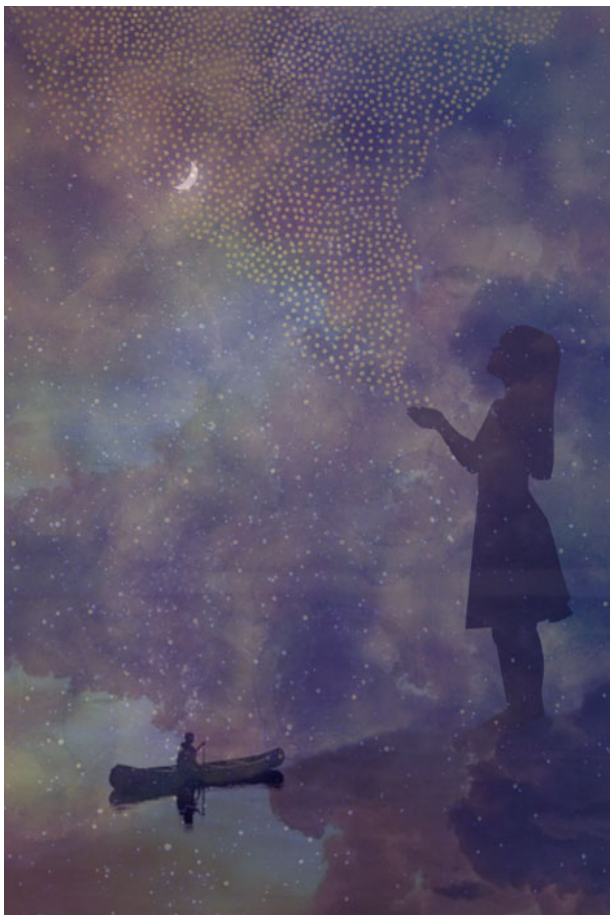
ESSAY

Here's to you, Mrs. Hutchinson

by Ana Bustelo



"Dreamer" by Mantraana Mahi Agarwal

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As I look back on my early school days in Washington D.C., I realize I don't remember the name of any of my teachers, only Mrs. Hutchinson.

Forty five years later I can see her face, perhaps helped by the only photograph I have of her. It's a class picture that I suppose we had taken yearly, but of the five years I was at the red-brick Episcopalian school that looked very much like a church, only one picture has survived. There are twelve of us in two rows, six sitting in the front, six standing in the back. We are all in our very best Sunday clothes. Ida is in a colorful pink and blue African attire as homage to her origins. I envy her, and wonder if I could be dressed in some very Spanish regional dress, since I am just as proud of being from Spain. However, the years go by and I never ask if I may do this. If my mother does not come up with the idea, I won't suggest it. I will continue to admire Ida every time she comes to class with a lovely pink turban on her head.

My best friend, Katie, is next to me, her slightly plump body a bit tight in a white blouse and what seems to be a velvet pee-chee, the color of wine. Katie and I cannot be separated, especially not on occasions like this. On the other side, Judith in a red and blue dress, with white little flowers, is smiling with crooked teeth, as blonde as ever, with strands of her lovely straight hair in the middle of her face. My hair, dark and impossible to control, is tightly pulled away from my face by a green plastic hair pin, to go with the little green owls of my blouse. You can tell a few of the girls have pulled their socks up to their knees for the photo. Some of us are in leotards that don’t seem to match the short sleeve outfits we all — boys and girls — are wearing.

It must have been Spring.

Our teacher, her head high, her back very straight, is on the far left of the picture, apart from the rest, to show she is the person in charge. She is wearing the dress that I will always remember her in, as if she had never worn another. It might have been a Lacoste, but I cannot see the crocodile. It has dark blue and white horizontal stripes on the top and a collar, as if it were a blouse. From the waist down it is all blue.

There is a black rectangular sign on the floor in front of us, that says in white letters:

> *Mrs. Hutchinson, 2nd grade, 1971-1972, Saint Patrick's School.*

It added solemnity to the picture, made us seven-year-olds feel important.

Mrs. Hutchinson had already been our teacher in 1st grade, and we didn't like it when a substitute teacher was sent to fill in for her. But there was a year — perhaps the year the picture was taken — when she came in quite often. A white haired woman, always with a perfect bun at the back of her head, who made me feel uneasy. With Mrs. Hutchinson I felt at

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home, with the teacher who filled in for her, I wanted to run out and go home. She had the air of the bad ugly grandmother in a children's story.

We wanted our teacher back. Why wasn't she here?

"Where is Mrs. Hutchinson?" yelled somebody, when we saw that she would be missing another day. It was probably Michael, who was always reprimanded for talking without putting his hand up. I remember him clearly; the thick black glasses always halfway down his nose, his lazy eye wanting to wander off to a far corner.

"Yeah, where is she?" someone else chipped in.

"Is she still sick?"

Mrs. … — let us call her Mrs. S. — waited for us to calm down, without saying a word. That wasn't like her. She was nervy, usually got down to business as soon as she set foot in class, shushing us quiet or clapping her hands. Sometimes she would stomp a foot. That day she sat there, hands folded in her lap, facing us, with a concentrated look in her eyes. It wasn't a mean look — though I was convinced she was mean —, she seemed to be thinking hard about something, as if she were not quite getting it right. Every day for almost two weeks we had thought it would be the last one with her, and yet, here she was again.

"Hello, children," she said standing up, when she thought the time was right. "Mrs. Hutchinson can't come in today..." Before she could finish Michael was asking again, "but where is she? Why can't she come?"

"If you will let me explain, Michael, I want to tell you a story."

We looked at each other in surprise. Was it story time? An uncomfortable, almost imperceptible twitch in Mrs. S.' face gave us the answer. It wasn’t story time, but it was time to listen to this story. Like puppies before they curl up to sleep, it took us a while to accommodate our bodies in our tiny chairs, we twisted, we turned, we crossed and uncrossed our legs, before a tense silence settled in:

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There was once a pretty little caterpillar who lived in the bottom of the sea. Her life in the ocean was full of the most extraordinary colors. She swam here and there, went to school, made friends, and visited her grandmother very often. Till, one day, her mother explained that grandma had gone away, and would never be back. She was now in a different world, the mother explained. She had gone way up where the water meets the air, and the minute she left, she became a beautiful butterfly. Just as she had once been able to swim, now she was able to fly.

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The little caterpillar raised her eyes trying to see that magical — and a bit scary — place where the water was no longer. All she could see was a huge darkness.

'Can we go visit?' she asked.

'No, dear. Not now,' her mother said. 'We will all go, when we're ready.'

The caterpillar was very sad. She could tell her mother was too. But it is the way of the world, her elders told her. Some things cannot be explained.

A few weeks went by, and the little caterpillar could not shake off the sadness. There was a hole in her life, and she didn't know what to do with it.

'It's alright to be sad,' her mother said, 'you only need to know you won't be sad forever'.

'But everything is so different without grandma,' complained the little caterpillar.

'Yes, that is also a part of life,' the mother said, 'we have to learn to live through the changes.'

'This is very complicated,' said the caterpillar wrinkling her small body.

'You will always have grandma,' replied her mother.

'I will?'

'You remember her and you know all her stories, don't you?'

'Yeah, I know all her stories by heart!' the little caterpillar said proudly. She was starting to feel better already.

'Well, don't you forget them, now,' the mother said, and they spent that afternoon recalling all the tales that granny had told the family once and again. Mother had some yarns of her own, and the caterpillar enjoyed every single one. She decided she would try to lock them safely in some secret part of her little head.

As the caterpillar grew up, not a day went by when she didn't think of grandma. She recalled all of her stories. They were hers now, she was to pass them on, perhaps add a few, before she too went to the world above the water.

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A feeling of dread filled the room. We sat rigidly, unable to understand, not completely. Our eyes stayed glued to Mrs. S.' mouth, our ears alert, awaiting the end, the final explanation of a class so singular. We dared not move a muscle.

Was this the end of the story?

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"This is what happened to Mrs. Hutchinson," said Mrs. S. in a voice ever so soft. The ugly grandmother look had left her mysteriously, almost at the same time the little caterpillar had appeared. "You all know she has been ill this year, but where she is now, she will never be ill again."

I had a vision of Mrs. Hutchinson, in her blue stripes, flying off to lands unknown. Her hair always in place, her smile the same. I imagined her arms as colorful wings, like those of the caterpillar, but I could not grasp the immensity of it. I felt as if I had been left alone in the middle of an enormous field and had to find my way back home. I stared at Mrs. S. in the hope of finding an answer there, only to see that the concerned look she had walked in with still clouded her expression; her eyes were tired, watery, I thought, her lips pursed. She stood up, and held onto the back of the chair. Then, as if thinking better of it, sat down again at the teacher's desk — where our favorite teacher had sat — and looked back at us expectantly.

The story of the caterpillar went round and round in my head. I knew about caterpillars turning into butterflies, but I didn't think they lived in the water. I also knew about the pine processionary, which we fought against at my grandma’s house, on the outskirts of Madrid. I hated them, and quite frankly, I wasn’t very fond of butterflies, either. Flying insects made me nervous. However, I had instantly taken a liking to this one and her grandma. I imagined that world of hers in shades of green, with bits of bright red here and there, and blue, of course, because water is always blue.

"Is she ever coming back?" cried Michael, suddenly jerking us out of the trance we had fallen into.

"No," said Mrs. S., "she's not, Michael, but I know she's thinking of you right now. She will always carry this class in her heart."

"She's never coming back! I knew it! I just knew it," he wailed before Mrs. S. had finished speaking.

He took off his glasses, crossed his arms in front of him, and let his head fall on them with a thud. He sobbed making all sorts of coughing and choking noises. Once in a while he would raise his head just enough to look around the room, without really seeing, only to let it fall again. I think Mrs. Muir, the principal, came in, and took him to the infirmary, where, like many other times, he probably lay on a cot disconsolate till his parents came to fetch him.

I wanted to cry and yell. I wanted to let go like Michael. For a moment, I even felt guilty for not doing so. We didn't show our feelings that easily, perhaps against the stereotype of the passionate Latin people. I was still pondering the story we had just listened to. I always felt I was a bit slower than the rest of the class, and this was one of those occasions when I wasn't

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completely sure that I hadn't missed the point.

Now Brooks, the cute tall boy who all the girls liked, was also crying at his desk, covering his face with his hands. As usual, the boys were much louder than the girls.

"No! No! Mrs. S.," he said, "she has to come back. She has to. She's our teacher."

I looked over at Katie, the tears pouring quietly down her cheeks, and I felt the numbness begin to thaw. A knot took hold of my throat, my eyes started to burn, and then, just as my eleven classmates, I cried, convinced that I would never be able to stop. Mrs. S. walked slowly around our desks; she got on her knees to hug each one of us, rub our backs, and tell us it would be okay.

"Remember what the mother explained to the little caterpillar," she insisted, but only some of us heard her. "It's perfectly alright to be sad," she continued without trying to talk over the noise. "Mrs. Hutchinson and all the wonderful things you learned from her will always be a part of you. You will all take her with you wherever you go."

She spoke in the same calm tone she had used to enact the mother of the story and, after a time impossible to measure, she regained our attention. Only a sniffle here or a hiccup there could be heard. Judith held on to Ida's hand, I had Katie's firmly in my own.

Mrs. S., still standing in the middle of the room, went on to explain more practical things, without ever losing the voice of the caterpillar's mom. We were having a day off from school, during which we could go to the burial, if we wanted. None of us were very interested, we felt it was not meant for us. When she mentioned a Mr. Hutchinson and children, the sniffling came to a halt.

She had a husband? And children? Kids like us? This bit of information gave an entirely new dimension to Mrs. Hutchinson, who, up till that moment, had existed only in school, only for us. We were able to forget ourselves very briefly and wonder how they, our teacher's family, must be feeling.

As I put this memory into writing, I wonder how Mrs. S. was feeling. Then, us seven-year-olds, of course, didn't care. This was about us, about our favorite teacher, whom we would never again see come into our class in the morning, her greyish short curls in perfect order, her smile always present, always contained. Her very straight back and her strong muscular legs would not walk down the halls of Saint Patrick's School again. We would never again sit in a semi-circle around her, listening, learning without feeling the effort, keeping quiet and busy to make her happy.

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Mrs. S. would be our teacher for the rest of the year, and not a single day stands out in my memory. All that comes back is the image of her telling that story which has forever stayed with me, and the clear feeling that I did not entirely comprehend then, that we were all little caterpillars, and would someday cross the line where one world meets the other. But I did, for a moment, ask myself what would become of me when I turned into a butterfly.

Would I get to see Mrs. Hutchinson?

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