“Choose Your Battles Wisely” received the First Place Award

in the 2012-13 Composition Program Writing Contest

Judges’ Commentary on “Choose Your Battles Wisely”

by Alexis Donaldson

In her winning piece, Alexis Donaldson found inspiration in the frustration that she felt as students critiqued others’ essays. As she says, “Instead of finding an appreciation for the author's unique style and finding ways to improve it, they [her classmates] wanted to alter the entire structure of piece to suit each of his/her individual tastes.” This led her to investigate how and to what extent we do this in other contexts in our daily life.

In her piece entitled, “Choose Your Battles Wisely,” Donaldson applies this inquiry to her own daily contexts. Her piece opens with her experience at a coffee shop. As she does throughout the piece, she sets the scene to create a mood, not just relating what is taking place, but providing details and dialogue. Her own perspective is clearly present in lines like “What do you want?” she [the barista] suddenly asks in an I don’t really want to help you tone” (1). She contrasts this scene almost immediately with one later in the day, when she encounters the woman again. The barista, now the “woman who backs into [her] in the Towers’ entrance,” has become more human to her; as the author claims, “I recognize her face but not the attitude from this morning” (1). Here the scene ends – no conclusion, no interpretation of her thinking—leaving the reader to ponder how much of a role perspective plays in the everyday scenes of our lives, how often we may have (without thinking) formed an opinion about someone based on a single experience and how much of a mistake that might be.

Though she does not tell us what to think, through the details she provides, she effectively leads us to a sense of her own feelings and allows us to form our own perspective as well. In talking about her piece she relates: “My professor enabled me to take advantage of techniques in writing I had never considered, such as using the white space of the page more creatively in order to implicitly make a statement, or rather than stating my point, finding a way to describe it and allow the reader to come to their own conclusion.” Particularly moving is the way in which she leads up to what is the most poignant part of the piece—the email from “him”, “the soldier” (2). The text is in a font different from the rest of her text, bigger and centered so that it stands out on the page. And then there is the contrast created through the selection of the text from the email that she decides to include:

“ADORABLE”

“—TOOK THE LIFE OF FIVE CHILDREN, WHOSE FACES AND VOICES I KNOW”
“—THOSE SAME CHILDREN THAT I PUSHED AWAY DID INDEED SERVE AS OUR BODY GUARD AND DID IN FACT PROTECT US” (3)

The only interpretation she provides here is her roommate’s response to the email, a response that most of us would probably have as well. Again, she leaves the reader to decide on his or her own response.

Donaldson tells us that, “The more I worked on the piece, the more invested I became in actually crafting the way in which I was writing.” Given its impact on the readers of the awards committee, it is clear that this is a piece that truly has been “crafted.