

Write What You Know Because You Don't Know Anything

Addison Sullivan

I never saw myself as a “good” writer. Before this class, I thought that writing wasn’t something important to develop. I assumed that all writers needed to be published to become writers, and if a piece was incomplete on the first draft, why bother finishing? I’ve attempted journaling and writing short stories, poems, and non-fiction in the past, but with little to no success. I didn’t see creative writing as an outlet, but a struggle to be good at. In taking this course, reflecting on previous experiences with reading and writing, and diving into different genres of writing, I’ve found the opposite is the case. A writing doesn’t have to be “good” or “publisher-ready” to be a proper outlet for someone. I’ve always struggled with ways of processing my emotions, and I’ve discovered in this class that writing has become a healing balm that I can use when I’m depressed, anxious, angry, or simply want to relive or process a once-forgotten memory.

Most of my revisions came from this place of self-reflection and processing. I’m a very slow processor and need to take my time to chew on concepts, reflect on what they mean, and how to apply them to my life and writing. Venturing out and trying something new has never been easy for me. Trying poetry was most definitely a growing experience for me. Being limited creatively turned out to provide a host of opportunities to express myself and how I feel, memories I have that I need to process, or just a fun idea I have.

The pieces I chose are among my favorites and ones I poured my soul into. I’ve always enjoyed writing, but I just thought I was good at technical writing or non-fiction essays and speeches. I was pleasantly surprised during the workshops and Creative Play exercises, how much I enjoyed different genres of writing and self-expression. The pieces I chose not to change were largely from the workshopped categories, where I tried to fix a lot of grammatical errors or rewrites I thought would better improve the theme or message of the piece. The Creative Play exercises were a lot more difficult to revise. Many of them come from memory or were ideas I hadn’t fully fleshed out yet. I have done a lot of reading and reflection since writing them, and the changes I made (hopefully) reflect that.

Some of the changes I made to the Creative Play pieces were the omission of prompts that broke up the flow and aesthetic of the portfolio. Other changes were with the contents and instructions of the prompt itself, which required changes to how the piece flowed and how the story was presented. *Just As You Are* is an example of extra reflection and exposition that was added. The prompt specifically asked for their omission, so their inclusion was to help the story flow better and add some necessary backstory to help clear things for the reader. *The Last Time She Saw Me* was a piece I had a difficult time finding a voice with when I initially wrote it. It was an idea I liked, but I had a hard time figuring out what I wanted to do with it, how detailed I wanted it to be, and what the theme was. Ultimately, I wanted to try and stay away from exposition (a desire not evident in the piece itself), but the exposition-heavy nature of the piece lends itself to the form of writing and the limitations of time I had. I’m happy with all the changes I made to the pieces.

If I didn’t change anything, it’s because I felt the theme was conveyed well or didn’t require revision to tell the story I was trying to tell. I am very attached to these pieces. They have parts of me in all of them. “Write What you Know” has become a cliché I hear regularly at this point, so I put aspects of myself, even in the poetry and fictional writing assignments. In doing so, I found my voice. I asked my partner what my voice was and what my writing was like.

“Other than really sad? Descriptive.”

As cliché and dramatic as it may sound, sadness is what I know. It’s all I’ve ever known. This is reflected in my initial draft and in the revisions of all my pieces. Again, it helps me process the grief and sadness I feel. Through the tools learned in this class, finding my voice; learning to balance reflection, voice, and exposition; learning how to find a theme; working with constraints to increase creativity; increased sensory inclusive descriptions in writing; and engaged with difficult activities and challenging new and exciting writing prompts, I’ve improved as a writer and have been able to gain confidence in myself as a person. I’ve learned to try new things, to do hard things, and to step out of my comfort zone.

My writings and revisions come from the soul, but I also recognize and appreciate that improvement to self-expression always requires a critical eye. If you have any areas of improvement you see in my writing that I need to make, I would appreciate that. The revisions, while soulful, are far from complete. I appreciate any feedback and have loved improving my writing throughout the semester!

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The Summer I Learned to Cry

“Why would you want to do that?” She asked, genuinely perplexed by the question I had just posed.

“Because it’s summer, and it’d be really cool. I’ve been asking forever, and now it seems like a good excuse.”

She whipped a tear from my sun-kissed cheek.

“You know we don’t have that long, right? It’ll probably have to be torn down when we leave.”

I ignored her plea to my common sense.

“We have scrap wood left over from the deck, and I’ll buy the nails and screws. It’ll be safe and everything. The neighbor showed me how to use a hammer, and there’s the saw and drill in the garage.”

I turned on my puppy eyes as best I could. It had never worked on her before, not coming from me. My older sister used to just yell until she got what she wanted, and my younger brother had my mom at his beck and call.

She sighed. I never asked for much. I think she knew that. I could see the wave of guilt sweep over her face as she looked outside at the yard we’d played in for the last three years.

“Where would you build it? Which tree?”

“The one overlooking the creek. There’s a branch that can hold the main supports, and I’ll build a floor off that.”

“And railing so your brother can play too?” It wasn’t really a question, but she posed it like one.

“Yeah, sure.” I didn’t really want my 9-year-old brother bothering me while I was working. I had to be fast. We didn’t have much longer in this house.

I’d heard a lot of words thrown around when mom was on the phone in her room in the weeks leading up to her telling us. The vents in the house carried sound a lot better than she knew. The three of us would huddle around the closest vent and put our ears to the floor to try to catch a word or two.

“What’s foreclosure?” I asked my sister.

“SHHHH!”

A couple of days later, my mom sat us down in the living room.

“Kids, we can’t stay in this house anymore.”

“Where are we going?” I asked. “Why are we leaving? Can I build a treehouse now?”

6 months: a span of time I wasn’t fully aware of as a twelve-year-old. I kept track of my calendar. I had to build this tree house within 6 months, preferably sooner, so I could enjoy it before we had to leave. I had fantasized about building this treehouse. I bought old newspaper stock from the local paper and drew dozens of designs. I mowed the lawn to save up money. We didn’t live around a lot of people, or I’d have asked them to.

“Can I build a tree house this summer?” I started asking around spring. I knew summer would go by fast.

“Can you afford all that wood?”

“Can’t I use the scrap wood from the deck?” It seemed an obvious solution to this simple problem.

“No, we may need that to finish the gazebo. Your dad is working on it.”

“I don’t think he knows how to do that.”

Mom laughed. “No, I don’t think he does.”

I asked her at least every week until Dad left for good. I tapered off. She had a lot on her mind, and I didn't feel like pestering her.

"I'll think about it," was her response one day after I'd asked on a whim. There was hope! I didn't ask as often after that until she broke the news.

The tree that overlooked the creek was perfect. It was the tallest tree in our yard, had the thickness to support the weight of the treehouse, and it was an oak, so it was like...a billion years old. I climbed that tree to the top at least a dozen times, searching for the perfect spot. Even when my mom said no, I continued to plot and design. When she said yes, I felt a mixture of excitement and dread, though I couldn't put a name to it back then.

The day I started it was hot outside. It was mid-June, and the sun had turned our grass a dull brown. The creek -that was really a drain run-off -had dried up, and the leaves on the oak tree were starting to lose a little color. The heat didn't bother me, and the mosquitoes that hunted around the puddles of standing water didn't shake my dedication. I worked every day on the treehouse, hauling scrap wood in a homemade wheelbarrow.

"You do know that this isn't going to last? It'll be torn down." Mom handed me a ham sandwich and salt and vinegar chips.

"You said that already," I said, amidst bites of my sandwich. "It's just a summer project, Mom. I know we're leaving."

I never learned how to cry as a kid. I never saw my mom do it, and my dad wasn't around enough to show me how. I never learned about the lump that forms in the back of your throat or the stinging that happens as the tears form. I never learned about the drop of your stomach or the quiet whimpers that happen when you're still. I finished the tree house a couple of weeks before we were supposed to leave. I learned to cry in that treehouse. I learned about the lump that forms in the back of your throat and the desperation you feel when you don't want to cry, but the tears come anyway. I sat on the treehouse floor, the summer breeze blowing through my shaggy hair. My legs swung back and forth as tears streamed down my freckled cheek. I looked at the creek that had since filled with water after the warm summer rains. My brother and I used to hunt frogs in that creek. I almost stepped on a garden snake once, when I was coming out of the creek. We used to sneak under the fence that cut through the creek and explore the neighbor's woods. We got in trouble.

I had nothing left to keep me busy, or that could distract me from the feeling of grief of giving up a home I love. I went back to the house a couple of years ago. It's now owned by a doctor and his wife. They have three kids, a swing set in the backyard, a garden like we had, and bikes scattered around the driveway. They're happy, or so I dream. But the treehouse I learned to cry in is gone, the old scrap wood and rusted nails only exist in the bittersweet memory I hold dear.

The Angel of Death

A figure appeared to me once when I was alone in the dark.
I whispered to her:
I need the dark.
I need the empty.
I need the hollow.
Have you come to take me away? I no longer desire this place.
As I stared into her hollow eyes,
she caressed my cheek with her cold finger, brushing away
a tear.
I understand her voice, though her mouth does not move.
I desire her cold embrace.
I desire the eternity of her company.
I yearn for her look of sorrow.
I wish to traverse the walk she's made with so many before.
To desolation.
To the burn of nothing.
She's not here for me, this angel of death.
She was not here for me.
Not your time, little one. Wait a little longer.
Her voice burns my eyes and stings my throat.

Please. Please. Please.

I began to cry out, begging on my knees.
Take me with you! Take me with you! Take me with you.
She said nothing but pointed to the wood from whence she appeared.
A light shone through the clearing far ahead.
It was dim, almost invisible to the eye that had been used to darkness for so long.
There it was,
a candle.
From the darkness, she created my light.
I looked to find her, but she had gone.
Her absence now made the dim light seem brighter.
The light of the candle burned my eyes as its intensity
grew in my mind.
The rays of golden honey filled my eyes with a sweetness that
startled my senses and filled me with dread.
As I stared into the candle, I no longer felt the desire
to join the figure of the night; that angel of death.
To yearn for her was comfort.
Her absence was pain.
In the small hours of the night, the candle would grow dim,
and I would yearn for her quick return. The night would
give way to day, and the candle's soothing light would return.
I need it.

I need the candle.

I need the light.

To hope for the future, to stave off death's grip on my heart.

Yet, in the shadow of the candle, I see her,
waiting for the day when she comes for me.

Just as You Are

The beige building loomed in the distance, towering over me as we walked at a snail's pace. We inched closer and closer. It was overcast and on the verge of raining. A neon sign flickered the name of the building as we neared the entrance. *Weapons and Paraphernalia are strictly prohibited.* That sign tacked on the front door did not bode well. Thunder cracked across the sky like a horror movie, begging us not to go in. My heart was pounding as we walked up the steps to the entrance. A drop of rain tapped on my shoulder. It was a cold February rain.

"What are we doing here, Dad?" I looked at him. His face was cold. He didn't answer. "What's going on?"

He was silent as we entered through the double doors. On the wall opposite the entrance hung a bulletin board with a directory of the various offices. *Dr. Richard Walker, biblical counselor... 2nd-floor office 204.* My dad pushed the elevator button on the adjacent wall. *Ding.* The elevator doors opened, and we stepped inside. The elevator crawled up the straining cables, creaking the whole way to the second floor. We only walked a few doors down before we reached office 204. My dad knocked on the door.

"Please come in!" The man in the office was round, his combover was rough and tangled, and he smelled like Axe Body Spray and regret. "Take a seat. What brings you in today, buddy?"

"Uhhh...I don't know. I guess I'm having problems with anger. I don't know why. Hormones, I guess."

He laughed, and his belly jiggled. "Well, it's normal for someone your age to be feeling afraid of new and complicated emotions. God gives us those emotions, you know?"

He motioned to an unopened can of Diet Coke on the side table next to him. A giant print bible was open next to the can.

"Your emotions are like this can of Coke." He grabbed the can and shook it vigorously. "Would you like to open this can?"

"Not really."

"Why?"

"It'll explode." I sank deeper into the leather chair.

"Exactly! You need an outlet for your emotions. If you keep them bottled up for too long, you'll explode and get angry. What kind of emotions are you feeling? Other than anger."

"Anger isn't the only reason we're here," My dad interrupted. His voice was a little shaky. He reached into his pocket and produced a folded piece of paper, handing it to the man.

"What's that?" I asked. My heartbeat spiked, and my palms started to sweat. Dr. Walker unfolded the paper. His eyebrows lifted as his eyes scanned this elusive mystery page.

“What is it?” I repeated.

“Hmmm. I see.” He said, sliding his glasses down his nose. He put the piece of paper down and leered at me. “Young man, God created each of us in his image. He loves each of us and has special plans for us.”

“What are you talking about?” I started picking at my thumb fingernail, scraping at the skin until it hurt.

“Going against God’s design is a sin. We all have desires, sure. But acting or continuing to ruminate on these thoughts is an abomination. God is perfect, and his creation is exactly how He wants it to be. How long have you wanted to be a woman?”

“What?” Blood trickled down my thumbnail. No one noticed.

“You’re a man, son. God created you that way. You can’t change that, no matter how hard you want to. God made you just the way you are. You have to be grateful and accept that his design is perfect.”

I looked at my dad as a tear streamed down my face. He stared straight ahead, ignoring my pleas for help.

“How long have you wanted to be a woman?”

I’ve always known I was different. That difference was unnamed and scary. I was told in many different ways by different people that uniqueness was not tolerated, unacceptable, and not “Christian.

“We’re all created in the image of God,” my bible-thumping pastor would often recall.

Never mind the fact that God doesn’t have shape or form in a corporeal sense. That wasn’t ever stated. We only went to a few other “therapy” sessions after that. I didn’t draw anymore. Those drawings were a sanctuary for me, a way for me to express myself externally in some way. It made me feel less...inhuman. I’d look in the mirror as I drew to copy my facial features and try for hours to emulate different feminine outfits. It never looked natural or realistic, but I didn’t care. Seeing myself depicted (even in poorly drawn outfits) made my stomach churn and my heart rate spike. It was euphoric, a word I was unfamiliar with and wouldn’t be until my early twenties.

My dad has since forgotten that he put me through conversion therapy. He’s accepting of my personhood, as much as an absent father can be. He often relates how he’s questioned his identity through the years, so I’ll chalk that up to his own repression and continuation of generational trauma. I forgot that’s something that happened to me until I started unpacking my childhood in legitimate therapy. Memories flood my brain at random times and not in chronological order. I bought a shirt at Goodwill the other day that triggered a memory of times I would sneak into my mom’s room to try on her clothes. I wore a shirt like the one I have now. It made me feel pretty then; it makes me feel pretty now. When I doubt myself as a trans person and wonder if I’m “making it all up” (despite being over a year on HRT at this point), I think

back to these moments; moments when, despite religious parents telling me I was wrong, disgusting, and foul; despite growing up in a cult that forced uniformity and unilateral ideology; despite having gone through conversion therapy, the feeling that I'm different, beautiful, and worthy of the space I occupy has persisted.

I hope by being alive through all that, by being myself and persisting in my self-advocation, I can also be an advocate for others, closeted or not. I hope that a child like myself, repressed and confused, sees me and believes that a better life of self-love and hope is possible, and they are worthy of that hope. When I get sad, I hold on to that. When I think about how awful the journey was to get here, I hold on to that. When I see headlines of another bill outlawing my existence being passed, I hold on to that. When I go to pick up my meds and my insurance doesn't cover them, I hold on to that. When my labs cost twice what they used to, I hold on to that. My existence through repression and oppression is resistance. The best thing I can do to advocate for others is to live through the oppression. I hold on to that.

I Guess It Was My Fault

He'd been pretty distant lately, so it shouldn't have been a surprise. Somehow, it still was. My heart sank into my stomach, and my hands started shaking as the weight of what he told me truly began to process. I replayed his words over and over again to make sure I'd understood; maybe I had misheard. No. He said the words. They had been spoken into existence, forever ringing in my ears. They still do.

"Your mother has decided that I'm no longer welcome in this house, and I have to leave."

My dad pulled each of my siblings and me aside to deliver the news individually. What does this mean? Would he never be back? Why did he have to leave? Would we still see him? We used to go walking after school. Sometimes we'd talk, and sometimes we were silent. We used to have family baseball games in the backyard. He made cinnamon toast in the oven before church on Sundays. I can't pinpoint an exact time when these things stopped happening, but it was after my brother was born. In the months following, I chalked it up to him being busy taking care of the baby, but he didn't do much in that department, either. It was just wishful thinking at that point, trying to justify or excuse his continued absence. Even when he was present, he wasn't *present*.

We used to go to the creek by our house every day during the summer, looking for crawdads or arrowheads. I was told our house was built on an old Native American reserve. I think my dad made that up, though.

"Can we keep the crawdads?" I asked my dad. He was sitting on a rock, sunbathing.

"No."

"Why not?" I asked, stomping my foot on the ground. The crawdad I had carefully pinched between my fingers was wiggling, trying to pinch me himself. In retrospect, it was really small. Not big enough to do anything with. I think I wanted a pet.

"It belongs to the creek."

That was fair, I guess. As the summer turned into fall and school came back into session, we went to the creek less and less. I don't remember the last time we went to the creek, or the last time I held a squirming, pinching crawdad; I don't remember the last time my mom and dad laughed in the kitchen while making brownies. We used to do that stuff a lot. I don't remember when we stopped or when it started to fade out. My dad used to kiss my mom a lot. He used to grab her and swing her around the living room while listening to old records from their childhood. He used to pinch her butt when she was making dinner. Then he didn't anymore. I can't even remember the last time he did.

Divorce constantly played in my mind every time my parents would fight. Then they didn't anymore. Maybe the baby helped smooth things over, but as a twelve-year-old, I couldn't process what all that meant or how the pieces fit together. Why would my mom tell him to leave? What did he do?

"How long will you be gone?" I asked, knowing in my soul that he wouldn't be back. Not truly.

“I don’t know.”

Told ya.

My mom and I went on a walk the next day, passing by the creek my dad would take us to. The retainer wall held mounds of rocks that my brother and I used to skip, trying to outdo my dad. We never did.

“How are ya’ holding up?”

“Fine.” I didn’t know how to process how I was feeling. What was I feeling? Anger? Guilt? Betrayal? Confusion? A mixture of all of them. How would I tell my mom that? How could I express the myriad emotions I was feeling all at once and constantly? I couldn’t. She wouldn’t understand. *Fine*. I was fine.

“You know I love you, right?” She asked. She didn’t look at me. She looked straight ahead while I looked up at her. “It’s not your fault. When my dad left, I felt like it was my fault.”

“This *is* your fault, you bitch! You drove him out of the house! How could you?” How good it would feel to yell those words to her, words that would be left unsaid. How cathartic the release of emotion. But I couldn’t be angry at her. As far as parents go, she wasn’t a great one. Neither was my dad. How could I be angry at them? My mom’s dad was a sex addict, and my dad’s dad was an adulterous pastor. It wasn’t their fault. That meant it had to be mine. It was easier to blame myself, I guess. I wasn’t a good enough kid. I thought that for a long time.

The Last Time She Saw Me:

She'd never been to a funeral before. Mine was a cinematic cliché. Rain poured off black umbrellas onto freshly dug grave dirt. Thunder echoed in the clouds, and a bolt of lightning illuminated them. A collared priest recited mundane scripture no one understood or cared about. My grandpa was thinking about whether he'd left the stove on, and my mom was thinking about the babysitter, high on her couch at home. My mom was only an ally cause she read an article about how trans people kill themselves without familial support. We never had a close relationship, even when I thought I was a dude. She took me to get my nails done on my birthday and to get my labs done when Lizzie couldn't. She had a hard time with the pronouns, and the name change wasn't something she tried hard to update in her mind.

"Yea though I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death..." A cigarette butt flicked onto the ground and sizzled out. Damn, Aunt Juddy was seven months clean and had NA tomorrow. Judy was a racist, so maybe she deserved the addicted lung damage.

"Now, Mrs. Peterson has a few remarks to close out today's service."

Mom wiped away a few fake tears and stepped adjacent to Father Adam.

"Thank you to all the friends, family, and loved ones who made it out to today's beautiful service," she glanced at Lizzie's tear-stained face. She shouldn't have worn mascara. When we lived together, she insisted on dressing and getting 'dolloed' up for every little occasion. I'd hoped my funeral would be the exception, but her effort meant a lot.

"You're the 'doll', you should be getting more...dolloed up," she said as we were getting ready for date night. We tried to do it monthly, just to keep the "spark" between us. We were too queer to let that happen, but regardless, we enjoyed the excuse to eat out.

My mom continued, "Cameron...shit...Uh, Abby...sorry...was a kind soul."

Great recovery, mom. She chuckled. Lizzie rolled her eyes and continued intermittently sobbing. Not a great first funeral, if there were such a thing. She was thinking about the last time she saw me.

"What do you think death is like?" I asked as we lay on the couch. Her head was on my chest as I was stroking her long, soft hair. She smelled like vanilla and weed. Saying it out loud, it doesn't sound like a great combination, but it was uniquely her. I loved that about her. She wore clothes that didn't match but still looked good on her. She sang in the shower like an angel, but got embarrassed when I listened. Her freckles got bright red when she was angry, but she refused to yell. I wished she would sometimes.

"What the hell, Abby?" She laughed. "I'm not stoned enough for that high thought."

I chuckled nervously, tickling from her forehead to her nose. "Sorry."

"Why do you ask?" She sat up and looked at me. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. The pause was too long. Dammit. She put a hand on my arm and kissed me gently. She

nestled into my chest, wrapping both arms around me, and we watched our show in silence. She tightened her grip into a hug now and then and popped up for a kiss at the end of each episode. She made me happy. She made me want to live a while longer. Was that the last time she saw me?

No.

My funeral was the last time you saw me. You walked up to my casket with unease. Even with makeup, I was pale, a different person than you were used to, unrecognizable as the hot mess you once loved...still loved. How I looked reminded her of when I started Wellbutrin and Lexapro. I didn't want to die anymore, but life was numb, a void of nothingness that stretched on for eternity.

"Why don't you start painting again?" You asked me. We sat on the couch a lot when I was on meds. I didn't feel like doing much. Anhedonia is one of my favorite words. The reduced desire to do things normally found pleasurable or interesting. A side effect of the medication. Was it worth it? I didn't think so. I stopped about six months after taking them. Feeling like *The Walking Dead* was worse than living with depression. God, that shit was awful. You knew it was too. You did everything you could to try to comfort me. It didn't matter.

You reached into my casket and lifted my crossed arms. A tear dropped onto my wrist as you returned the letter I left you on the day it happened.

Lizzie,

I love you. You did enough. You are enough. It's not your fault. The pain of waking up was made a little sweeter when I turned over and saw your face. The honey of your laughter curbed the hope of death. Your hugs and soft kisses were like dams that levied the ideation and constant numbing of emotions other than sorrow and fear. You'll try to convince yourself it's your fault. It's not. Go be happy. Be happy and remember me when you sleep.

Abby.

I wish I could take away that memory. I wish I could replace it with the times we cuddled on your shitty couch or kissed under the willow tree in your parents' yard. I wish I could isolate the good memories, like when I came out to you, and you hugged me, did my makeup, and told me I was pretty. I wish you could only see the good memories. When you think of me, don't think of the last time you saw me.