devastated areas of the city. And I worried over my school, Frederick Douglass High School on St. Claude Avenue in the 9th ward. All it seemed I could do was worry. The world had lost its center and I my bearings. The New Orleans Times-Picayune had begun a valiant effort to remain and report on what was occurring. Somewhere, somehow, they managed to make production of a slim rag, every word of which was gold to me. On September 21 I found a copy of the Times-Picayune in Hammond, and there, on page three, was a half-page photograph of a Douglass classroom. The photo depicted an Oregon National Guardsman playing the guitar on his cot in front of a blackboard on which the men had hung their towels and uniforms and drawn graffiti. Behind the men and clothes and cots and among the pictures they'd drawn I recognized that it was my classroom, room 219, they were living in. I recognized a poem I'd copied there in chalk, William Stafford's poem called "For My Young Friends Who Are Afraid." It was the subject of the last lesson I ever taught in that room:

There is a country to cross you will
find in the corner of your eye, in
the quick slip of your foot—air far
down, a snap that might have caught.
And maybe for you, for me, a high, passing
voice that finds its way by being
afraid. That country is there for us,
carried as it is crossed. What you fear
will not go away; it will take you into
yourself and bless you and keep you.
That's the world, and we all live there.

It's now almost a year later. I've been to my room several times. The National Guardsmen used it, but cleaned it too. But they left the poem on the board. I lost almost all my

sixteen years of teacher stuff, but not that poem, that innocent moment of putting the poem up there, of asking the children to think on it.

I returned to my house a few times after the storm, sneaking in around the police and guardsmen (because the city was closed), but came back with my cats to live for good in early October. I occasionally hear from my Douglass students who are mostly in Texas. One, Kiri, one of the mere 39% of her senior class who graduated, contacted me a few months after the storm. In August 2005 she'd just begun her freshman year at Dillard University to which she'd won a scholarship. She wanted to get OUT of the toxicity of the downtown New Orleans neighborhood of poverty and violence and she'd made it happen. Then Katrina occurred and destroyed her home and her school and she ended up in Dallas, living in a house full of raucous displaced people. She had no computer, no records, no contact numbers, no dependable telephone. She called me and asked me to be her liaison with Dillard and help connect her with the registrar. It worked out. On registration day I met her there and helped her take care of the complicated business of getting back in. I was so grateful to be able to help.

We stay in touch. She calls me and says, "Ms. Plesh! My English teacher expects me to write a paper . . ." and I've helped her though three such papers so far.

In two weeks I start back at teaching at a suburban school untroubled by Katrina. Over the summer the students were expected to read four novels. One is *Cry, the Beloved Country*. I haven't read it yet.



From Melanie's Blog

<http://pleshblog.blogspot.com/2005_10_01_archive.html>

They Have Their Own Thoughts

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 24, 2005

five days in

Today was the fifth day. I've already covered one class and they asked me to cover another one yesterday but I had a meeting to go to. One teacher broke her collarbone the day before school started and another had some kind of diabetic attack that mimicked a stroke the first day the kids came to school. I'm just saying that to say the absences are legitimate and there's no tomfoolery.

The first couple of days it looked like it was going to be a different year, but things have pretty much gone back to normal, with rivers of students circling the floor, a few students who don't respond to me when I say hello in the hall (they look at me and walk past me), bellowing during classes, etc. I haven't had a problem with people walking into my room because I put up blue paper on the panes before school even started and I'm locking my door. I tried leaving it unlocked the first day but a kid came in and did his little dance, so I'm locking it again.

The strategic reading program comes with a facilitator who is there full time, working with the three of us strategic reading teachers. She put up a "word wall" with colorful borders in my room and I now, for the first time, have POSTERS in my room. I prefer the walls stark so that the children will look inside themselves for the colors and such. But I'm following the program. Trying to. Today I had a tiny argument with the facilitator about the length of time children are given to read in the group setting. I'm going to try. And dammit but the poem I used for the reading showcase (included below) was too hard (my fault) and it didn't really work with the kids, which is not a problem for me because I have no problem saying my bad when I choose something that doesn't work. But the facilitator was in there, watching me. Now I'm thinking out loud here. I think the powers that be believe it's the teachers that need help teaching, not that other things have to change. I feel like I'm being scrutinized, and by a very young woman with I think five years of teaching under her belt. I think she has assumed that

I'm not a good teacher and that that's why she's there and that that's why I'm at Douglass. It's a weird feeling. I guess I'll just have to see what's up.

Monday a student of mine from last year, Shonda, told me she had a nightmare Saturday night in which she was riding in a car with two boys and someone shot the boys and she went running out of the car and into Douglass screaming, "Ms Plesh! Help me!" over and over. She screamed it out loud and her mother came into her room and asked her who Ms Plesh is.

A lot of my students from last year have been coming to see me. It doesn't hurt my street cred or my reputation for the children in my classes to see this.

Here's William Stafford's poem, "For All My Young Friends Who Are Afraid":

*There is a country to cross you will
find in the corner of your eye, in
the quick slip of your foot--air far
down, a snap that might have caught.
And maybe for you, for me, a high, passing
voice that finds its way by being
afraid. That country is there, for us,
carried as it is crossed. What you fear
will not go away: it will take you into
yourself and bless you and keep you.
That's the world, and we all live there.*

October 27, 2005

The next two weeks

I'm a person who has to drop out of the action of living every so often and reflect on it, to get perspective. I do that by writing in my journal. But in mid August, with the beginning of the 2005 school year, everything started moving too fast, boom boom boom, and I didn't get to write much and I didn't get perspective and suddenly I found myself, two weeks after the hurricane, trying to get a grip and feel my life. During the first two weeks there was FEMA to think about, and emails that I couldn't access except every so often, at PJ's, with the rest of the refugees. My brakes got ruined during the drive from New Orleans that Sunday so I had to have a brake job done (the man at the Texaco, Darryl, reattached my rearview mirror without even charging me for it). There were the neighbors, Patsy and

her refugees and Ryan and his, and Kathy downstairs and the dog Greta who disappeared for a while after the hurricane, and all the drinking and partying on the stairs, and the Crescent Bar opening, even without electricity, so people could get booze, and waiting for the Mexican restaurant, La Carreta's, to open, like it was some kind of magic event, like when that happened somehow everything would be okay. And about how meanwhile, during this day to day attempt at normalcy and the human unfolding, New Orleans was desperate. The Superdome, the Convention Center, filled with people who'd not gotten out, and the desperation, the lack of food and water, lack of toilets, for days, and the talk of looting in the city and the burning of SAKS Fifth Avenue, and the talk of thugs with guns attempting to take the city over, commandeering vehicles. And the news was just trickling in and it was all dark, every day darker, and hearing about the city flooding and none of us knowing what was happening to our homes. And the low grade crying all the time. And having no clothes and driving to Dillard's and telling the ladies what I needed and where I was from, and the sadness and compassion in their eyes, and the woman in the lingerie department fitting me for a brassiere (I hadn't brought one), which was the first time that had ever happened for me in my 52 years (and learning the little trick about leaning forward and holding the brassiere by the top edge and shaking to get the, um, flesh, in there right). And me trying to be a girl in the midst of all this, trying to live somehow normal in that sweet little town, knowing that the city was in chaos. It's like I was in two places at one time, the most tender and serious part of me in New Orleans, the survivor me in Hammond, trying to be fine.

This is from my journal:

It's the day after Labor Day. I signed up for unemployment insurance and must now look into food stamps and social security. But the main thing is I SPOKE TO TIM AND BONNIE! Tim said, "What are you going to do?" And finally, nine days after leaving New Orleans, I hear the question. And it blows my mind. What am I going to do? What am I going to do? What am I going to do? Tim made this great point that if ever there was a time for my book about Douglass High School it's now. He made the point that all those people at the Superdome and Convention Center were from the 9th ward. And that I taught in the 9th ward at Douglass in what will probably turn out to be its last year. And I wrote a book about the experience. I wish I could find a way to get on the blog site so I can update it. I know there will be people who are concerned. Another thing is that people are talking about racism, that those people on the roofs, waiting for days to be rescued, were black, from the 9th ward, from

poverty, probably almost all of them, and that they were left for days on roofs. Why were they left behind? I think maybe there's something in the story of Douglass that may help explain that, the disregard these children are treated with.

It's stunning how the hurricane called everything to a halt. Where's Tanya and Ms. Simmons and Julie and Monique and Whitney? Where's Raymond? Did he get out? Did Katrina disable him? Is he trying to take care of his mother? Where's Ms. Holliday? Where is Douglass? It's like this is a cleansing for New Orleans. The murder, the crime, the poverty, the ignorance, the destitution, the way the city let the black population slip. The disregard it had for protocol, much less propriety. Plain human protocol, just following a few of the rules that keep us decent, we did not do that in New Orleans. Our laissez faire attitude, our celebration of the playful and the outlandish and the extreme, our acceptance of, hell, everything.

I have to start smiling more. I think in the recent past I'd gotten way too serious and heavy. It's probably because of that job. Which I do not have anymore. I half jokingly said, aloud even, that I halfway hoped I'd get fired in the massive layoff frenzy that was occurring before the hurricane. And now I have been, but by a hurricane. And I don't want to jump into a teaching job outside of New Orleans.

I feel like a big drop of mercury that hits the surface and scatters. Or more, like a big drop of water that hits a hot sidewalk and sizzles. I feel like the world has popped open, like a shell, and I'm an emerging bird. Oh, and I heard that there are 45,000 national guard troops in New Orleans and that a new hurricane is in the gulf. Ophelia. I hope some of my students from last year will remember who Ophelia was in the Shakespeare we read.

There's a train, open car after open car, fifty maybe, more maybe, hauling nothing but chunks of concrete, heading east toward New Orleans, the sound of it over the gaps in the track like old men harumphing, a high explosive expression of a tone, a clearing of the throat as it were, landing an octave down in a kind of resolution, a being finished with the moment. It's that sound all the way down the tracks, yard after block after mile of the journey.

Listening to the radio. On Monday it looks like some people, uptown and in the quarter, will be allowed home. I guess we can't stay, but we can at least see. I fell asleep reading *The Odyssey*, which David brought me yesterday. I know there's a big perspective to gain. In the near distance I hear a church playing a fake bell rendition of Rock of Ages. There's of course

nothing intrinsically wrong with the music but I don't like the fact that churches try to act like those are bells, like from the old world. The woman who sold me my cellphone today was angry and adamant about the New Orleans people here, talking about how they are different, crankier, more impatient, and that a lot of them "hang around doorways." I'd been thinking of how New Orleans people would change Hammond because of our differentness but wasn't thinking about the negative things. I guess that'll happen, yes. The influx of us. Things will be different everywhere New Orleanians have settled.

Looking at the fish in the bottle on Dave's table. The Tetra. It's a gorgeous dark red billowy thing with big fins and a spectacular tail, but it sits or floats or lies or whatever it is fish do all day alone in a clear glass bottle about the shape and size of a vase that could hold a dozen roses, with a plant growing out of it and blue glass disks layered in the bottom. It has for its companions the blue glass at the bottom, the roots from the plant, the rope around the bottle, and its little surface of air which it sips sporadically. I think it's the height of arrogance for humans to keep fish and birds in such cages, to keep such creatures in check like that. Why does it even occur to us to keep animals bound for our pleasure? Why is it a pleasure at all? I'm sure it could be said that, at least as far as the fish go, we bred them for it. I mean, does the Siamese Fighting Fish occur in the wild? The terrible idea of lovebirds kept caged for us. Why? Why do we need to witness the spectacle of love caged? Why does anyone find that attractive? It's some perversity in us. I'm sitting here watching the creature react to various stimulants I touch onto the glass and I think he's full of fear and bravado. But then I remember he's a fish and I don't think fish have either. The thing is, it's not a cruelty toward the fish or the bird so much as it's a cruelty in us towards ourselves, that we could derive pleasure or satisfaction from the manipulation of an animal. That's the terrible thing. It's how it harms us. It's how we show ourselves feeding a mean streak in us, perhaps us trying to reconcile ourselves with how caged we are. If we were not in this society as we are, with rules and cages of our own, would we be able to derive any kind of pleasure from seeing others in that position? Maybe that's it, it's a way we can come to terms with being tamed as we are by taming other creatures. Maybe it's a way we rationalize our own lives. This makes me question whether we were ever wild. Have we ever been the sort that succumbed to allowing ourselves to be tamed? Or were we born to be tamed? Organized? Forward thinking? Rational? It seems to me more like a curse than a gift. Wouldn't it be lovely to be thoughtless and blind, so to speak, and to follow instincts through the world, follow the messages from a designer, follow the design without

question? But it seems we weren't made like that. It seems we were made to strive, to think, to reach, to attempt to rise. It seems we could never, can never, will never really rest, that we're born to move toward understanding, that we have to question everything, that it's only in the rising that we're really alive. That's probably one of the serious issues for the kids I used to teach. They're as filled with the human need for movement as anyone else is, but the portals out and up are closed to them. How did that happen? Do we not all share in the same human need and desire, and therefore feel compassion for our brethren? It seems we don't. Otherwise, why would we let the things happen that we let happen? Why would we allow the kids at Douglass, for example, to remain exempt from the wider world? Is the world not big enough? Is that what we fear?

When I get back into my world I'm going to understand something I didn't understand before. I don't know what. Which adds to the wonder of it all.



MARATHON MOMENT

3:00 P.M.

Molly's at the Market

Drinking In New Orleans. I'm at the window of Molly's at the Market, somewhere between outside and inside. Behind me is the clatter of people letting their guards down. Angels and alley cats are working things out at the bar. Two men are tossing around the word Stonehenge and lighting their cigarettes with Zippos. I hear the hinges creak and the lids slap shut. It's a rich sound. I probably only think I smell the lighter fluid. I let them and their conversation and their Zippos melt into the general manic din. A diva in neon green with a shrill nasal voice laughs too loud and I feel bitten by her. I relegate her too, and let my attention float back to the outside, to a princess in a yellow net tutu, to a man drinking something from a purple twelve inch approximation of Barbie. Someone named "Roachlegg" has been writing on the bathroom walls.

It's three o'clock in the afternoon. I know this because a wide-eyed woman in Mardi Gras beads just looked over my shoulder into the fully peopled bar behind me and announced with incredulity, "It's only three o'clock in the afternoon." Hmm, it's later than I thought.

In a ripe and unguarded moment, an old man in a heavy frayed tweed coat stops at the window in front of me. His eyes are so tender. Soft. Too soft for this world. He speaks a language I cannot understand. Probably no one could. But I want to. While his eyes are on me, his hand is in the ashtray taking the cigarette butts out and putting them in his pocket. I offer him a whole cigarette, hoping he'll stay. He holds it up to his face like it's something dear, then he backs out of my view and is gone. I feel unaccountably bereft.

The sun is gone now behind a rain cloud. Nina Simone is singing "Suzanne." Perfume like iced flowers drifts in through the window.

-Melanie Anne Plesh

From “New Orleans in Letters.” Ed. by Richard Louth. *Louisiana Literature*. 2013.

Dear Rick,

One of my favorite things about New Orleans is being on the land side of the levee watching ships pass upriver. Lately I’ve been noticing the Carnival cruise ship coming in from a cruise, about 6:30 a.m., its strands of lights lit, its blue and red whale tail following. That’s all I can see in the dim winter morning light. It reminds me that life is always going on in New Orleans. That’s how it is in a port city. The river doesn’t operate 8 to 5. When a ship gets here, no matter where it’s from, that’s when it gets here, and the moment it docks there’s work to be done. I love the idea of that. That may be part of why New Orleans is what it is. Not simply that people party late, drink late, eat late, but that somebody has to serve them, just like somebody has to serve the boats. It’s sort of in our nature to be somehow round the clock, even if I go to sleep at 9 p.m. The city is always alive, awake, and available. Bring on your ships! Step to the wharf, boys. Unload, re-load. Blow us a kiss goodbye. Come again! —*Love, Melanie Plesh*

From “Finding Your Muse in New Orleans. Ed. by Richard Louth. *Louisiana Literature*. 2015.

My Sister, Laura

I’ve always wanted to write the story of my sister, Laura. I started it once but couldn’t quite capture the juxtaposition of grief and joy, hope and defeat, tragedy and comedy. She was an infant when her father abandoned her and our mother. He suddenly one day told our mother that he wanted to immediately go on a driving trip out west, and they did, and it was there the brothers of a 14 year old girl Arthur had impregnated caught up with him and the farce was up and he divorced mother and Laura and married the 14 year old. Then mother had to go back to her secretarial job so she gave Laura, GAVE Laura, to the old lady we only knew as Granny and only visited her on the occasional weekend. I don’t know, maybe it was every weekend. I don’t know. But Laura was a stranger to me, really until I returned from the trip, when I was 51 and she was 59. She’d had brain surgery and I was still on sabbatical so I was driving her to go see our mother in Alabama. Sometimes Laura couldn’t even go in the room with mother, even after that long drive and her need/desire to see her. It was so sad. But it was during those many hours on the road that we got to know each other. It was at an Alabama rest stop when she showed me the photo of a man and asked me if he looked familiar. I said no and she said this is her first child, the baby she’d given birth to when she was very young—14? 15? Mother sent her to a home for pregnant girls and she had to leave the baby behind. She got pregnant again but this time married the bastard and gave birth to Donna when she was 17. I was 8. She told me in the car that day that she had always thought of him, remembered his birthday every year and had been sad over him all her life. And absolutely nobody knew. But then the baby/man, Gene, found her. And Laura was finally happy. They got to know each other. A few years after this reunion, Laura died of undiagnosed pneumonia in the night, in her sleep. And she’d never told mother about Gene. —*Melanie Plesh*

From Melanie Plesh's book: *I'm in Estonia, and I'm Alive*. LULU.com 2012.

The Eiffel Tower

It's 11 August, the day before I'm leaving for Germany, and I have a rendezvous planned for noon with someone who actually knows me. I'm a little early, so I'm waiting in the hot dusty shade next to the leg of the Eiffel tower closest to the Seine, our prearranged spot.

Neither Richard nor I knew back in America when we'd made the plan (MONDAY, 8-11, 12 NOON, EIFFEL TOWER, MEET LEFT LEG WHEN FACING RIVER), just how daunting in width as well as height the Eiffel Tower would be. It is almost serendipitous when we find each other here.

Or just plain silly luck.

I spy Richard and his wife, Doris, as they're passing wide-eyed through the crowd. It's a shock to my current view of the world to recognize someone and difficult at first to reconcile myself with that. Richard and Doris are of home, but now they're here. Seeing them grounds me, but perhaps in the wrong reality. It's confusing. I'm not so sure it's a good thing because my automatic response when I'm with friends is to relax, but I'm not in the habit of relaxing in Paris, nor do I think I can afford that luxury. I feel my hard-earned sharpness diminish when they touch me.

Maybe I'm just afraid of becoming accustomed again to warmth. It takes me about ten seconds to get over it.

I love Richard because he loves the world. It is as simple as that. While Doris climbs the Eiffel Tower, Richard and I sit in the shade and talk about the little things we've fallen in love with here. I cannot remember a thing we talked about.

When Doris comes down we three go for a jambon (Paris's spectacular ham sandwich) in the Tuilleries and sit at a garden table with a yellow striped umbrella over us. I am suddenly struck with the most painful loneliness I've felt in years. We drink beer and I laugh and chat vaguely, trying to seem to mean it. But all I can think is that here I am, in the City of Love, with two friends who are actually in love and are together, across the table from me. When Doris suggests we ride the Ferris wheel I believe I say I cannot ride it because I am afraid of heights. I can't quite explain how tormenting the idea of being alone on that thing, especially in the presence of these two, would be for me.

I'm torn when our few hours together come to an end and I watch Richard and Doris leave through the soft, slow moving evening. I stay at our umbrella table as they walk away down a manicured lane between rows of the Queen's gardener's flowers and Doris reaches for Richard's hand.

I let the loneliness envelop me.

In the twilight I find my way to a metro station, then to the train station where I purchase my ticket to Hamburg. Business as usual. I sit at a table in the station for a long time and watch travelers, which usually makes me feel better about everything.

[...]

The tie with Richard and Doris stays heavy in me until I am finally forced to put the loneliness aside and face my reality. I'm leaving tomorrow.

I write a poem, ostensibly for the bartender who longs to travel yet doesn't because he's afraid. The poem is more likely for myself, a reiteration of my resolve.

It's too late when you're worm food,
Being digested rather than digesting.
Step up and go to Africa.
Who knows when the worms will come?
I write it on a napkin and leave it for Damien in the tip glass.

I'm leaving with mixed feelings. I should have ridden the Ferris wheel.

Oh well. Another time.

Writings for Melanie

These pieces by members of SLWP and friends say how much she meant to all of us as friend, teacher, colleague, mentor, writer, Co-Director, and National Writing Project leader.

There are never enough words to say it all. Yet we try.

As a writer who carried a dictionary wherever she went and loved every word she ever met, Melanie knew the power as well as the limitations of language. For her, every word counted.

These few true words are here to help us and others remember what she meant to us. They are of, to, about, from, and for her.



May 21, 2016

A Call to SLWP Writers and Friends:

Today, coming in to my office to send this email to you all, I stopped at the local Goodwill. There on a bookshelf was a pristine copy of Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*, a book Melanie introduced us to in the very first SLWP Summer Institute. For her three-hour presentation that June 25, 1992 (my first writing marathon), she asked our Institute to write about "this moment," and then about "why I write," and then about "a grandparent," and out of those writings, our sharings, and her discussion, she began to weave a magic that has inspired many of us as teachers and writers for 25 years.

I still sit in a circle with my students and write with them, till this day, because of her. When I listen to my students, it is because she taught me how and why. She taught me more than any other teacher ever has—about teaching, writing, living, loving the world. In helping run the Writing Project as Co-Director, Mentor, or Guest Writer for so many years, she also influenced many of you to be better teachers, writers, and human beings. For that, we must all say a collective "Thanks, Melanie."

When I told Kim Stafford about Melanie's death, he said something like, "Now we must all write for her," meaning, I think, "because she is no longer with us physically, we must do the writing she can no longer do." It could also mean, "We must write at her behest, we must write about our lives as she would want us to." And also, "We should write about her, tell her story to others as we only know it."

I thought, in her honor, we might all write. I think it is what she'd want for us.

I invite you all, as writers, to open the gift that Melanie gave us, and take some time to write in the next few days. Time that you might spend another way. The best tribute we can give her is to be writers, and to think of her as we write. Write about anything. For her. For yourself. For the world. "Just write," she might say. "It will come to you."

—*Richard Louth*

From a letter to Melanie Plesh after she had written me
about the rich confusions of this life. —Kim Stafford



31 August 2000

Dear Melanie in Folsom, L.A.,

Good to hear from you, cobwebs and all. I don't think you can explain these mysteries, only live them. Your letter clarifies for me an old terror and wonder: the artist is alone. It's part of the gig, a predicament, a curse, and the blessing of true need. You don't have to shag around looking for what you need to do. You need to write. Feel what you feel, get knocked around by the intensity of it, and then write. And no one will understand, but they will receive. They can't say it back to you, because what you do is in your own language. But like the yearning call of a bird, in a language all its own, you come to others, and the love you hold holds them....

Our little Guthrie at three has taken to babbling long monologues to himself, sometimes punctuated by "Papa, are you listening...did you hear that?" But often just running along in his solitude. Yesterday I just caught the tail end of a long ramble: "...and then my papa died and I was all grown up." And I understood that he understood, already, what growing up means. It means you are alone. Not til your papa dies are you all grown up....

You are talking about how to do this, because life surges through you like music shaking the very floor of any room you enter. Joy. Pain. Sudden mercy. It's all welcome, so you feel it utterly, so you are alone with it, and so you write, and welcome more....

I imagine this conversation could be happening over a Voodoo beer in some juke joint out of the way in N.O., but it's not. It's on the page. And that's the point. It has to be this way for a writer. I'm writing back as I read your letter. I've finished page one. I'm talking back as it comes to me. You've struck a chord here, because I woke up at three with the feeling my writing career is a sham. So it's good to talk.

You want to build a house with your own hands. Do you know I have spent the past ten days tearing apart the guts of this house I inhabit with Perrin, in order to rebuild it with my own hands? One thing leads to another. She wanted the lead paint gone, so I ripped off the walls. She wanted more light, so I tore out the windows. And now she tells me to stop, or hire someone to take over. But I have to keep on. She goes to work, and I crawl into the stifling attic to crouch on the joists and splice the old dangerous wires they threaded through the hidden spaces in 1914. I find the pencil sketches and math problems on the inner skin of shiplap fir. The tin disks cut and neatly nailed over every knot hole. From within. Hidden. By hand.

And Rilke. The very passage that woke you woke me: "You show me your verses. You ask me whether they are good verses...I beg you to give up all that. Go to the very center of yourself..." Yes, living the questions. So you ask why you travel everywhere, see into everyone, and know not yourself. Live that. I think you know this: Live that question, and write.

In my dream I went down into "the world of Kim" – in this case, an underground India Indian restaurant peopled by great seething crowds of people from Kipling's novel Kim, which my mother was reading in the hospital in October of 1949, and so named me. Dreaming this summer, I went down into the world of Kim, and after wandering in the seething crowds, I looked up from the city I seemed to be inhabiting, and saw all around the horizon a ring of green forested hills. And I was puzzled, because we were underground, and how could there be such a horizon there? So this question came to my mind, and in my mind in answer an old woman spoke: "You may seek to understand the beauty; you may also enjoy it." And she said to me, "You may take a new cup." A waiter was standing, holding a silver tray. I put down my old cup, and took a new one. And woke.

Melanie, my friend, we may seek to understand. We may also enjoy. And do what we are called to do, without explaining to anyone why. Have to do this music a writer does.

–*Kim Stafford*

From Janice Krantz

May 24, 2016, 5:44 pm, Houston, TX

Writing for Melanie Plesh. I was in her company only a handful of times, but her soul was accepting, embracing . . . so much of what we become when we allow our hearts to open, our words to flow, our voices to be heard. Accepting, embracing.

We could use so much more of that in today's world - a world fettered with self-imposed obligations that portend a non-existent need to be something we're not. What if the world simply turned, and we simply did our best to meet our needs and not harm others around us. Would that be so very unrealistic? Unimaginable?

To be curious enough to understand yet not judge

To be helpful enough to lift without dominating

To be present enough to comfort without changing

To speak in gentle positives rather than harsh negatives

To listen . . . that's it . . . nothing else

Wherever Melanie is now, may there be pen and paper and an ear to hear her read her words.

Like Melanie, may we find the strength, the courage, to commit to paper those thoughts that tangle with our needs and make us live, because life is an unpredictable journey. Embrace it. We are given one chance with each body we inherit. Accept it. Why waste that gift mistreating the one person who will be your constant companion on this journey. Accept, embrace, honor yourself.

—Janice Krantz

From Jessica Netterville

Melanie Anne Plesh is the reason I consider myself a writer today.

Even though I've never been published and never will be in the main stream.

She is the reason I value free writing expression in my classroom.

Even though my students sometimes think it's just a good way to waste time.

She's why I know their journals are valuable: full of personal inspiration, potential poetry, college entrance essays, future fiction and non.

Even though students don't see further than immediate revelation or nostalgia 30 to 40 years down the road.

She's why I have focused more on becoming a teacher of writing and creation.

Even though the system encourages more passivity and regurgitation for both teachers and students.

She is why I feel comfortable bucking our rigid English curriculum.

Even though there is urgent and high accountability with standardized testing.

For me, she was the physical embodiment of why the art, beauty, power, and connections of words still needs to be taught.

Even though our fast-paced modern culture denies this, the universe still recognizes its truth.

She taught me that there are a lot of "Even thoughts" in this life, but they are worth non-conforming to.

For Melanie

You are Written.

Your life has Words.

Phrases—Sentences—

Stories—Lessons—

Hopes—Fears—

Journeys—Hibernations—

Failures—Fulfillments—

Your life has Words.

Because you Wrote them.

Because you taught others to Write them.

Because you listened to others share them.

Because you accepted them—the Words and their Writers.

Your life has Words.
We have listened to your Words, and we live them.
You are here with us now.
You are there, in time with Homer, Aeschylus, Melville and Dostoevsky.
You are everywhere in space and thought.
You are internal and eternal.
Your life has Words.
You are Written.

—*Jessica S. Netterville*

From Ellen Steigman, 25 May 2016

I believe Melanie and I first met just after Hurricane Katrina, in the Fall of 2005, when I was substitute teaching at Mandeville High. I was (of course) drawn to Melanie. I could much more readily relate to her than I could to most people I had encountered in St. Tammany Parish. Until 2001, I had lived almost my entire life on the East Coast. Upon moving to the New Orleans area, I had worked only in the Jewish community. In conservative Mandeville, I was definitely a gefilte fish out of water. I recognized in Melanie someone with whom I could share my social and intellectual views; someone who would not see me as an outsider, someone who understood how it was to live differently from those around us.

That was before I remembered that I was a writer.

In 2008, I attended the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project. On our first day, I was delighted to see Melanie enter the room. I really had no idea what SLWP was, and of course didn't know about her role in the project. I am fairly certain that it was Melanie who gave us our first free write prompt. I can't remember what it was, but for some reason the word "door" sticks in my mind. That probably wasn't it, but I'm going to go with that, because there must be some reason my mind is telling me that, right?

"Door" seems like a wholly appropriate prompt where Melanie is concerned. She opened the door to so many people, welcoming them in to the world of writing and literature – not just opening the door, but, as we've heard from so many of her students, ushering them into the home of her mind, taking them on adventures through the past to chat with Dostoyevsky over a glass of tea (made in an authentic samovar, I'm sure), accompanying them to hell and heaven, and -- most importantly, some might argue -- helping them navigate the unique circle of hell that is being a teenager.

I only learned that Melanie was sick the week before she died. My first reaction was that this really, really sucks. Why her? Why do the people who contribute the most have to leave? I'm sure many people have expressed the same sentiments.

But enough about the unfairness of life. I'm going to remember Melanie as the inspiration she was for so many of us. I'm going to try to honor her by rededicating myself to free-writing with my students, by focusing on what it really means to teach, and by continuing to strive to help my students develop as critical thinkers with strong moral compasses, as compassionate people who know what it is to feel cared for and appreciated, as individuals who can make a difference.

Melanie was one of a kind, and if everyone she taught – students, teachers, friends, family – carries with them even part of the spark that she was, we will all have continued her legacy.

May her memory be a blessing.

–Ellen Steigman

For Melanie

When a favorite fountain pen runs out of ink, two options remain:
throw it in a drawer, where it will linger for sentiment's sake,
or refill it, and continue writing.

Writers speak to us, but when their life's ink runs out,
they speak through us.

So should a thought enter your head,
circle your brain, fire your synapses,
and stubbornly refuse to leave,
refill the ink
and become her pen
Write it down.

—*Ellen Steigman*

From Tracy Ferrington Cunningham

Thinking of Melanie:

It is with tremendous sadness that we report the loss of our beloved friend, mentor, and co-director, Melanie Plesh, who passed away yesterday morning. I am sad beyond words. But as words were her magic, I offer a small tribute in her honor.

To say that Melanie Plesh's spirit lives on is the most inadequate of phrases. Her spirit long ago took up its own place of residence inside each one of us who had the great privilege and tremendous pleasure of her good company. For five hot summer weeks in the year 2000, I was enchanted by her wit and charm, enthralled by her magical writing, and humbled by the pure love and brutal honesty she brought to the art of teaching.

That five-week Institute with Richard and Melanie at the helm quite simply changed my life, and Melanie became a standard for teaching and writing that I could only aspire to reach. She taught us to let go of the fears that cause us to clutter our classrooms with nonsense, and instead let our students be themselves and to be our true authentic selves in front of them. She taught us to let them write and to write with them, and to give them the time and space to think and create and be together as a community of writers and scholars.

These are truly simple concepts but they manifest themselves in thousands of small decisions we make as teachers--daily, weekly, monthly, year after year, until we've shed our old skin and begin to teach from a place of love and truth and purity that we learned from Melanie Plesh.

She is not with us but she is always in us. Our teaching and our writing are ever infused with her wisdom. As we impart small bits of that to our own students and through our own writing, her influence becomes immeasurable, unfathomable, and unending.

Over the years, she made me a better teacher, a better writer, and a better human being, and as I mourn her absence I can only be grateful to have been in her presence.

—Tracy Ferrington Cunningham

From Bev Marshall

A Friend's Random Thoughts About Melanie

The seeker who sets out upon the way shines bright over the world.

Sayings of Buddha

"She's a plucky girl," my grandmother would say when we'd marvel over someone who'd attempted an exploit we could never have imagined. My friend Melanie was a plucky girl. At writers group she'd slap her hand on the table, rare back in her chair with a big, baritone laugh and amaze us with a story about herself, too astonishing to be true. But her stories were all true. Truth was paramount in her life, and no matter how brutal, how painful, how deep the cut, she faced it, shouted it, sobbed it to me sometimes late at night. Many other nights we danced, we danced in her round house . . . so relevant. It had no angles, a circle, like the eddies she pirouetted in as she choreographed her own path through life. How many words did she write about those paths? Thousands? Millions? A billion? Those words that bespoke of everything she felt, she thought, she experienced in the moment. Each word written with her heart that she so freely gave to all who needed her. I read as many of those words as she offered. I will read them all again. I will not mourn for those words she will not write in the coming days and years, but I will wait for the whispers I will hear in the echoes of her husky voice when she comes to me on the wings of the hawks she always said were her spirit. When I'd spy her hawk landing in the marsh behind my house, I would telephone her, and she would answer, "Yes, I am flying there." She loved fiercely, hyperbolically, without fear. And she spoke endlessly to me of the many things she loved: her family, Penny, her students, writers of truth, and other seekers. She loved sunsets, books, her cello, candles, hawks, and so much more. Melanie was filled to the brim with a joyous Life Force, surplus Life Force for everyone she touched in her chaotic and beautiful world. I am grateful for sharing that world with a plucky girl with an open heart. Melanie's light shone bright over the world and its afterglow will continue to offer light to all of the people she loved.

With love,

Bev

May 24, 2016

From Lynne Vance

A Journal to Melanie

by Lynne Vance

And now, sitting here in the year 2003, writing this essay, preparing to walk through New Orleans with a pen and paper, I'm beginning to understand why writing matters. It matters because it gives my spirit an avenue to come closer to my flesh. It gives me a way to paint my feelings, to give words to thinking, to see. Writing is a friend to me.

I think the world wants to be noticed, and loved. Through writing I can love the world out loud, and can thank the Stars the Gods the One for my life, and for yours, and for the beautiful complexities.

Writing is an act of love.

— *Melanie Anne Plesh*

And now, sitting here on the last day of school in the year 2016, writing this journal, preparing to exit the classroom into halls lined with empty desks instead of students. The desks are neatly stacked in missionary style hugging the walls of the corridors. I write to Melanie, though she isn't physically here. She is in the air. I think of the title of a book on my list to read entitled *When Breath Becomes Air*. It's on my list because I like the title and because it was written by a recent medical school graduate who died of cancer. The ultimate irony – to spend a large part of life learning how to heal others – and then to die young with all of that knowledge. A double death.

I wonder why “death” and “breath” rhyme.

I think of the poem that Aaron M. chose to explicate last week – “Thesaurus” by Billy Collins.

It could be the name of a prehistoric beast
that roamed the Paleozoic earth, rising up
on its hind legs to show off its large vocabulary,
or some lover in a myth who is metamorphosed into a book.

It means treasury, but it is just a place
where words congregate with their relatives,
a big park where hundreds of family reunions
are always being held,
house, home, abode, dwelling, lodgings, and digs,
all sharing the same picnic basket and thermos;
hairy, hirsute, woolly, furry, fleecy, and shaggy
all running a sack race or throwing horseshoes,
inert, static, motionless, fixed and immobile

standing and kneeling in rows for a group photograph.

Here father is next to sire and brother close
to sibling, separated only by fine shades of meaning.
And every group has its odd cousin, the one
who traveled the farthest to be here:
astereognosis, polydipsia, or some eleven
syllable, unpronounceable substitute for the word tool.
Even their own relatives have to squint at their name tags.

I can see my own copy up on a high shelf.
I rarely open it, because I know there is no
such thing as a synonym and because I get nervous
around people who always assemble with their own kind,
forming clubs and nailing signs to closed front doors
while others huddle alone in the dark streets.

I would rather see words out on their own, away
from their families and the warehouse of Roget,
wandering the world where they sometimes fall
in love with a completely different word.
Surely, you have seen pairs of them standing forever
next to each other on the same line inside a poem,
a small chapel where weddings like these,
between perfect strangers, can take place.

This poem is Melaniesque.

I find myself writing to her as if she were in the room. I see her listening intently and laughing in a rough, cackle. Melanie was a striking woman. She wasn't pretty, but she was beautiful. She was a monochrome of amber tones. Different shades of copper: some golden, some honey-brown, some brassy. She was sassy, classy, and sincere.

As each school year ends, I find myself not running out of the room screaming F-R-E-E-D-O-M, but rather inside, sitting still and thinking of the year to come, pondering how to improve on the past one. I am reminded that my "best" teaching years were the ones when I was more involved with SLWP. The ones when I really did write daily with my students. I, unlike Richard, have let that practice slide in favor of "academic vocabulary, test prep, and sterile out-of-the-context-of-life activities."

I hear Melanie calling me back.

Back to the places where writing was the center. Writing was my center. The writing of others my muse and companion; the writing of students, my stethoscope to listen to their hearts.

I love Melanie's words about writing giving her spirit an avenue to come closer to flesh. I hear another NWP voice in my head, Pen Campbell, reciting an ancient Celtic poem that talks of the "thin places" where life or flesh is stretched so thin it becomes an invisible membrane – a window into the spiritual realm.

I pause to google the name of the poem and instead come up with this.

If you are Irish you are probably familiar with the Celtic notion of "thin places" where the liminality or being on the threshold between experience/space is thin. We all hold some places as especially sacred, as 'thin places', where there is barely a dividing line, just a thin membrane, between the spiritual world and the material world. A liminal space is one where we are never in control. The old Celtic notion of a "thin place" was a place where it was possible to touch and be touched by God as well as the angels, the saints, and those who have died.

I feel myself expand. Touched. I thank you, my friend, for reminding me of these sacred spaces, and how writing thins the flesh and quickens the soul. It is indeed, and act of love.

—*Lynne Vance*

From Marley Stuart

Relics

—for Melanie Plesh

On the floor beside me is a bag of relics. Last night at my mother's house, after the card game, and after stories shared under the porch light, everyone hesitant, wanting only to prolong the night, after even our goodbyes, I raced up the stairs to my old room, now bare, and to the closet, full. In two weeks my wife and I are driving across the country, and I needed to find my tent. But this was only pretext. I wanted to sift through the old things packed away in boxes, on shelves, and choose a few relics to take along as well.

As I drove across the bridge, the large paper bag in the passenger seat, a lightning storm crawled over the lake and followed me into the city. With it came a crippling migraine, and now the paper bag is a mystery—I don't remember what went into it at all. So, this morning I'll rediscover what I chose for our trip north, what I decided to bring from my mother's house, my old life, into my new one.

I learned, late last night, as lightning rippled around in the sky and the migraine ebbed, that Melanie Plesh died two days ago. I met her just once, a quick hello, but I have heard so many stories, and I feel like I know her through the words of my friends. In these stories she is a legend, a stalwart companion, one of the greats. One of the finest writing teachers around, a contemplative, honest soul. Although I never truly knew her, I can guess at what she would approve of, based on the stories—and so this morning, with my giant paper bag of relics and my notebook, is spent in her spirit.

Speaking of time, the first relic is my father's wristwatch. I'm wearing it. It has a thin black leather band and a fake gold rim around its white face. It was given to my father as a token of appreciation after two years at Dufresne-Henry. It is a company watch. It is worn, the metal scuffed, the leather delightfully soft, like a strip of pressed fruit. Its hands are stopped at 2:20, seven seconds to 2:21.

The clasp reads IMAGE WATCH in raised metal letters, and the band bears a crescent-shaped groove from what appears to be many years of use. I never remember my father wearing it, or him giving it to me, but here it is.

*

The second relic is a ten-inch handsaw in a leather sheath. I found this, as a child, on a camping trip with Mom and Dad. It was buried on the trail. Who knows why I had set to digging there? The saw blade is pointed, each side serrated like the toothy bill of a swordfish, and it has a satisfying aluminum handle that fits easily into the palm of my hand. KNAPP SPORTS SAW, the handle reads, PAT. NO. 206,369. Though I've had this for years, it wasn't until recently that I discovered the saw's secret: on the side of the handle is a disc, the size of a dime, with a line scored through it. With a dime, you can unscrew this disc and uncover a little hidden

compartment, perfect for storing matches, or fishhooks.

I don't have a dime, though. I look all around—I don't even have my knife. I really want to open this tiny door, now, but I've got nothing beside me that will do the trick. Other than the bag—there must be something inside that will work—but I don't want to rush the relics. I want to take my time with this. And—*voilà*—I see my father's watch, unhook it from my wrist, and insert the thin clasp into the saw's little keyhole. It fits, and I unscrew the door.

Inside is a narrow, silver chamber, the size of a battery. A small dent at the end, but otherwise flawless. It has absolutely no smell. I close the door again, and set the saw, and the watch, on the carpet. I reach into the bag again.

*

A spool of metal twine, a bag of shells, rocks, and coral. I rifle through. I'm not quite following my own rules here—I wanted to reach in with eyes averted, taking each find on feel alone—but these objects don't speak to me. There's no mystery.

And then the shape of a bottle. I pull it out. It's a wine bottle in a white garbage bag, wrapped tight. Who stowed this here? It smacks of discarded evidence.

But it may be innocent. When Kimberly and I lived in my mother's house, and my brother moved out, we had all of the upstairs to ourselves. His old room, my old room, a bathroom, and a large, open middle room with two dormer windows and a futon. We found my brother's old drafting desk and set it up by a window, and we made art. Every bottle of wine we drank became a candlestick holder, and we painted watercolors and sketched with hunks of graphite we found in his closet. My brother has always been an artist, and soon we were scavenging all his paper, all his paint, all his straightedges and books on anatomy, promising to replenish his supplies—if he ever asked, of course. I mean, he did leave all this stuff here. We found his old artwork: oil paintings of planets with wax drippings and scattered sea salt, done on cardboard.

I remembered these from his apartment in Thibodaux, across the cane field from the hospital. He had a tiny bed on the floor, paper lanterns out on the small balcony that looked over the cane, and a tiny kitchen stuffed with secondhand pots and pans. And there was art all over his walls. All of it was done on cardboard, crushed boxes of fruit, scraps he'd picked up along the way.

When we found them in his closet, after he drove to Vermont, we pinned them all over the walls of the middle room, and each time we finished a new nude sketch or watercolor landscape, we pinned it up beside them, and in this way my wife and I built our mosaic universe, our first world. We listened to *Tea for the Tillerman* on scratchy vinyl, again and again (“I'm looking for a hard-headed woman-headed woman!”) and we sang along as we painted, both windows open. When deeper hues of red were needed, we dipped the bottle of merlot into our pallets. We talked of adding blood, but never did. I thought about the woman who added breast milk to her paints—that human itch, we had it to.

Or maybe it is discarded evidence. My father calls empty beer cans “dead soldiers.” Either that or “witnesses.” He says that when he and my mother were in college, and they took

road trips across Montana and Wyoming, they tossed their empties out the window on back roads, yelling, “Get rid of the witnesses!” And then there is that line my mother says, playing cards, I think from Hunter S. Thompson: “a red white and blue evidence bomb.” There’s rarely a prompting for this line, and it bubbles to the surface like a fleck of gold in a pan—but maybe it’s the print on the back of the cards that reminds her.

*

The next relic is a zoom lens I got secondhand with a busted Sears 35 mm. I admire its weight, its size. It is a bit smaller than a thermos, and much heavier. It is black, with white and yellow numbers along the rim, and a curving red line etched along the smooth barrel. Many small numbers are stamped along this line, probably indicating distance. In feet? Meters? 80, 100, 120, 135, 150, 200. The other numbers on the aperture dial—22, 16, 11, 8, 5.6, 4—fall against the white and red lines on the barrel, as do the yellow and white numbers on the notched zoom slide.

I look through it. Blurry—nothing. A smudge of dust. I go find my Pentax and remove its small lens, attach this one. Now, from my position on the couch, I can spy through the window at the frat house across the street. No one is on the balcony. A silver pull-up bar hangs crooked near the eave, dangerously close to the metal railing. It’s not really a frat house—we just call it that because four young men live there and are nightly out on the balcony, drinking beer and playing music. They have a big colored flag too. So far no one has braved the pull-up bar.

Last night they were all out there, watching the lightning storm. As the forked beams crackled purple across the sky they cheered, and when the thunder banged its kettledrums they cried in awe. My dog had been cooped up in the apartment all day, and I took her out for a quick walk, so she could relieve herself. I could barely see from the migraine, and each lightning strike was like a knife in my eye. It started raining as soon as we stepped outside, hard and cold, and the lightning kicked like a mule above us. I was completely soaked, and terrified, and I couldn’t stop laughing.

*

This one is good indeed: the pair of binoculars I found that night, scavenging with Dad. We’d ridden bikes to the abandoned sawmill across the highway, after Tequila shots. I had one false start, where a man sleeping in his car behind the sawmill freaked me out and I raced home. Dad circled back, revived my spirits with another hit from the bottle, lick of lime and salt. We went out again, over the white river passing black beneath us, and across the highway to the sawmill, a long, green warehouse at the foot of the mountain. Nearly everything in this town had died—the one-room schoolhouse, the hotel, the sandwich shop, and, most recently, the sawmill.

Somewhere inside were the inner tubes from semi truck tires. Don’t ask my how my father knew this. I never asked, or thought to ask. They were right where he said they’d be, in the darkest, sharpest corner, way back, and we shuttled them out through a loose panel of sheet metal and biked home with them around our shoulders, like balloon ghosts in the moonlight.

Also: deep in the maze of machinery, rusted saw blades, and stacks of discarded scrap metal, was a door, leading nowhere, and on its knob, these binoculars. I clean them, now, for the

first time. The lenses are gummy with spider webs, and I find that the whole apparatus slides apart with measured turns, like a pistol. I dust each lens with a clean white t-shirt that picks up the black stains of the grease. Before reassembling them, I try out each eyepiece on its own, like a jeweler's glass, and discover an intensely magnified world—the burr at the end of my thumbnail becomes a pink and yellow forest, glowing in the light of the open window. Then with the binoculars reassembled, I spy again on the frat house. Now there is a bearded man smoking pot on the balcony. He coughs, looks at me. I wave. He does not wave back.

*

I see some threads here—time, lenses, family stories—all of which could build on, I think, if I kept going. But I thought there would come a neat and tidy end to all this—that some object would kick off a string of memories that would cap this off, seal it in wax. That through digging around in a bag of my own things, I could somehow account for a life, the life of a stranger, one dear to me for those she loved.

But there's still so much more in the bag—tangles of speaker wire, a shoebox of rocks, a mysterious flashlight with a pinhole-sized eye. What I have is what I began with—a large paper bag, its sides split, and these random, personal objects, only a sampling from a packed closet at my mother's house. It really looks like the whole lot should be thrown out. Junk. But to a writer, these objects are keys, doorways themselves.

There is no neat way to end anything. There is, if you'd like, no end (there's still so much more in the bag . . .), and those that leave before us go on further down the path. This morning I felt it. I was guided by a finer spirit, walking just ahead.

—*Marley Stuart*

From Andree Cosby

As I remember Melanie, I think of someone who was always grappling with reality. I woke up this morning with an image of her leaning over a table, cigarette and drink in hand, gesturing wildly, debating some topic about which she was passionate. I decided to look up the definition of grapple since the word wouldn't leave my mind when I thought about her. It means to engage in a close fight or struggle without weapons—to wrestle, struggle, tussle. To me, that is Melanie all over. In our many discussions, she always wanted to get to the root of things, to strip away convention or societal expectations—to try to get to the truth about every issue. But, like the dictionary definition of grapple says, she did it without weapons. She could be wary, but ultimately always open, listening, always trying to figure out the world in which we live. I so appreciated the way she would reserve judgment and let ideas simmer in her mind. It would be wonderful if more people acknowledged the world's complexities the way she did. And with the grappling, she was so much fun all the while.



In Memoriam

Melanie Anne Plesh

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

In case you all haven't heard, Melanie died yesterday morning. Jan C. said that there would be no service, so I wanted to at least acknowledge that she's gone. I woke up this morning with an image of her riding her beloved horse Penny. I hope they're reunited and that Melanie is at peace and free of pain. She was certainly a wild child and a passionate woman. I know she'll be missed.

Goodbye Melanie! Love from all of us!

—*Andree Cosby*

From Annabel Servat

“Writing is the answer,” Melanie said during the first presentation at the beginning of my first writing project adventure. And she was right.

Melanie’s infectious warmth and openness were quite impossible to ignore. I had never considered myself a writer—I’m a reader, I always contended. But with her presence, more than words, she somehow influenced me to try, and to accomplish more than I assumed possible. She did the same thing for other people—her students, her colleagues—too many to count.

Melanie didn’t bring a spark of life—she was the spark of light that brought out life in others. What a rare gift she was.

I could mention that first recognition of a kindred spirit (I like to think), or enumerate shared ideas, interests—all the things that we remember of people we cherish. But Melanie’s open heart transcended that.

So now, I may not write like her, or exactly for her, but she’ll be there—with all of us, I imagine. Writing honestly, openly, fearlessly, is the only thanks I can give her. She was a woman you could enjoy and love, and you knew she was as real as it gets. She always helped me be my most authentic self. This summer, when I write in that magical city of hers, I have confidence she’ll be with all of us who learned so much with her—and didn’t even realize she was teaching. What higher praise can any teacher have? And I’ll toast her with a Blue Moon at Molly’s, another joy she taught me.

—*Annabel Servat*

From former Mandeville High School student Annalise Torcson

I had just gotten back to the Northshore after a rather arduous few days on the evening of the memorial. I wasn't sure if I was going to go, but was compelled to honor Ms. Plesh in my own private way no matter what. About two hours before the memorial, getting off the Causeway, I found myself at Mandeville High. Its been years since I've been there, and certainly years since I've set foot on campus. I parked my car in the side parking lot, and went to sit in front of Ms. Plesh's room. The school was completely deserted. As I sat facing her door, her name plaque removed, I strongly felt her presence in that space and in the wind shaking the trees. I listened, and I came away with one thing: "Create."

There's a quote hanging from my desk, printed on computer paper and cut out in careful strokes that reads: "We must suffer into truth." It's from Aeschylus's *The Oresteia*, and its been there ever since I read it in Melanie Anne Plesh's freshman English class. In a moldering modular classroom overlooking the side parking lot at Mandeville High, one woman wove together an environment of literature, love, and learning. She offered us Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, and George Elliot in their purest forms: our voices bouncing against the peeling walls as we unpacked the symbolism and the beauty of the language for ourselves. She was our guide through the Inferno, through Purgatorio, and through Paradiso. All of it was done with a smile on her face, stomping her feet on the tile floor in excitement as she spun out from her desk...saying, "OK, I'm ready" as a way to end our adolescent chatter. From ages fourteen to sixteen, I sat in the same desk beneath the window; different texts passing through my hands, but with her warmth and wisdom permeating each one. She handled poetry and literature like precious things, each word a creation that was to be marveled at. She encouraged her students unflinching in their own creative work, and was the benevolent patroness of Writer's Club on Monday afternoons. She was my mentor and she was my friend. She wrote my NOCCA recommendation. She teased me about my hatred of eyeballs. She listened to me play Mendelssohn for her on the piano in the auditorium. She pushed me when my paper on *Absalom, Absalom!* was distracted and rushed and told me, "I know you. You can do better," and had me re-write it. When I stumbled onto campus one afternoon as a tear-stricken sixteen year old, hiding from teachers and the front office, I found myself at her door during her off-period. She let me in, gave me a box of Kleenex, and told me that I was someone's soulmate and was worthy of a deep and resounding kind of love. She then started to watch out for me and tell me when my eyes looked bright. At graduation, as we were funneled out of the auditorium like salmon caught in a river current, I picked her face out among the line of teachers. I leaped to the side and we grabbed each other's arms before I had to keep moving. "Oh, Annalise," she said. "Have a great life. Have a great life." I only saw her one more time after that moment, coming back to visit during my freshman year of college. I sent her a long letter coupled with my graduation announcement a few weeks ago, telling her that she gave me all the tools I ever needed as a student of language and learning as well as life, telling her that none of it was possible without her, and thanking her from the bottom of my heart. I can only hope that she somehow got to read that letter. I had no idea she was sick. So I say it again now: from the bottom of my heart, thank you, Ms. Plesh. I would not be who I am today without you. This tribute is a poor way of conveying all the loss I feel, and to articulate the deep ways in which she touched my life as well as the lives of her students and so many others. In the words of Gertrude, which we read aloud in your class: ". . . All that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity."

—Annalise Torcson

MELANIE PLESH:
PUTTING THE ‘WRITING’ IN WRITING PROJECT
JUNE 26, 2014 40FOR40

I remember when Melanie Plesh interviewed to become a Summer Fellow at the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project’s first summer institute in 1992. I was expecting an applicant named Melanie Lachin when a knock on my door announced a thin woman with red frizzy hair. I asked her if she was Melanie Lachin, and she said no, but her name was Melanie too, and she’d come for an interview. I asked her to sit down and talk while we waited for Melanie Lachin. The more this one talked, the more impressed I became.

After about 15 minutes, she said, “Imagine, two Melanies on the same day.” We both thought it was strange, but kept on talking about her classroom and her love of writing. Finally she said, “What did you say the name of that other Melanie was?”

“Melanie Lachin.”

“Oh,” she said, turning red as her hair, “that’s me! I was Melanie Lachin, but I go by ‘Plesh’ now! I guess I’m who you were looking for!”

“You sure are,” I said. “Whoever you are, I think you’re what Writing Project is all about.”

This wacky moment of identity and epiphany began our 23 years of writing, teaching, and working together and has defined our relationship ever since. Not only has Melanie become one of my closest friends, but she’s also become one of the strongest threads holding SLWP together. One of the best teacher-leader-writers I’ve met in my career, she’s grown tremendously due to her involvement with the writing project, while changing the life of our site and mine as well.

Because she was so sharp, and so much a writer, Melanie’s teaching demonstration on Natalie Goldberg’s *Writing Down the Bones* was selected to kick off our first institute. She led a three-hour “in-house” writing marathon based on Goldberg’s model, where writers sit around a table, write for about 10 minutes, read their writing aloud voluntarily without criticism, and then repeat the process again and again. Melanie would give us a word to start each round of writing, have us write, and talk to us about her teaching between each round. We learned how she believed in her students as writers and thinkers and protected the sacred writing environment she created in the classroom.

“You don’t need to teach the essay,” she’d say, “because students have essays in them already and just need the encouragement and opportunity to write them.” As we wrote together under her guidance that day, we began to feel more and more like writers. “You’re not writing here so that you can take back how to teach your students, you’re writing here to be a writer,” she said. “If you are a writer, the teaching of writing will follow naturally.” She told us that she always wrote alongside her students. “That’s the key,” she said, “if you want to be authentic. What do you think is going through their minds if you’re taking roll while you are making them write? You need to write with them and share with them.” Beside her stood a stack of a dozen

journals she had filled, and others she'd borrowed from students, which she read from to prove how profound and coherent young people could be if given the chance to write just as we were doing now. By the end of her demonstration, the room had changed. Once complete strangers, we had written, shared, and talked honestly about ourselves and our lives, and now we felt like a community—and better yet, a community of writers. From that day on, we spent the first hour of every institute day with sacred writing and sharing time. And every institute since that first one has followed the same pattern, often led by Melanie, the thread holding us together year to year, first as returning Mentor, later as Co-Director.

Melanie not only put her stamp on our site, but the National Writing Project transformed her as well by giving her friends, an audience, and opportunities to grow. She became our most successful inservice presenter, often facing belligerent faculty and turning them around by having them write together. She also traveled across the country as a speaker at NWP events and meetings as well as to the NCTE/NWP Global Conference in Amsterdam, her first trip abroad. She took a sabbatical to write her way across Europe, publishing the memoir, *I'm In Estonia, and I'm Alive!*

Melanie also changed my life as a teacher, writer, and director. If it hadn't been for Melanie, I doubt I'd ever have figured out how to take Goldberg's "in house" writing marathon to the streets, producing The New Orleans Writing Marathon, which became the model for writing marathons across the National Writing Project.

I remember when Jim Gray came to visit the Louisiana sites as keynote speaker at our "Festival of Writers" (where the first New Orleans Writing Marathon was held), I told him over dinner on a French Quarter balcony about Melanie and how she so embodied what the NWP was all about. A few years later at the Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Jim was standing by himself in the hotel lobby, and I brought Melanie over to meet him. She stood silently beside me, slightly in awe, as Jim talked to me about one thing and another. Finally, he looked over at her and said in that challenging voice of his, "Who the hell are you?" For a second I recalled that interview with Melanie, and how neither of us seemed confused about her identity.

"This is Melanie Plesh," I said to Jim. "She's the one I told you about once, the one who embodies the Writing Project more than anyone else I've met but you." He looked her up and down, nodded, and extended his hand. I felt that moment was meant to be.

—Richard Louth





Tim Lachin, Melanie's son, speaks at memorial on the levee in the Ninth Ward, May 26, 2016.
THE END