Running the Baltimore Writing Marathon

Richard Louth, director of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project, is the writing project's writing marathon point man. Each year, he leads a writing marathon with teacher-consultants in his New Orleans-area writing project. (See Louth's upcoming article in The Quarterly, winter 2002.) Because there's nothing particularly complicated about a writing marathon, he's found success with them in many places. Basically, Louth takes a group of teachers into an urban area, where they put the environment to work for them as a source for writing.

This year, he hosted a writing marathon on Saturday, November 17, the day following the NWP Annual Meeting, taking an intrepid band of writers into the streets of Baltimore. There, he introduced them to their task with a little piece of his own writing, which he offered "as a 'prompt' for anyone who wanted one."

"I was there..."

This is how it all must begin. Then all you need to do is answer two questions "Who WAS I?" and "What was THERE?" And if you can do that and still have time, answer two more. "Who AM I?" and "Where am I NOW?" And then you're done. You can close the book and drop the pen and get on with your life. But you usually never finish answering the first questions, so how can you ever get to the second?

The following pieces, generated by the Baltimore Writing Marathon, are offered for our enjoyment. They are part of a larger collection, which can be found in The Voice online at the NWP website, www.writingproject.org. (Note: see Writing Marathon, page 15)
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The following pieces should be considered rough drafts, fresh from the pens of the Baltimore Writing Marathon runners, and have been faithfully reproduced as such.

**Harborside in Baltimore**

**KIM STAFFORD, OREGON WRITING PROJECT AT LEWIS AND CLARK COLLEGE**

**NOVEMBER 2001**

In America at war, it comes to me I was raised in another country.

In America, the country I grew into as a kind of immigrant, I’m sitting at a table with friends attending the annual meeting of the National Writing Project, and as I look around I feel disoriented by the ordinary militarism of my native land: a destroyer is moored below the brew pub; marines wave white-gloved hands at children; cannons protrude from the historic _USS Constellation_; in the parade happening along the waterfront, stars and stripes drape over the withers of marching horses; a fifty-foot flag hangs inside the World Trade Center of Baltimore; red, white, and blue letters decorate the commercial truck that has joined the parade to advertise oil; and in the parade, teetering among his elders, the smallest boy is being trained to march with his drum.

I was another kind of boy—my pacifist mother and father teaching a gospel of no border, no patriot country, no gun, no soldier—only suffering, witness, and the courage to not fight. We knew we were surrounded and in danger always, that soldiers would claim to protect us, saying “my gun is for your good.” But “justice will take us millions of intricate moves,” my father said. And my mother told the PTA, “I am for reconciliation in all things.”

On the destroyer below me, the coxswain’s pipe chirps part of a code that thickens the air around me. My country lacks half an imagination, knowing—with billions of dollars in toys for killing—what to do after Pearl Harbor, but not a clue what to do before.

My childhood was all about before.

**Small Sparrow Friend**

**PEN CAMPBELL, TEACHER-CONSULTANT, THIRD COAST WRITING PROJECT, MICHIGAN**

Small sparrow friend, with whom I share my pretzel, from such a tiny pinch of bread you make a feast of bites.

**Of Christmas Past**

**PAT WACHHOLZ, DIRECTOR, FLORIDA GULF COAST WRITING PROJECT**

I hadn’t seen a Christmas parade in years until November 17 in Baltimore. When I was young, my family went to Detroit every Thanksgiving to the Hudson’s parade, the official beginning of the Christmas season. My mother put the turkey in a slow roaster before we left, and we traveled the 60 miles from the farm to the city with my dad’s two brothers, wives, and kids. One year, my dad’s youngest brother was in the parade—not by invitation. He just decided to join in. We were

Yup, she was right. All those store windows and all that walking put me into a heightened state of shopping alert.

Today, I’m drinking a coffee with Melanie and Joan at B&N in Baltimore.

Ouch: another case of the wants strikes a chord in the heart of my shopping genes.

2002 calendars call me to go look—what 12 images will lead Ernesto and me through days that begin in our kitchen?

My eyes comb photos of nature—waterfalls tumble down the mountain, rainbows rise up into the sky, mountain snow turns pink in winter sunsets, streams flow flush with spring runoff, flowers dance when the wind calls.

Straight ahead—books on sale. Over there, Harry Potter calls to me—“Deborah, over here, time to read #2 in the series…” … organizers luring me too, “Get thy papers filed and scanned and put away in the dark screened computer, now sleeping.”

Okay, I give up. I’m venturing out to browse.

**Two Pieces from the Baltimore Writing Marathon**

**LYNN CHIRENKA, CO-DIRECTOR, CROSSROADS WRITING PROJECT, MICHIGAN**

**A Cup of Imagination**

Richard said, “Be a writer. Tell people you are a writer and act the role.” I decided to start with a cup of imagination, a Starbucks concoction called “Writer’s Chai”. Essentially an herbal tea enhanced by milk and honey, its syrupy sweetness seemed appropriate for jumpstarting the mind. Although I don’t like sweets all that much (except for chocolate), there’s something about the warmth and the faint flavor of cinnamon that, while its powers do not compare to Hemingway’s rum, promises to fire up the pen. Perhaps, it’s the adventure of trying something new, something different in a different place, although I’ll admit that one Barnes and Noble seems pretty much like another. This building is, however, unique—an old electric plant in a former incarnation, someone said. I wonder if anyone back then had imagined its imposing smoke stacks might become niches for books. Probably not. Someone who tended the plant back then, seeing it now, might be heard to say, “I was there—there when great billows of black, coal-fired smoke belched from those stacks and floated out over the Chesapeake, not mere words stoked only by a cup of imagination.”
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Closed Until Further Notice
The Baltimore version of the World Trade Center stands on the inner harbor only 30 stories high. I’m sure there are taller buildings in the city. But, it IS still standing. Nevertheless, the sign says, “Closed until further notice,” and I can understand why. Wednesday I spent the day in Washington, D.C., where, except for essential business, the city and most of its attractions are “closed until further notice.” I sat in the Senate Gallery to hear John McCain and Robert Byrd address a nearly empty chamber. The National Mall from the Capitol to the Washington Monument and from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial was deserted. Only joggers, lunchtime walkers (I.D. tags dangling from their necks), and fat squirrels scavenging for scarce morsels broke the vast expanse. Eerie.

The Lincoln Memorial was “open until further notice,” and I was able to stand before his imposing likeness and think with some reverence about an end to conflict. I was there—between the Korean Veterans Memorial and the long low black wall remembering those lost in Vietnam. When we don’t learn from our history, we ARE doomed to repeat it, it seems. War, it seems, is only rarely “closed until further notice.”

Outside the window now a corps of men carrying American flags leads the local Thanksgiving Day parade. The city is evidently “open until further notice” as long as people are insistent, willing to carry on in spite of conflict and adversity brought home. I can’t help thinking about another World Trade Center reduced to rubble and dust—there where the ashes of 4,000 people mingle with those of their murderers. Closed until further notice.