

Alms to the Reading Gods of Samuel Staples Elementary School



I am quite sure that I stepped into my first grade classroom as a beam of pure light, radiating myself out as ardently as I could to every single color-coded Lippincott Basic Reader, singing hallelujahs with my very presence. Frozen by the moment, I stood coveting a desk at the very front, knowing, with all of the enthusiasm and confidence in my rightful place that my kindergarten teacher had swept me off within a haze of report-card glory the previous spring, that it was to be mine.

In a moment, I was not so gently re-directed out of my fog by my new teacher to a seat at least halfway back, by virtue of something as random as my last name. It was miles away from the golden glory of the chalkboard and the front-of-the-room excitement, a hierarchy that my kindergarten classroom had not possessed.

A chilling and anxious misery slammed my stomach and made me both dizzy and lead-footed at once. Something had gone wrong. But who to turn to to fix this? My beloved and motherly kindergarten teacher, her room just around the corner, was right now slipping worlds and new kindergarteners away. I sat down and ducked my head, blinking, fixating on the undulating, barely discernible tan and beige pattern of the

desktop now just inches from my eyes that were not even yet behind glasses.

Thus began a series of missteps that Mrs. Vecchiola and I would have throughout the year, most born of an insatiable eagerness on my part that had me in a perpetual, just-out-of-touch-with-things jitter, tearing into any new lessons like a frenzied little puppy. But despite these painful valleys along the way, I knew deep down that nothing would get between me and reading.

And, nothing did. I had waited for this time, out of respect, or obedience maybe, tantalizing myself over the summer by play-reading longer books that I hadn't yet memorized from hearing aloud. And so I took my assigned seat where it was, only briefly fantasizing an existence at the front desks I passed each morning. I don't remember much of the window between that first day and the day when I knew that I could read. If not a light bulb, there was a calm, solid thudding into place of awareness.

My unabashed, cool conviction that I rightfully possessed something so powerful was often belied by my spastic forays into interpersonal relations in the classroom and on the playground, but it sat at my center nevertheless, soothing the wrongs that the world and I inflicted upon one another.

To celebrate my milestone, I chose from among my favorites the story *Inside Outside Upside Down*, a book that I had already read a hundred times over, tumbling the cleverly-stacked words around on my tongue. I transcribed it entirely onto a few pages of wide-lined paper, into newly acquired, neatly printed letters. My sister helped me attach the pages together with staples, or maybe ribbons, and we added a cover page that I'm sure I drew a picture on.

It was the words that mattered. I was amazed at my newfound power. I had taken the story from one form and transformed it, intact, into another, fully accessible, version. The same thing happened inside my head when I read my copy as when I read the original. I was so happy with myself that I took it in to Mrs. Vecchiola to show her what I

had done, and before I knew what she was doing, she pulled out her red grading pen and marked a bold A+ right across the cover.

I'm sure I smiled — I wanted so badly for her to like me — but inside I was stunned. How could she not tell the difference between this and an assignment? She had been the messenger, maybe, but I had sprouted wings and flown free. What had I missed? Shaken, I determined that I would take more care with my books in the future.

I hoarded my reading life more privately after that, possessively and gluttonously cramming myself with stories read over and over, blurring the line between them and my actual existence. Any book could become part of me, every one read or unread a separate universe spinning right in my midst somehow, ongoing.

Large quantities of them anywhere made me giddy. I coveted them for their covers, their thicknesses, their rectangles, their corners, their beginnings and endings, their definition, their quiet peace with themselves and with whatever it was they had to say.

Eileen Lynch grew up in Easton along with her three siblings. A student in Mrs. Vechiola's '74-'75 first grade class at Samuel Staples Elementary School, she was a frequent visitor at the Easton Public Library back when Mrs. Mueller was the librarian. Although Eileen now lives in Georgia, her parents, Kris and Charlie, still live in Easton.