



First and Foremost: Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson

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by *Ilse Munro*

At *LPR* online, emerging and lesser-known writers and artists have always received precedence. But—first and foremost—we love showcasing those whose debut literary and artistic works have appeared on our pages. Which is why we started work on such a list, posted on this site (<https://littlepatuxentreview.org/about/contributors-2/>), and the “First and Foremost” series (<https://littlepatuxentreview.org/?s=first+and+foremost>), where our “firsts” can speak for themselves.

To get things going, here’s Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson (<http://eedickinson.net/>), whose first published short fiction piece appeared in our Winter 2013 Doubt issue (<https://littlepatuxentreview.org/issues/13-winter-2013/>).

One day, I started hearing voices. I had been warned that this might happen, but it still came as a shock when they arrived.

The first to speak was Isabelle. I was driving home late one evening from a friend’s house when I passed a furniture store that I had passed many times before. The business is in a renovated warehouse fronted by a plate glass window that offers a full view of the interior. It’s the kind of design-not-within-reach store that sells contemporary wares displayed in perfectly conceived groupings as though the sophisticated homeowners are about to walk in, sit at that Le Corbusier (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Corbusier) dining table and enjoy a good Bordeaux.

It was late. The store was closed, but the security lights warmed the window display and the glow hit my peripheral vision. I turned to look for that split second that it took to drive by, and that’s when Isabelle appeared. I can’t remember exactly what she told me that night, but I do remember this: she was on the outside of that store looking in and was desperate to climb inside and pretend that the clean,



Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson

(https://1prjournal.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/headshot_2011.jpeg)

orderly space belonged to her. She also wanted to take a nap.

Then came this sentence: “Isabelle wondered how long it would take for the police to arrive.” That became the first sentence of my short story “Danish Modern,” which appears in the Winter 2013 Doubt issue of *Little Patuxent Review*. “Danish Modern” is the first piece of fiction that I have completed and the first that has been published.

So how, at age 39, did I start hearing voices and writing

fiction? [Annie Dillard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annie_Dillard) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annie_Dillard) stated in *The Writing Life* (<http://www.amazon.com/Writing-Life-Annie-Dillard/dp/0060919884>), “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” I walked out of a good museum job at the age of 25 because I realized that I wanted to be a writer. Specifically, a [nonfiction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-fiction) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-fiction>) writer. I wanted to tell true stories.

Writing has always been the lens through which I have seen the world. It is how I have harnessed my curiosity and made sense of things. Journalism became the conduit that allowed me to invite myself to places that I knew nothing about and learn. I liked talking to people, understanding different points of view and distilling complex ideas to their essence so that readers could enjoy the result.

I was happy in that work for many years. Telling true stories was enough. And then one day it wasn't. There were many reasons for this shift—rounding 40, my father's untimely death, the birth of my daughter—but the gist is that I no longer felt content with the limits of nonfiction and journalism. I wanted to explore questions without easy answers and work those questions out on the page.

At first, timid to stray too far from nonfiction, I delved into the personal [essay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essay) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essay>) form. I re-read [Didion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joan_Didion) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joan_Didion), [Dillard and White](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._B._White) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._B._White). I remembered the power of personal essays such as White's “[Once More to the Lake,](http://www.freewebs.com/lanzboim/EBWhiteLakeEssay.pdf)” (<http://www.freewebs.com/lanzboim/EBWhiteLakeEssay.pdf>) with its chilling ending and insights on aging, to transform everyday experience. But it was re-reading White's short fiction work “[The Second Tree From the Corner](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1947/05/31/1947_05_31_022_TNY_CARDS_000208692)” (http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1947/05/31/1947_05_31_022_TNY_CARDS_000208692) that stirred something in me. There was his lean and powerful prose, of course, but also the recognition that he had allowed himself to venture where his mind took him—essay, personal essay, poetry, fiction, children's literature.

I still have the desire to unpack the human experience, examine it and report back. I simply want more outlets for that process. The power of fiction is its ability to synthesize and convey the inner terrain of the human experience. Fiction offers its own truth.

I've since turned my journalism training inward to make my thinking the subject. The result is an epistemological (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology>) tool that chips away at everything. I am more curious, more alert than ever. I no longer edit questions beyond the pale because they deviate from fact or the interests of a magazine editor. I allow my mind to wander and to see the stories that exist within the connective tissue of my thinking. I allow myself to hear the voices.

I'm still figuring out my creative metabolism for fiction. I know journalism well. I've written hundreds of articles, and the process is ingrained. Fiction is awkward, mysterious and clumsy. But it's also reinvigorating. In making this leap, I had to get over the anxiety of being a beginner and ask for help. Here are a few things that I learned along the way:

- **Participate in the community that you hope to join.** Ralph Waldo Emerson (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Waldo_Emerson) wrote in "On the American Scholar," (<http://www.bartleby.com/268/8/33.html>) "First we eat, then we beget. First we read, then we write." You must be an active reader to be a writer. In his column "Ask The Paris Review," (<http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2012/07/20/dear-paris-review-where-do-i-publish/>) Editor Lorin Stein tells new writers, "Here's the thing: no matter how many classes you take, no matter how much time you spend at the keyboard, you cannot write seriously unless you read."
- **Don't be afraid to be an outsider.** So many of us pretend that we know more than we do for fear of looking naive. Journalism has taught me the value of being the outsider who gets to ask the questions. I am still learning the ins and outs of pitching literary magazines, applying for grants and writing retreats and reading in front of audiences (as I did for the first time at the launch of the Doubt issue (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ixu1WibhARk&feature=share&list=PLhgw0PTENW8M0xGa1vaJuk_IRrf_ivCIN)). In each of these situations, I sought out someone who knew the ropes and could offer guidance.
- **Seek people who are smarter than you.** The adage about picking a tennis partner who is better than you because it improves your game also applies to writing.
- **Workshop in a healthy, productive environment.** "Danish Modern" benefited from the thoughtful feedback of two writing workshop partners. Both offered different insights, but, most importantly, both treated the work with respect. They had to suffer through some terrible writing, but because of their considerate and fruitful comments, I learned, I improved and I moved on.
- **Get into the habit of writing things down.** I thought that "Danish Modern" came out of nowhere. In rereading my journal, I realized that the idea had been percolating for some time. You never know what might be grist for the creative mill. (And once you start working those ideas out on the page, you can edit out overused expressions such as "grist for the mill.")
- **Never stop honing your craft.** This doesn't mean going into debt for an MFA. I have no advanced degree, in part because I could never make the finances or the timing work. But I have been a consumer of continuing education classes and workshops. CityLit Project

(<http://www.citylitproject.org/>), [Creative Alliance](http://www.creativealliance.org/) (<http://www.creativealliance.org/>), [The Writer's Center](http://www.writer.org/) (<http://www.writer.org/>) and journals such as *LPR* all offer great instruction on craft. If you attend a writing retreat (http://www.pw.org/content/writers_conferences_colonies_and_workshops?cmnt_all=1), pick one that makes you work more than everyone drinks (or at least in equal measure!). And read. Books that I have found helpful include *The Elements of Style* (<http://www.amazon.com/Elements-Style-Illustrated-William-Strunk/dp/0143112724>); *The Art of Time in Fiction* (<http://www.amazon.com/Art-Time-Fiction-Long-Takes/dp/1555975305>); *On Writing* (<http://www.amazon.com/Writing-10th-Anniversary-Memoir-Craft/dp/1439156816>); *First We Read, Then We Write: Emerson on the Creative Process* (<http://www.amazon.com/First-We-Read-Then-Write/dp/1587297930>). And, of course, this blog (see the “Concerning Craft” series (<https://littlepatuxentreview.org/?s=concerning+craft>)).

And never forget that everyone was once a beginner. “Meek young men grow up in libraries believing it their duty to accept the views which [Cicero](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cicero) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cicero>), which [Locke](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Locke) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Locke), which [Bacon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Bacon) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Bacon) have given,” Emerson wrote in “On the American Scholar,” “forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote those books.”

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Recently, we were delighted to learn that Elizabeth had received a [2013 Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Award for Fiction](http://www.msac.org/iaa2013) (<http://www.msac.org/iaa2013>). Then doubly delighted when we realized that another contributor, [Susan Muaddi Darraj](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan_Muaddi_Darraaj) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan_Muaddi_Darraaj), received one as well. Given Elizabeth's advice, you might want to read “Concerning Craft: Susan Muaddi Darraj.” (<https://littlepatuxentreview.org/2011/04/12/concerning-craft-susan-muaddi-darraaj/>)

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