

Our *Writing* Lives

Ink Stains

BY C. J. GILBERT

My hands were always stained. I could never remember how I came to have blue and black stained hands and never noticed them except when someone commented: "How did you get ink all over yourself?" My friends never questioned the marks on my fingers and neither did I; I always assumed that they were a part of writing. And writing was a large part of my life. Diaries, stories, letters, and doodles literally left their stain upon me as my pens refused to be confined to the paper. In the sixth grade, I won first prize for creative fiction writing. That is the first time that I remember feeling that perhaps ink ran within my veins.

I had been plotting out the tale for weeks in my head, had carefully crafted the opening scenes the week before, and now was feverishly caught within the flow that came with being fully gripped by my creation and by the fact that the deadline for entering the contest was mere minutes away. I remember the feel of sitting at the cold metal desk; the faux wood finish underneath my paper, my hands. Pages of lined paper covered in pencil spread out on my desk

as the classroom clock quietly ticked on the wall behind me. Someone, a classmate, offered to organize my papers. I looked up long enough from scribbling to thank them, I think, and then went back to the story.

Placing the finished story on my teacher's desk brought a rush of elation—and the surprising feeling of loss. Briefly, I felt as though I had amputated some limb, and although I still felt like the story was mine, it wasn't. It was *out there* where others would read it. What would they think? Would they enjoy reading it? Would they think the hurried ending too easy? Why hadn't I worked on it earlier so I could have worked on the ending more? I wanted my story to read like the novels I read and not like the stories my peers wrote for class assignments.

That contest provided me with an audience; and thinking about that audience did more for me as a writer than any classroom assignment. It made me want to write and want to refine that writing into something worth presenting. It made me view the ink on my hands not as a stain, but as a mark of my new profession—writing.

As a teacher of writing, that is the experience I want to re-create for my students: the flush of being caught in the writing, the suspense of

waiting for a reader's response, the pride in having ink stains on their own hands.

C. J. Gilbert is a Battle Creek Central High School English teacher and a fellow of the Third Coast Writing Project at Western Michigan University.

Tell Us *Your* Story

The Voice editors would like to read scenes from the story of your literary life for *Our Writing Lives*. If you've ever written a literacy autobiography at a summer institute, you may already have a manuscript on hand. The literacy autobiography is a short piece detailing important events that have affected your attitudes toward language, reading, and writing. We're looking for simple, straightforward, from-the-heart stories, 500 to 1500 words. Send your story to editors@nationalwritingproject.org or to Editors, National Writing Project, University of California, 615 University Hall #1040, Berkeley, CA 94720-1040.