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| The Evolution of putting a pen to paper |
| Ilana Berlin |

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# Artist StateMent

A writer is someone who has the ability to be create and tell stories. Good writers can do so in a captivating way. Sometimes that ability comes easily and sometimes it is something that must be worked for. It depends on the person, and it depends on the day. My definition of a writer has not changed since the start of the semester but my abilities as a writer have.

One of the most helpful tools for revising was printing out my works and reading them out loud. I don’t often proofread thing, though I definitely should more often. Reading aloud helped me catching things that I did not see when my mind just filled in the blanks as I read silently. Making notes on paper helped me catalogue which sections needed the most help and allowed me to make more small revisions as I retyped. Working on paper was also a nice break from the blue light of technology.

Lynda Barry’s ten-minute practice from the start of the semester helped me view writing in a different way and change perspective as I wrote. I am often bad at changing my perspective. It is not something I am proud of, but it is something I easily admit. I have always been “the smart one” so being wrong or needing help was rubbed in my face as a victory over me. This has made me an insanely stubborn person and means I have a hard time seeing things from other points of view. My writing reflects that and many of the works in this portfolio, and my journal, are from my point of view. It was very helpful to have the workshops so other people could give input. Suggestion for drastic change would have been more helpful for pushing me out of my comfort zone but any input was greatly appreciated.

Some of my biggest issues this semester were in writing tension and story pacing. A lot of my works from the beginning of the semester had good scenery but a lack of tension. They were pretty environments with motionless characters. If something did happen, I often skimmed over it. Reducing it to one paragraph or a few lines of dialogue when it should have been an entire scene. I also had difficulty moving from scene to scene. There are still many points in my works where I feel the transitions are very clumsy.

I am the proudest of my poems because I like their overall flow. I am especially proud of both poems in this portfolio. My issues with pacing in longer stories made them jumbled at points while the poems flow neatly. It was also easier for me to pick over the poems with a fine-tooth comb and be super nitpicky with how certain words sounded.

My greatest improvement throughout this semester has been in writing tension. It is something I still need to work on however I am proud of my improvement. My works still have a focus on the scenery, but they also have some tension. I am proudest of the tension in The Lady in the River. I think I managed to convey a sense of urgency and yearning that does not appear in many of my earlier works. It still needs a lot of work as it does not have the feeling of encompassing tension that draws readers in.

I intent to get better at fiction writing. It allows me to use parts of my brain that I don’t usually get to in my science and math intensive classes. I titled this portfolio The Evolution of Putting a Pen to Paper because I am a very science minded person and this portfolio reflects my developments in writing throughout the semester.

My favorite authors have not changed. I still love Rick Riordan’s sarcastic writing style and the amazing descriptions in Kevin Kwan’s *Crazy Rich Asians.* They are amazing writers who have worked very hard to develop their writing styles. While I aspire to write like them someday, that is still a long way away. I will continue to write, my own thought and fantastical escapes, and practice becoming a better writer.

I write by myself, listening to music, and focusing on what I am trying to create. Sometimes this this led to sticking points where I could vividly picture something but couldn’t get the description to sound right. Sometimes I had to force myself to step away from my work so I could come back to it later with fresh eyes. A lot of the time I would complete my work right after class because my mind would be running rampant with ideas and inspiration.

I still prefer reading to writing but this class has changed the way I read. I am more aware of good descriptions and specific word choice. One of the things I noticed when doing movie nights with my friends was that almost all of the good movies had some sort of Chekhov's Gun. I started looking for this in readings. This helped me pay attention to foreshadowing and constant themes authors ran through their books. I tried to incorporate it into my writing as well.

Despite my love of reading fantasy and fiction works, many of the works I wrote in this class were personal nonfiction. Writing became an outlet for my thoughts and processing feelings. While it was not what I intended, it was something I needed at a few points throughout the semester. I am very aware of myself, as a writer and as a person, but I do not always have the skills to fix the issues I recognize. That is why it is so important to learn and practice techniques that help build new skills. The lessons and tools from this class helped immensely improved my writing. There is still a lot of room for improvement.

# Bat Mitzvah ABECEDARIAN

A great gathering that brings people together. My

Bat Mitzvah, my thirteenth birthday. My

Celebration of Jewish adulthood. My

Deep fear of standing on the bimah. My

Encouragement from my parents wanes quickly. My

Focus is on the crowd in front of me. My

Grandparents are here in the front row. My

Hebrew school friends sit in our usual section. My

Inadequacies will stand out to them. My

Jewishness is being put to the test. My

Knowledge is lacking. My

Lips are sealed as I stand at the bimah. My

Mom is watching with pride. My

New friends from my new school are here. My

Obligation to do this comes from my Dad. My

Parents sent me to Hebrew school for this. My

Quitting was not an option. My

Religious beliefs are atheist. My

Speech starts soon and I start off strong. My

Tenacious nature will not be stopped. My

Ultimatum of *I don’t believe in god*. My

Very bold statement makes the rest easy. My

Worries fade as I focus on getting the words out. My

X-ed out part of the speech remains unsaid. My

Yelling at my parents was in vain, I do want to be here. My

Zion Temple experience has come to an end but I’m glad I had it.

# Take Deep Breaths

The world is reduced to a gentle hum

As *I‘ll Be There* starts ringing in my ears

It keeps me grounded and keeps me right here

My heartbeat feels like a thundering drum

And I feel rough carpet under my thumb

The music distracts my mind from its fears

And helps it to become completely clear

As my headache fades my mind is numbed

I return to my desk and to my books

To finish off work and complete my tasks

I will push through no matter how hard it looks

If I can finish these problems I will relax

Pen on the page but silent still. I’ve looked

Blankly for some time. Another day perhaps.

# The Lady in the River

Do you ever sit by riverbanks and listen to the water as it sweeps over stones and washes against the shore? Listening to the ebb and flow of the water is the purest form of meditation. Let your mind sway with the waves and relax. If you listen closely, you may even hear my whispers through the ripples.

The riverbank used to be my refuge- my escape from that decrepit house, Lenora’s endless nagging, and my little brother’s constant coughing. I would hide under the old willow tree at the edge of town and listen to the river. It would tell me beautiful stories of the far-off places it flowed through as I watched it rush off past the horizon. I often dreamed of following the river’s example and wandering off to see what adventures I could find. I hoped I could venture away from my weary town, but I never dared to leave. I never had the courage to abandon my brother to our drunkard of a mother. I left those dreams behind when I was a young girl, around 16.

Merlin was the opposite. A strange young man from a far-off land whose mind still ran rampant with ideas of further adventure. He charmed me with his stories of brave knights and fearsome monsters.

The first time I met him he was in trouble. I was working at the apothecary, making pocket change to fund my brother’s medicine and Lenora’s drinking habit, when he first appeared in front of me. Appeared being in a literal sense. He smirked at my stunned expression as he ducked behind the counter next to me.

“How did you…” I started to ask him. He quickly hushed me as a man came barging through the apothecary door.

“Nimue! Have you soon a strange man come through here” Oliver shouted at me.

“Good afternoon, Uncle Oliver,” I calmly greeted him “I haven’t seen anything.” I tried very hard not to glance down at the man hiding by my feet. Oliver glared suspiciously at me.

“You let me know if you see anything girl. There are some strange folk around and strange folk always bring trouble.” My eyes stayed glued to Oliver’s back till he disappeared into the next shop.

“He’s gone,” I whispered to the man under the counter.

“Then why are you whispering,” he whispered back, grinning up at me. His shoulder-length silver hair fell into his eyes as he stood. He was taller than me and stronger looking too. My face warmed as his piercing blue eyes met mine.

“Well.” he hopped back over the counter. “Thanks for the save but I best be going now.”

“Wait!” I grabbed his arm. “How did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Don’t be daft, you know what I mean. That appearing trick. How did you do it?”

“Oh, that little hat trick.” He pulled his arm from my grasp. “That’s but a fraction of my grand magical powers.”

“Now really, how did you do that?”

“I told you,” he almost sounded offended, “magic.”

“Magic doesn’t exist,” I insisted.

“Oh, doesn’t it.” He leaned towards me, still grinning.

Suddenly, I was doused by cool water. It ran down my skin and soaked through my linen frock. I strained my neck to see a storm cloud above me, pelting me with rain. The cloud flickered as bits of lightning ran through it and the purr of thunder echoed through the shop. I blinked and the cloud was gone as quickly as it appeared. My head snapped back towards the mysterious man leaning on the counter.

“Teach me,” I begged breathlessly.

His grin fell. “Magic is not something to be trifled with by silly little girls.”

“My name is Nimue and I am not silly nor little. Please, you must teach me.”

“You beg for a power you don’t understand from a man whose name you don’t know.”

“Then tell me your name and teach me to understand.”

The last spark of my hope latched on to him. The limits of his power seemed endless, and I was desperate to learn. I thought his magic could give me an escape, one more permanent than listening to the water. He only smiled sadly before he disappeared like all his other tricks.

I thought I would never see him again after that, though I desperately searched. I was saddened by the idea that he would just pass by like the flow of the river. I even thought that he could have been a figment of my imagination brought on by my desperation for hope. Lenora enjoyed my despair and would endlessly laugh at my desperate attempts to find my mysterious man. When I finally returned to my refuge by the riverbank, I was amazed to find him there sleeping under my willow tree.

That time I did not let him leave till he promised to teach me his magic. I tried to convince him that fate had led him back to me. I desperately pleaded until he caved to my desires. The first spell Merlin taught me ensured that he would keep his promise. He showed me how to weave the silvery threads of my magic into a thick cord that he wrapped around his heart. He taught me how to protect my refuge under the willow tree. How to blanket it in enchantments against the weather, wild animals, and wandering eyes.

Every day after I found him, I rushed straight from the apothecary to meet him by the riverside. Most of the time Merlin would be napping under the willow tree. Sometimes he would float down from the clouds or rise from the water to see my awe and hear me beg to be taught such tricks. I took to magic like a fish to water. It was not long until I could bound up to meet him in the air or stand on the water to pull him from the river.

Some days we lounged on the riverbank, and Merlin would tell me stories of his adventures. I would forget about all about Lenora and other troubles as I practiced my magic. I would puppet the water and fallen autumn leaves to bring Merlin’s stories to life. His stories were not only enchanting tales, but they also contained warnings. Magicians who were persecuted for simple tricks and friends who were burned for associating with him.

“I have been hunted many times by people who have feared what I can do. You must never show your magic around others. They often fear what they do not understand.”

“Why can’t you make them understand? Why did you show me then?” I questioned to no avail.

I enjoyed my time with him. My cheeks would be sore from smiling by the end of our practices and I would trot home with extra bounce in my steps, exhaustion forgotten. Merlin often told me he was glad to see me smile with him because my sadness marred my pretty face and made me act like an old lady.

“Am I supposed to act young and dumb?” I would retort.

He would just laugh and tussle my messy auburn hair.

It was when I was finally happy that things started getting worse. Our coins were already spread thin, and my brother’s medicine increased in price. My long hours at the apothecary grew even longer. I couldn’t find the time or the energy to spend with Merlin by the river.

I felt desperate to help my brother and even more desperate to regain the freedom to return to the riverside and Merlin. I planned to use my magic to heal my brother. Merlin protested and got in the way of my plan. He was worried about the consequences, but I was blind to them. I decided to make sure he wouldn’t be able to stop me.

One frosty winter day, I closed the apothecary early and snuck out to the riverside. I wove my spell across the river’s stones, through the curling roots of the willow, and finally intertwined it with the cord around Merlin’s heart. The tree’s weeping branches sheltered his already sleeping form. All I had to do was ensure he wouldn’t wake up till I wanted him to.

My brother’s sudden recovery seemed like a miracle to most. Little did I know that Lenora had taken note of my happiness through her drunken haze. Her jealousy made her suspicious and when she saw an opportunity to get rid of me, she took it.

She accused me of being a witch and dragged me by my hair to the town square to demand a trial. As the townsfolk gathered, I could feel the weight of their pitying gazes. I wept in fear and the sky wept with me. Clouds gathered and bolts of lightning flashed in time with my sobs.

“You see!” Lenora shook her fist at the sky hysterically “The girl summons this! She is a witch!”

She moved as if to strike me and, in my desperation and fear, I called a bolt of lightning to strike her. I saw the pity turn to rage and heard screams and gasps from the gathered crowd. I bolted away from the town and towards the river. Towards my willow tree and my Merlin.

“MERLIN,” I screamed at the top of my lungs, begging to be heard through the thunder and his slumber. He could not hear me. The spell was too strong even as I tore at its fabric.

The warm light of the torches illuminated the frigid water of the river as the townspeople approached. The river was convenient for a trial by water. My arms and legs were bound with thick, coarse brown rope so I could not swim. If I survived then I was a witch and would be killed, and if I didn’t…that wasn’t their problem. Rising from the water was one of the tricks that Merlin had yet to teach me.

In a sense, I have achieved my dream. I flow with the river, over stones, and against shores. I am free to see far-off places and meet many mysterious strangers. Next time you sit by a riverbank listen closely. You may hear my whispers through the ripples.

# Figuring Out Flåm

On the third evening of our trip to Norway, my family and I stepped off the ferry from Gudvangen into the rain in Flåm. Anders dragged his suitcase behind him while the rest of us shouldered our various backpacks and computer bags. I raised my plastic pink and white umbrella in an extra attempt to deflect the rain.

“Here’s the plan,” Mom stated, “we are going to get Grandpa checked in to his hotel so he doesn’t have to wander through the rain while we find ours. We’ll meet back at his hotel for the 6pm dinner reservation that Shell made.”

She directed us off the dock and to a nearby cabin-style hotel. The Flamsbrygga Hotel was the same hotel that Grandpa, Grandma, Mom, and Aunt Michelle had stayed at when they made a similar Scandinavian tour thirty years ago. The area gained many more tourist since then and the hotel only had one room available when Mom booked reservations three months ago.

We left Grandpa to settle into his room and headed for the grocery store up the road. Mom wanted us to grab breakfast so we would be prepared for the early morning train ride the following morning. She, as always, took forever so Aunt Michelle, Uncle John, Anders, and Blake went ahead to find the check-in. While Dad, Isaac, and I waited, I tried to find interesting Norwegian snacks and candies to try.

Our rainy trek to the check-in took us out of town and towards the mist covered cliffs surrounding the fjord. The entire time the rain continued to pour. The water ran off my umbrella and onto my backpack. It soaked through my bag and my not-actually-waterproof raincoat.

“Are you sure this is the right way?” I questioned as the path turned to muddy gravel and the town grew further away.

We approached Aunt Michelle and her family standing under a tree by a little white shed. The shed was in the middle of nowhere outside a small town in a foreign country. *Seems legit.*

“So, what’s the deal here?” Dad asked as we approached.

“Well…” Uncle John gestured to the sign on the shed door which read Brekke Apartments and Hostel. “This is the right place, but it looks like this doesn’t open for another fifteen minutes or so. I guess we’ve got some waiting to do.”

A line of seven single-story white buildings stood across from the check-in shed. The small overhang of their front doors offered the best protection from the rain. Many of them had scattered belongings and lawn chairs beside the front door. A few even had clothes lines with clothes flapping in the wind and or sopping with rain. My skepticism grew as I spotted cows and pigs roaming in a fenced-off area behind the shed. *Are these the building we’ll be staying in?*

After another ten minutes of sheltering from the rain and watching the roaming farm animals, a gray SUV pulled off the dirt road towards us. A middle-aged lady clutching her laptop hopped from the car and unlocked the shed. Uncle John tried to follow her inside, but she held out her hand.

“One minute.”

A few minutes later Uncle John was finally allowed in. I peered in through the small grimy window in the door. Inside the shed, the lady was sitting at a plastic folding table typing at her computer while Uncle John talked at her. *What is taking so long.*

He came back out five minutes later with news.

“Iv’e got good news and bad news,” Uncle John started. “Good news, we have plenty of beds and one of the places is in town. Bad news, the other place somewhere else.”

Everyone looked confused.

“Ah yes, somewhere else,” I said sarcastically, “What do you mean somewhere else?”

“She just said it was somewhere that way.” Uncle John waved vaguely further down the gravel road.

“That doesn’t seem…”

“So, who is going to which place?” Anders asked abruptly. *I don’t think that’s the biggest issue here.* He leaned tiredly against the shed. He had been sleeping on the ferry, but the eight-hour time difference was taking its toll on him.

“Why don’t you kids head back to the place in town, and we’ll try to find somewhere else,” Dad tried to joke. “Since we should have plenty of room, Ilana can choose if she wants to come with us or stick with the boys.”

“I think I’ll stick with the boys and the place in town,” I immediately answered.

Anders, Blake, Isaac, and I walked back toward town while our parent’s bobbing umbrellas disappeared further up the road. We went back past Grandpa’s cabin-like hotel and two giant cruise ships docked at the fjord. We came to a large brown house at the base of the cliff. The two-story building looked perfectly suburban. I could see mismatched sheer grey and pink curtains hanging in the windows. As we approached rustling leaves caught my attention as a large grey hare dashed through the small side garden.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” I asked again.

“According to Apple Maps this is the address.” Isaac looked at his phone.

“So how do we get in?”

“It should be unlocked.”

We walked up to the rickety wooden deck to the door labeled 3B and opened it to reveal a normal-looking entryway. We stripped off our muddy shoes and damp socks and left them by the door as we explored the house. To the right, there were two bedrooms with sheets neatly folded and stacked on top of the beds. To the left, there were two narrow but complete bathrooms with a sink, toilet, and shower. Straight ahead, there was a kitchen area with a dining table and a starkly empty fridge. I checked that the fridge was cold and placed our breakfast groceries inside. In the corner a spiraling staircase led upwards to a second floor.

Anders was quick to make and collapse into one of the beds on the first floor. The dirt-caked wheels of his suitcase left grimy streaks on the floor as he dragged it into his claimed room.

Isaac, Blake and I explored the second floor. It had another narrow bathroom but with no shower. The light of the half-bath flickered, and an off smell emanated from the room. Further down the hall there were three more bedrooms with a total of five more beds.

“Well, this is definitely more than the four twins and a sofa that Mom told us to expect. There is probably even enough space for all of us here if you guys don’t mind sharing the bedroom with two beds.” I suggested to Isaac and Blake.

“I’d be good with that,” Isaac agreed.

“Eh, that works,” Blake agreed too, “I’ll let the parents know.”

We messaged back and forth for a while, trying to explain the strange house, before Mom finally called me to make things easier.

“So what is going on?” She asked.

“There is enough room for everyone here,” I told her “You guys don’t need to stay somewhere else or walk all the way back in the rain after dinner. There are 5 bedrooms and like 12 beds here.”

“We’ll be right over.”

Half an hour later another four pairs of muddy shoes were left by the door. Aunt Michelle, Uncle John, Mom, and Dad explored the house. They seemed just as confused as we had been but less concerned.

“This place can fit all of this and then some,” Dad joked.

“Are you sure we have this space to ourselves? No one else is going to show up?” I asked.

“No one else Ilana,” Mom reassured me “We reserved this space.”

When we went back towards the dock for dinner, Dad regaled us and Grandpa with the story of how they had hiked along the muddy road and past a small streaming waterfall to find the house that was somewhere else. The entire time my mind was filled with thoughts of someone taking our things or how dirty the almost white sheets must be. We retired for the evening, wet things hung by the vents to dry and hope that tomorrow would be less rainy. I slept restlessly despite my exhaustion. Nothing happened despite my fears, but little did I know that our adventures in Flåm would only be the beginning of the disasters of our Norway trip.