

Creative writing portfolio

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What it's like to be a bat

Hi, my name is Fred. I am a bat. I live under the roof of a local church.

Thanks for doing this interview, Fred.

You are welcome, thanks for coming in in the middle of the night.

Of course. Do you ever go out during the day?

Very rarely, I try to avoid that. I used to do it more in my youth. But at my age, I mostly stay at home.

How old are you, if you don't mind me asking?

I am 12 years old.

Is that a lot?

It's getting up there. I am definitely beyond my prime. Makes one think. Have I lived a good life? Have I done what I was meant to do? Have I seen everything I wanted to see?

What have you seen?

Mostly the church I live in and the surrounding area. Didn't see it the way you see it, though. My eyes are weak, I see with my ears. I make sounds and wait for them to come back to me. Sometimes they don't. I can only see things that are close. And everything I see is a reflection of myself. Do you know what I mean?

I think I do. Do you ever see any other animals? What is your social life like?

It's ok, I can't complain. I have a few friends living with me at the moment. There is a cat living down the street. Some rats, but I avoid those. Sometimes I stay up during the day to watch the mass. Sometimes people bring dogs, but they get restless fast and have to leave. But people stay in the church for hours without moving. Maybe that's what they do recharge and conserve energy instead of hanging upside down.

Do you ever wish you were a cuter, more domestic animal like a dog or a cat?

Haven't thought about it that much. At the end of the day, you have to be what you are. I don't imagine thinking about alternate lives would be make me much happier. Besides, some people like bats.

Sure. Have you seen any Batman movies?

No, but I have heard of them. Apparently there is a trilogy starring Christian Bale that's really good, but the new ones are much worse. I learned that from a parrot. He lives in a cinema down the road.

Socratic dialogue

Socrates: Antisthenes, greetings to you on this glorious day.

Antisthenes: Greetings, Socrates.

Socrates: Is that a knife and a wet stone I see in your hand? For what purpose does a man of your stature personally concern himself with maintenance of tools? Do you not possess multitude of servants to attend to such matters?

Antisthenes: I am afraid, dear Socrates, the purpose of this knife is one I must fulfill myself. It is true, I own servants to maintain my estate, kill the animals I wish to eat, cut fruit for the celebrations I host... but justice, justice must be carried out by my own hand.

Socrates: Justice against whom? Who has wronged you to such depth that retaliation must be administered by you and you alone?

Antisthenes: It pains me to say it was my own wife. She laid with another man.

Socrates: Apologies, i am so sorry to hear that, my friend. Was it a transgression of passion? Did she act without contemplating the consequences of her actions and expressed regret afterwards?

Antisthenes: I do not believe it so. She may have expressed regret, but here actions were her choice. She has decided to humiliate me, and my entire family, of her own free will.

Socrates: What do you imagine that means? To possess free will?

Antisthenes: She had a choice to make. Staying faithful or destroying me. She chose the latter. Nobody forced her to do it, nobody put a knife to her throat. She acted voluntarily.

Socrates: I see. But surely there must have been circumstances external to her own mind which pushed her to make that choice? The circumstances of your marriage which you yourself helped create? The situation she found herself in made her feel lust, loneliness, emptiness, love or boredom, or any combination of feelings that made her act the way she did.

When a poorly treated, hurt beast escapes its cage and tramples over people in the street, is it the fault of the beast, of the fault of the cage? Would you not say, that we are driven by our emotions, yet have little control over them? Surely you have experienced this yourself on occasion even during your own distinguished life?

Antisthenes: Humans are not animals. But I suppose it is true that dark thoughts can encircle any man or woman. But good men and women control their emotions. They have the strength of character to always do what is right, regardless of feelings.

Socrates: And your wife lacked this strength?

Antisthenes: Evidently so.

Socrates: Why do you think that is? What makes your character strong and hers weak? Is it something you possess since birth? Handed down to you by your parents or gods, the same way a man is born tall or short? Is it a short man's fault, that he is short? Is it just and fair to pass moral judgement on a person based on a fluke of birth?

Antisthenes: A man can be born short, but his character is forged during his life by the choices he makes. A man decides to be principled, a woman decided to be faithful. A faithful woman would deal with the same circumstances my wife was in very differently.

Socrates: So the way your wife has lived her life made her an unfaithful woman.

Antisthenes: Yes.

Socrates: But how much say did she have in the way she lived her life? Was she unfaithful when she was a 4 year old girl?

Antisthenes: No, obviously not.

Socrates: Right, her life was completely controlled by her parents at that point. And would continue to be so for a long time. And when she finally reached the age of adulthood, she lived her life and made her decisions using the way of thinking, habits, mindset and patterns of behavior given to her by her parents and her environment at young age, true?

Antisthenes: I guess so.

Socrates: But did she have control over her environment, any more than she had over her height? Where do you draw the line on that circle of causality? At what point does a person exert their own agency in a way not influenced by things they had no control over?

Antisthenes: So you are saying it is her parents' fault for making her the way she is? For screwing up her character and setting her up for life of deceit and wretchedness?

Socrates: To some extent, perhaps. All parents can make mistakes. But what made her parents bad parents?

Antisthenes: Their parents?

Socrates: Exactly! And they were ruined by their parents! Ruined childhood upon ruined childhood! All the way down to the beginning of time... to some original sin, or a quarrel between the gods, or perhaps to nothing at all.

Antisthenes: So you are saying she is innocent? That she should escape punishment? What then becomes of justice, if people's choices are not their own?

Socrates: I do not know. Perhaps punishment is still necessary. Not to punish people for what they have done but to deter them and others from doing so again. But killing your wife might not be justice, but revenge.

Antisthenes: What possible difference could that make? Besides, if what you are saying is true, then I have no choice but to end my wife's life. Everything I know, everything I have done, everything I have seen has brought me to this place, to this choice, to the only way I can make it. If my wife is without sin, then so am I. She is already dead, the fate wills it so. If she had no choice but to betray me, then I have no choice but to kill her.

Socrates: As I have no choice but to try to stop you. Perhaps if we talk more, you will have no choice but to spare her life. It seems true to me, that if one tries to achieve moral virtue he should treat others as if they possess no free will, yet treat himself as if he does. Maybe your character already made the choice for you. Maybe you can force your character into a shape that conforms to your choices. What do you think you will do?

Antisthenes: I don't know. I guess it's not my decision anyway and I will just see what happens when I confront my wife tonight.

Socrates: You wish to talk about it some more?

Antisthenes: No.

keeps sharpening knife in silence

Advice column

reply by [Steven D. Levitt](#).

Let me reply with a classic thought experiment to illustrate a point: You are walking to a dinner party in your favorite outfit when you see a man drowning in a lake. Would you help him, ruining your clothes (worth perhaps hundreds of dollars) in the process? Most people would say yes, a human life is worth more than a hundred dollars. Why not then, send that money to charity and help save perhaps several human lives by providing vaccinations or clean water? Only a fraction of us do that monthly. It is natural to feel responsibility for people that are geographically close to us and not care much about those far away. But there is nothing wrong in choosing the rational point of view that you are no more responsible for the man outside your home than the one two blocks away. Perhaps allocating your free resources (money, time, emotional energy) more systematically to people more receptive to your help would do more good overall and ease your conscience along the way. That being said, if a doner costs X dollars and a peace of mind for the day is worth more than X dollars to you, it's only rational to buy the man a doner once in a while.

Autobiographical short story

Trapped people

The hospital smelled the way all hospitals smell. A combination of old furniture and cheap disinfectant. The cover of the padded bench we were sitting on was peeling off and a halogen light, a single source of light in the waiting room, was buzzing above our heads.

"This is a bad idea." she says.

"You haven't slept in 3 days. You are shaking. Someone needs to take a look at you."

"You don't get it. If they diagnose me, I am done. It will be in my health records forever. I will never work again. Any moment an old classmate could walk by and recognize me."

"You wanna leave? We can leave. Before the lady comes back. Find a private clinic or something, no classmates." I said, half-serious.

"It doesn't matter. It's all fucked anyway."

"It's going to be okay."

My performative optimism was not convincing. It stopped being convincing weeks ago when her life really started falling apart. Taking time off didn't help. Alcohol didn't help. Therapy didn't help. The downward spiral had started and seemingly nothing could stop it. My girlfriend's mental health was disintegrating in front of me like a poorly built Jenga tower.

"What do I tell them?" she asked.

"Try telling the truth."

"That I am a trained psychologist that's crazy? That I am a walking definition of irony who just came here to pick up some pills?"

"You are not crazy."

The lady nurse came back and announced with inappropriate cheerfulness:

"Miss? You can come in."

"I guess we will find out." the girlfriend said, seemingly to no one, and started walking to the psychiatrist's office door with the enthusiasm of a captured partisan being told to dig his own grave.

I was left in the empty waiting room with my thoughts.

It started almost a year ago, the way most love stories start. There was a party. Drinks. Conversation. A smile. A smile back. A step forward. A matching step forward. Kiss. Fireworks. A bad date in a restaurant. A good date in a park. Awkward sex on the kitchen floor to avoid roommates. Searching for a common apartment, nicknamed “the nest”. Moving in. Painting the walls. Coming home from work to someone close. Netflix and chill. Pancakes on a Sunday morning. The lottery winning luck of finding someone both smarter and better looking than you, who for some reason, likes you anyway. I was the reacher; she was the settler. Life was good.

There were small cracks at first. Misunderstandings blown out of proportion. Mismatched expectations. Small fights that dragged on. Unprompted jealousy outbursts. Talks of a break-up, periodically revisited but going nowhere. She changed jobs, then changed jobs again. Ended long friendships, started new destructive ones. Nothing was good enough. The crushing weight of high expectations. Not knowing what to do with your life. Comparing yourself to Instagram versions of your friends. Hedonic adaptation. Excessive introspection. Choice paralysis. Stress. Depression. Anxiety. Sleepless nights. Little food. Self-destruction.

At some point, it was clear we were over. It was never going to work. But there is no right moment to abandon someone who is already in trouble. We were friends first, and friends don’t do that. And she didn’t have that many friends left. So I stayed, waiting for things to get more stable. But the spiral only went down.

Until here I was, sitting alone in a waiting room of a psychiatric clinic.

The door opened, and she came back holding a piece of paper.

“How did it go?” I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders, the way a sad child does when their mom asks them about school.

“As expected. Depression, anxiety, probably more. Got a pills prescription. They said I should stay, but I refused. I may not have a choice at some point. You can’t really diagnose someone in a single session, but their best guess is a combination of narcissistic and regressive borderline personality disorder.”

“How bad is that?”

“It has a 10% suicide mortality rate.”

“That won’t happen to you.”

“It feels like 100% for me.”

I shook my head and hugged her. She hugged me back, defeatedly.

“I am quitting my job. They are on the verge of firing me anyway. And I should move out to my parents...”

What did she expect me to say to that?

'No, stay, I will take care of you!' like in the movies? 'I am with you till the end of the line, in sickness or health'? I wanted to say it. I wanted to be a hero, a knight saving the day.

But I was tired, and I was no knight. I haven't had a happy day in a long time. I was trapped. There is only so much sadness and depression you can absorb from other people before it settles in you as well. And I could feel I was approaching my own cliff.

How much responsibility does one have over the health of their partner? How long do you stick around and take care? In marriage, forever, I guess. Even If your one night stand sprained her ankle in your kitchen, you would go with her to the hospital for a day. Is there a formula for relationships? Like 25% of the relationship timespan or something? Am I off the hook after three months? Where is the line? I didn't feel off the hook, yet felt I had to draw the line somewhere. A trapped coyote will chew off its leg to break free. What do trapped people do?

Maybe the price of freedom is the self-delusion of being a good person.

Maybe the price of freedom is accepting your own selfishness.

Maybe the price of freedom is accepting a 10% chance of total disaster.

She was still looking at my face, expecting a response.

"Yeah... maybe that's a good idea." I finally said. We drove home in silence and started packing boxes.

Anything about: love, bracelet, horizon, fragile

Sleeves

Through the city a man had gone
Wearing his sins on his sleeves
The concrete felt like amazon
Truth spoken, yet crowd disbelieves

Love was but an excuse
A drug for those weak of mind
From the beginning there were clues
The evening would not be kind

The man anticipated this
His morality always agile
His intelligence hit and miss
His ego weak and fragile

Delusion works only outwards
To himself a rat, to others, a lion
A president and king of cowards
Wanting bracelets made of iron

He walked through the fallen leaves
Horizon as far as ever
Wearing his sins on his sleeves
Wearing them forever