



Rebecca Wadlinger

Houston, Texas

HANNAH GAMBLE

Rebecca Wadlinger is a PhD candidate in literature and creative writing at the University of Houston. Her writing and translations have appeared in or are forthcoming from *Ploughshares*, *Kenyon Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and the *Best New Poets* anthology, among others. She received her MFA from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas, and currently works with *Writers in the Schools (WITS)* in Houston and as the managing editor of *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*.

Hannah Gamble: How would you describe your writing?

Rebecca Wadlinger: I write in several different genres, but lately I've been focusing on poetry. Most of my poems that appear in literary journals and anthologies are what a teacher recently called "fluent personal surrealism." I write about our complicated human state in a way that foregrounds invention, yet

Hannah Gamble is the author of Your Invitation to a Modest Breakfast, selected by Bernadette Mayer for the 2011 National Poetry Series and to be published by Fence in 2012. Hannah is the poet-in-residence at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago and also teaches memoir and creative writing to seniors at the Center for Life and Learning. Her poems and interviews appear or are forthcoming in APR, Indiana Review, Ecotone, Mid-American Review, and elsewhere.

still has an emotional core.

I'm working on two long poems now, as well. One grew from a play of mine that was produced in Austin a few years ago—the main character is a woman in an iron lung during the 1950s polio epidemic. It's a story about love and isolation that ends when the woman wills her body to sublimate, leaving behind only her dreaming head.

HG: You've been a resident writer with *Writers in the Schools* in Houston for three years now. Was there anything for which you were completely unprepared when you first started teaching children?

RW: One thing that I can't get over is how excited third-graders are to share their writing. I always save at least ten minutes towards the end of class so students can read their work—it's an incentive for students to work hard and cultivates a shared appreciation of writing.

When I first started teaching, I had no idea that students would be jumping from their desks in hopes of reading their work. It's fantastic! I remember one semester when I was teaching with *WITS* and going to teach writing at the University of Houston immediately afterwards. For some reason I thought that college freshman would be just as

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excited to share their writing with the class—but when I asked, no one volunteered. I told them, "What's wrong? I just came from a third-grade class where *everyone* wanted to read!" According to them, it becomes less cool to read your writing out loud in high school.

HG: *What is the most ambitious lesson you've ever done with your young students? Which kinds of lessons do you find usually produce the best student work?*

RW: I never know which lessons will be awesome and which ones will flop—so I always make sure to have a few ideas in mind in case my plan isn't working that day.

The most ambitious lesson I've done was one on revising, and it's a lesson that I'm still revising myself. My revising lesson is basically this: I'll choose from each student one piece of writing to improve, then I'll type it as-is and bring a print-out to class. (Elementary School students *love* seeing their work in print. It's an instant motivator.) I made an illustrated handout that lists different things to look for when revising—students can search for the key ideas, cross them out, and make the revision process into more of a game.

HG: *Which poets/poems are you most excited about sharing with your students?*

RW: I try to find poets who speak to the students in disguise—poems that don't seem difficult or intimidating, but are tackling important issues about

humanity. Langston Hughes is one example: I recently shared his poem "Advertisement for The Waldorf-Astoria" to teach students about humor and tone. Basically, the poem is a fake advertisement for the glamorous new hotel, but at the heart of the poem, Hughes highlights the poverty, unemployment, and racial inequality that plagued America at

the time. Hughes' poem led us to have a discussion about social justice (quite the feat in a third-grade classroom!) and inspired a number of heartfelt poems about writing disguised as "Advertisements for Poetry."

I also like to share poets that I'm excited about, because sincere enthusiasm is invaluable inside classrooms. I'll take in poems from books that I'm reading in the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program (poems that are appropriate and easy enough to parse, of course), and tell the students, "This poem is one that students in *college* read." We'll read and talk about the poem, and at the end of the day my students go home and tell their parents that they read books from college. I've used work by Italo Calvino, Russell Edson, Terrance Hayes, Kenneth Koch, and others.

HG: *Along with your own writing, you are also working on translations of prose poems by the Norwegian poet Gro Dable. How did you find her?*

RW: I read quite a bit of contemporary Norwegian poetry and find myself wishing it were more widely available—there's so much of it that I know Americans would love. A few summers ago, I was living in Oslo and reading through a lot of poetry collections in the basement of the University of Oslo's library. When I happened upon Dahle's *Hundre Tusen Timer (A Hundred Thousand Hours)*, I was shocked and delighted. The book is strange, well-composed, and energetic. When you translate,

you live inside the work in powerful ways—translation theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls it “the most intimate form of reading.” I would think about the poems at all hours of the day, awake and asleep.

HG: *Are you involved in any writing projects besides poetry and poetry translations?*

RW: I’ve also been working on an essay that examines a rhetorical move in contemporary American poetry, traces its presence in popular culture, and guesses at the motivation behind its popularity. I think it’s important for creative writers to engage in formal discussions about craft, theory, rhetoric, etc. I’ve had so many fantastic writing-related discussions with other poets, fiction writers, playwrights, you name it—but it’s not exactly standard for a young creative writer to take a stake in issues of form with a theoretical essay. It’s probably just intimidating—you think to yourself, “I have ideas about these things, but really, what do I know?”

HG: *Has there been a time when a student’s work has inspired changes in your own writing?*

RW: Student work inspires me practically every time I teach. I love to see how their minds work, how little they worry about continuity or fact, and how strongly their voices come through in classroom exercises.

Writers in the Schools works with the Menil Collection [in Houston] to invite students on a field trip to see art and write about it in the museums. There’s one painting in the Cy Twombly Gallery called *Say Goodbye Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor*. I’m always inspired by students’ writing when we visit this one. We’ll look at the painting for a while—it’s huge and takes up an entire wall—then we’ll talk a bit about loss and saying goodbye. There’s just so much heart in the writing that happens there. I remember one poem from a little girl named Ella—she wrote a beautiful poem about saying goodbye that moved across the page. I’ll share it with you:

goodbye

ELLA, AGE 6

I will say goodbye but an
explosion of sad will come to
me

I will
never forget
you

but then
you come back

an explosion of happy comes
to me yellow red pink blue

I
love
you

How could I not be inspired by that one? For a while after that field trip, all I wanted to do was write soft, heartfelt lines in my own work. I think I went home and read a bunch of Sappho.

HG: *And then what happened?*

RW: I think I realized that writing simple, elegant poems is not as easy as it looks. There’s an irony here, especially when I’m thinking about this particular Cy Twombly painting. When the third-graders first see the artist’s scribbles, tick marks, and brushstrokes, some of them will call out the predictable, “I could do that!” And when I read my students’ work, I’ll think to myself, “Wow, this is so simple... but incredible. I could do this! I *should* do this!” But then when I try to sit down and do it, I remember how long it can take to get there artistically. Writing takes time, and focus, and while we can occasionally get things perfect from the start, the majority of it is practice and learning along the way. 🍷

Classroom Snapshot

REBECCA WADLINGER

Poems Can Make Soldiers Drop Their Weapons

JAYLEN C., 3rd grade

Listen: there was a poem that could
make soldiers drop their weapons.
It followed them, singing its song,
and the soldiers would get scared
and run away from the poem.
The poem would follow them
until they fell. When they got up,
they would run again, and the poem
would follow them again and again
and again. It was a brave poem.
Most were afraid. But one soldier
stopped to listen to the poem.
He thought that reading a poem
was like exploring a mountain.
He listened to the poem's sad song
and climbed its powerful words
until he reached the top.

Storytelling is a fundamental part of our survival, so I wanted to teach a set of lessons on the ways in which stories help us communicate ideas, teach moral values, preserve culture, entertain, and more. I was teaching a group of older elementary students in Texas, many of whom were familiar with the Mexican legend of La Llorona (“the Weeping Woman”) who haunts the rivers of Mexico. We had a fun time sharing stories and folklore, then set out to write some morally-instructive stories of our own.

For the lesson that inspired “Poems Can Make Soldiers Drop Their Weapons,” I first read the poem “Song” by Brigit Pegeen Kelly. I actually

read a shortened, modified version—the poem is about cruelty and sweetness, and it’s fantastic—but it gets rather graphic and eerie at times. We talked about the poem, focusing on what the story was about, then what the poem was *really* about, and then each student came up with an idea for a haunting, folkloric story of their own.

Each poem began with an address to the reader: “Listen.” The structure of the poem was to tell about the legend that each student made up, beginning with the action of the story and ending with how the people’s lives were changed because of it.

When Jaylen read his poem, I was just astounded with the first line. As he continued to read, I understood that he was communicating ideas about the power of writing and bravery in this short *ars poetica*. Everyone in the room broke out in applause when he finished. It was one of those moments when the lesson just seemed to click: we were telling stories, together. We were sharing hidden parts of ourselves.

Jaylen’s poem helped to inspire the class, and I’ve shared it often with other classes since. It has actually inspired an entire new lesson for me: a lesson about the power of writing, and what poems can do.



Rebecca Wadlinger with students from Lockhart Elementary School. Photo by Hyacinth Thomas.