

Anne Valente

Storytelling

<http://crabsoccer.blogspot.com/2008/07/storytelling.html>, July 11, 2008-07-11 Anne Valente teaches feature writing at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and will pursue an MFA in creative writing at Bowling Green State University this fall. She has worked for Sauce Magazine and Playback in Saint Louis, Missouri, and has been published in Divine Caroline, Suite101.com, and The Washington Post.

On Monday nights, I spend two hours in a musty classroom with five other people. They are my students, and though I'm at least four decades younger than each of them, they don't seem to mind. They've signed up for my Memoir Writing class, and every Monday night, after hearing their narratives, I drive home with my chest swelling like a bunch of helium-filled balloons.

I don't think this sense of joy is mine alone. I think they share it, which I see in the tales that ripple from their mouths each time someone reads their work aloud. This week, after one woman read her story about stalling out at a traffic light—dressed in a Snoopy costume, no less—each person in the room shared a similar anecdote about blowing a tire, or jacking up their car, or running out of gas. Though I stayed quiet, trying to be the impartial teacher, I thought of the first time I changed my own tire. I can still remember the greasy feel of the bolts as I wrenched them loose.

As human beings, we are wired to share such things. We are social, even if we seem anti-social, and we crave something that is collective, common. This is why my chest swells, feeling like it will burst. Though my students are strangers of sorts, and though I can't relate to their parallel stories of growing up in the 1940s—I wasn't even alive then—it still feels like we've bridged an immeasurable synapse each time we're together. The drive home, every Monday night, is like returning from tea with an old friend.

I think I'm finally old enough now to recognize just how much these stories mean. A large part of me wishes I'd recognized them sooner. Most of my students are writing down their lives for their children, and for their grandchildren, filling in the gaps of who they were before children were even a possibility. I wish I'd encouraged my grandparents to do the same, and a hard pit forms in my stomach whenever I remember that my chance has passed.

When I was in ninth grade, I interviewed my grandpa about World War II for a history assignment. I scrawled out a bunch of questions, and I waited for his answers. Though he responded in detail about the logistics of the war, he was noticeably silent regarding his own experiences. My last question, probing into his feelings on the Hiroshima bomb, received a simple, "I didn't agree with it, but they did what they had to do." How naïve that question seems to me now.

My grandma was the same way. Though she once talked freely about her wartime job as a receptionist, and how rampant sexual harassment was in the workplace, she stopped telling stories after my grandpa passed away. I tried once or twice to ask her about him, and about their life together before they had children, but she always changed the subject or walked away.

Maybe the hard stories aren't what I should have prodded for.

In some ways, I feel like I can make up for lost time. Just yesterday, my dad told me about the time he and his friends stole a life-sized dinosaur from a local park when he was a teenager, and hid it in a garage until it became front-page news. After the story ran, the dinosaur was miraculously returned to the park at four o'clock in the morning.

Recounting stories like these may be why my students have signed up for Memoir Writing, and why I chose to offer the class in the first place. We need these stories. They solidify who we are. And even if certain stories seem foreign to my own experiences, like those of one student who grew up under Hitler's regime in Germany and is just now writing about it, I am drawn to them nonetheless. We all are. I can't say whether anyone else in the room drives home each Monday feeling something swell inside their chest, but I'm guessing that it's possible. I'm guessing that, as my students relate their anecdotes of running out of gas, or being audited by the IRS, or going deer hunting with an older sibling in the backcountry of Louisiana, they sense it—that complex patchwork that connects us, one by one.