

## Final Creative Writing Portfolio

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I wake up, and I'm late. Class began thirty-two minutes ago.

I wake up again. I realize now that I was actually not awake before, much to my chagrin. I'm growing increasingly sick of that. That fake waking up thing. It's awful. Plus, at this point, I'm completely and totally dizzy, and I haven't even sat up yet.

I look at the wall next to me carefully, and begin my near-daily song and dance. If each little groove and fleck of popcorning is exactly where it should be, dancing off the metal edge of my lofted bed, then I'm real. I'm awake, alive, and my responsibilities for the day are going to march forward. The realization and its associated dread washes over me as I find each and every divot right in their usual spots with my meticulous gaze. *So I am awake*, I think. *Great*.

I stir and look at my phone, hoping that the clock is on my side. It is. I'm not late for anything. In fact, I'm up early. But my skin still leaves sticky gleams of nervous sweat on the screen. I suddenly notice that my heart is beating awfully fast – I'm frightened, I realize. I'm still convinced that I'm not awake, or that the screen is lying to me, and I also think I might've gotten a sunburn in my sleep. My face is hot and tender. I think I dreamt about mowing the lawn. I bring my hands up to my cheeks to make sure they're still there – they're hot, but intact.

I breathe a sigh of relief, and count to three in my head. A few times, for good measure. Then a few more times. Then I decide that I probably shouldn't get out of bed until 7:45. Odd numbers are safer like that, but only threes and fives. No one would get out of bed on a seven or nine.

As I sit, I realize that I don't remember falling asleep. Really, I never remember falling asleep. And for that matter, I don't know if anyone actually remembers falling asleep. The concept seems so foreign to me. Drifting off into dreamland, and all that nonsense. It seems more to me that I merely teleport from consciousness to unconsciousness, then fight tooth and nail to escape it every single morning.

For some reason, it's always hard to wake up. But not in an ordinary “want-to-smash-the-alarm-clock-and-roll-over” way. More like I have to wiggle my fingers to

wake up my hands and bring them up to my face to pry my eyes open. Sometimes, on even more exciting days, I wake up screaming. Today I woke up 3 times before I actually woke up, and I couldn't begin to say which ones were real and actually, for that matter, I couldn't begin to say if any of them were.

I think it's my meds. They silence and numb my brain so badly that I get stuck in it sometimes. Everything gets so slow and mucky up there. I often feel like I'm trudging through molasses inside of my own consciousness, and never is there a stronger current than when I'm trying to wake up.

But at least the repeating thoughts are quieter in my waking hours.

One, two, three. I tap my toes on the rough carpet as my feet dangle off the side of my bed. One, two, three. The other.

As I stand, I visualize my feet being torn from their sockets. And boy, it hurts. I fall. There I am, helplessly laying on the floor as my legs rip themselves to shreds. I'm bleeding mercilessly and for some reason I don't have lungs to shout from. *No one will find me here.*

I don't know what would happen if I didn't tap my toes before I got out of bed, but I have to imagine it's something like that. I like being able to walk and I don't want to get hurt, so I tap my toes every day before I get out of bed. 3 times. Each.

It's an innocent little habit, like how I bite my tongue so hard it leaves little dimples whenever I'm in church. It's so I don't blurt anything out. And it's not like I *want* to blurt something out, but it's always possible that I might accidentally, so I bite my tongue. If I feel my teeth come away from my tongue, I'll know something is wrong. And if I taste pennies, I'll know I'm doing my job well.

I probably don't have to physically bite my tongue to restrain myself from shouting. But my brain gets so loud it makes my eardrums hurt if I don't, screaming at me that I'm GOING to shout, and that the only way to prevent it is to physically prevent it from happening.

Sometimes I worry that if I stare into darkness too long or listen to silence for too long something will appear there. It's like I'm hardwired to be fearful. Like a deer, or a mouse, or something. I'm embarrassed and annoyed by it. I'm not a coward. I do hard things all the time. And yet, there I sit in my bed, hesitant to leave it until the clock says a certain number. I mean, how am I going to let the number five permit me to start my day?"

“I see,” the man sitting across from her says, swinging one of his legs over the other.

Silence fills the air, and small goosebumps raise on the girl's arms. Her words flew out of her mouth with such a speed, so quickly she forgot she was even talking. At this moment, somehow within the blink of an eye, the room becomes very cold.

“If... if that makes any sense, you know,” The girl qualifies hesitantly. Her words hang in the air for a moment, but disappear into the silence quickly. It's quiet again, and it's pressing into her ears with an unbearable force. Her skin is on fire, and suddenly her skull feels like it's too tight for her brain.

“Have you ever tried writing to avoid these compulsions?” The man says. He circled something on his notepad. “To get the obsessions out of your head, I mean, in a way that's more productive. I remember you saying you like to write.”

“Yes.”

”And how did that work for you?”

”It either didn't, or it sort of turned into a compulsion itself.”

“Right, that's the tricky bit,” he says, repositioning in his chair and placing the notebook on his lap. She sees a lot of little red marks and circles on the page. She wonders if he's dealt with someone like her before. “It's all about intention.”

“Right,” she says, mustering assuredness. As far as she can tell, she sold it pretty well.

“You have to come at these coping skills with the knowledge that they're functionally distractions, at least until you essentially prove to yourself you're alright without your

compulsions. You just have to ignore the obsessions for long enough. They'll go away. And you can write about them in the meantime."

Somehow, she doesn't believe him.

"Okay."

—

The pen strikes the surface of the paper before her and gushes dark ink. Her hand instinctively retreats. She hates these pens, and what's worse is that she knows that she hates them but she bought a pack anyway because they're expensive and look cool, all pinched between her fingers and all steel and black. She knows the ink bled through, but tries not to care.

### *Therapy Homework*

The pen flicks ink haphazardly and the words are fuzzier than she'd like them to be. She looks over her shoulder and sees her boyfriend lounging on the tiny dorm bed, lofted just a little too high for comfort. It gives her solace that he's here. She doesn't like to do these weird psychoanalysis things alone.

In elementary and middle school, I used to write notes on my hands. Almost every day I'd hop into my mom's car at 4pm with my entire forearm covered in gel pen ink, and almost every night she'd tell me to go scrub it off in the shower until my skin burned red. My friends would warn me about ink poisoning, and I'd assure them that ink was obviously only poisonous if you ate it. Seems a little silly in retrospect, but what did I know?

My family would ask why I wrote on my hands instead of a notebook or something. I knew why, but could never put words to it until I grew older. These thoughts and ideas were loud – too

loud, and they still are. They thrash around in a lap pool in my brain, throwing cold blue water onto everything in my everyday life until I excise them in a way that is careful and sure. Notebooks simply wouldn't do it – they towed the line of permanence and impermanence in a way that was bungled. If I wrote it down, it was there on that piece of paper forever. The thought could never vanish. That was a problem because, a lot of the time, these thoughts were things I really, really, really didn't want to remember. Plus, I could end up losing the notebook, or forgetting it somewhere, or someone could take it – that was unthinkable.

My hand, though, was perfect. It was on my literal person, so I had all the control I so desperately wanted. I couldn't leave it anywhere, and I couldn't forget it, and at the end of the day when I wanted it gone forever, I could vanquish it into the sewer system, transporting it from the watery lap pool in my brain to the swirling drain below me.

All these skin scrawlings eventually ended up intermingled with my green apple shampoo, sent to a place I'd never see again. With them gone, it no longer felt like the margins of my brain were pressing up against the inside of my skull with thoughts and thoughts and thoughts. No; here in my shower, I could wash them away. I often wished I could do the same to my brain itself – take a wet sponge and just scrub.

That's not quite right, is it? Does that make any sense?

She flips the page and sees the big ball of black ink that, yes, indeed, bled through.

*I should just use a pencil, she thinks. I always think that when I'm writing - why don't I just use a pencil? Then I can get rid of what's ugly or meaningless or doesn't make sense. When I mull and second guess my words I don't have to just simply press on or scratch them out (forever leaving an inky stain that angers me every time I look at it and really, why do I bother handwriting anything anymore when I know I have to tweak and stare at every word I write no matter how confident I am in the premise, the idea or anything else?)*

But the pen feels better in her hand. It's smooth and doesn't catch on the paper, snapping the cheap resin led that looks nice on the page but is brittle as the tips of her constantly chewed

nails. *God, they're bad. Ugly and unpainted – it makes me feel naked, but I can't type with press-ons. Useless. I feel useless. I am useless. Useless. Useless.*

But for some reason, the pen gives her something to stand on. It always has, so she keeps using it, and she keeps writing, as that sticky word – “useless” – keeps playing in the background.

“Oh my god,” a friend titters as I shove another loose piece of paper into my backpack, “You're triggering my OCD so bad right now.”

I pause, grab the paper back from its void and straighten it out, using the edge of my desk to flatten it. “Sorry,” I say with a smile.

“How do you even find things in there?”

“I don't know,” I say back, grabbing a folder from the bigger pocket of my bag. I tuck the paper into the pocket gently, as if I'm performing some time honored ritual, one foreign to me. “I guess my brain just remembers where they are. Like, I can picture the inside of my bag, you know? And I always know where my stuff is in there.”

“Oh, I see,” she laughs, “There's a method to your madness.”

A gong sounds in my chest and the reverberations jitter through my whole body. “Yeah, I guess so,” I reply, a newfound label of “mad” stitching itself to the inside of my heart.

She slings her new Duluth Pack bag onto her shoulders. And she walks out the door. And through her opaque bag I can tell that every handout, worksheet and graded exam is inside a plastic, 3 pronged pocket folder.

She drops the pen and squints at the words. *Will he know I embellished this to make my point stronger? If he knows, will it matter? So long as my intent is clear and beautifully drawn out, does it matter what really happened?*

*Or does something come alive at my word? Does a light come on in my head of a memory that wasn't, not truly, not wholly itself?*

*What happened? Why can't I remember? Why do I remember the feeling, the burn, but not the words?*

She pauses and thinks for a few moments. After milling internally, ruminating on her confusion and worry, she continues writing.

Whenever there were reminders etched between my knuckles, my friends would sometimes criticize my bad memory. "You can't just remember that you have math homework due tomorrow?" They'd ridicule lightly over Lunchables and apple juice. And I'd laugh too, and shrug my shoulders.

That wasn't the truth at all. The truth was that my memory was *too* good. It was relentless. My brain was sticky. So, so sticky. And writing notes down on my hand was the peanut butter that got wads of thought unstuck from between the pink wrinkles inside my head. It gave my brain permission to let go. I'd remember, I'd think. Now I'd remember. I didn't have to worry anymore.

Wads of thought. *Yes, that's good. It's tangible – it's relatable. I'm not lost or deranged, just... sick.* Sick? An annoying word. A burdensome word.

A word a therapist likes to use – "not broken, just sick."

Sick, even if it's ordinary? Even if it's always, and always has been, always will be? Sick does not imply permanence. Unless it's fatal.

Annoying. Very annoying. No good word. Wish there was a word for wrong but not bad. *But no such word exists because – guess what? – being wrong is bad. Allegedly. According to this pill bottle and that guy who sits in a chair across from me telling me all the things we need to work together to fix.*

She picks up the pen again.

Wads.

Wads

Wads

Wads

Wads

Wads of thought

Wads of thought

Stuck

Stuck

Stuck.

STUCK.

STUCK

My head

My head

My head

The pen pushes through the paper and sprays dark, viscous ink across the page and onto the back of her hand. It's dark and runny and starts meandering through the small channels in her skin, making little patterns as they go. It's almost cute, so small, so relentless.

*I can feel tears coming to my eyes.*

*Why now?*

—

Who am I?

My head hurts a little.

What happened?

I must've gotten lost in my writing.

I'm in my room, right?

And he's here. His shoes are at the door.

—

I feel a hand on my shoulder.

“What’re you working on?”

It would ordinarily irritate the hell out of me, but in my craze I’m calmed by this voice — it’s sweet and earnest and makes no apology for hanging in the air around me. I relax my shoulders and flatten my voice as much as I can: “Homework for therapy. It’s stupid. Well, not stupid, just... I don’t know. Stupid, I guess.”

“I’m proud of you, sweetheart,” the voice volleys back. “Even if it’s difficult. Actually, especially if it’s difficult.”

I can tell he’s eyeing the big spray of ink I just shot across the page and my fingers, and I assess that that’s probably why he checked in on me. I glance back down and realize it looks like a wide-ruled warzone down there. I can’t blame him for being a little worried. Unlike me, he’s relatively “normal.”

“It’s whatever, honestly,” I say with a short laugh. “It’s not like I’m curing cancer.”

“No, but you’re working towards curing yourself,” He says, sitting next to me. “And that counts for something.”

I’m not sure what he means. But I smile and try to continue writing.

I can’t, though. My attention is pulled. I remove my now nearly dried up pen from my work, and I notice he is still sitting next to me. He’s watching something on his phone, but his hand is resting on the crook of my arm.

He is not here to judge, nor to watch. He is here simply to let me know he is here. He is exactly what I need — not someone to rescue me or sweep me out of my deluded, rocky state of mind. He is just here, for no other reason than he’d like to be and he knows that I like him here.

And suddenly, what rushes into me is the fact that, when I first met this boy — sporty and loud but awkward as hell; kind as it gets with the sweetest face you’ve ever seen, almost like a puppy, a fresh one, maybe a lab or a retriever or something — I had no idea the hand he’d have in helping me out of such a depraved state of being.

Suddenly, I'm taken back somewhere – a place where I knew I was safe, with or without my arbitrary rulings and mandates and patterns and thoughts. A cold night in April. One where I wasn't scared of the dark.

*“I think you're too hard on yourself,” he says, a seriousness in his voice that I'd never heard before. “I want to be a rock for you. We all do.”*

*“That's so sweet,” I say, my voice higher than I imagined it. “I'm sorry for being such a wreck. I'm just a little overwhelmed.”*

*“Don't apologize,” He says with a smile. And through nothing but that smile, I can tell that he means it. “We all care about you.”*

*I giggle. “Even when I'm crazy?”*

*He smiles. “We love you, boss. You make it easy.”*

*A flush approaches my cheeks, and for one moment in all time and space I feel that word, the old fashioned one: bashful. Applied to nothing in the world but me in the driver's seat with my window rolled down staring at the cutest boy I've ever seen — and also, a fictional dwarf from Snow White.*

*He walks away after our conversation ends and I scream to myself in my car. A good scream. A hearty one that leaves me with a shaky smile. Am I in love? No. Dammit. Maybe. But he said it first. The “L” word, I mean. That's not my fault.*

Meeting this guy was like drinking water for the first time. Imagine going 20 years without drinking water, only to be met with a perfectly chilled glass, metal straw, and that crunchy, crispy ice you can only get in bags from the grocery store. Plus, a squeeze of lemon. Can you imagine the potency? The will to keep going?

Can you imagine how it would be to feel so safe, so secure, that the life-defining rules you've lived by for your entire existence feel silly, redundant, and self-destructive?

Or, to humor me, imagine going 18 years without feeling the warm summer sun on your face. Without feeling truly alive, free, careless and stupid and annoying in the best ways possible. Can you imagine it? Can you imagine your life being so restricted, so bound that it takes 18 years to see the sun? That it takes you 18 years to meet YOUR sun?

*"Hey, we should go to the beach!" She says, a glint of something new in her eye. "Or maybe the boardwalk? It's so sunny out."*

*"Orientation just ended!" I laugh. "Aren't you tired?"*

*"Not enough to sit around and do nothing," she responded. She was so sure. She continued, "Come on. Your car or mine?"*

*I want to go back to my dorm to play video games and cry after such an overwhelming day, but I find myself in a choiceless position.*

*She must be so strong. I only met her a few days ago, but I can already tell. I'm envious, but not in a way that upsets me – maybe there's a better word for it. I'm motivated. I have to meet her level. Really, I want to meet her level.*

*I have to try.*

*"You're so right," I say, "it would be stupid to waste such a beautiful night! Let's take my car. I just filled my gas tank."*

*"Okay, Moneybags!"*

You stifle your desires and dreams with desk lamps and LEDs and other useless and harsh sources of light, ones that simply aren't good for you and enable these rules and strictures, but you hope deep down in a small, dark place that someday there will be something more. You guard those desk lamps jealously — they're all you've got — but once you see the sun life is never, ever the same.

Can you imagine the will? Can you imagine the insatiable desire, the primal need to get better? To become one with yourself, aligned and true?

The sun, be it a celestial body or a funny girl you met at college orientation, is a guidepost. It's something to live up to. It's a reason to be more, to want more, to push and push and push and find the will to do as *she* does. To live freely and wholly, just like *her*.

It's a reason to give up the rules.

There's the sea foam on the edge of the ocean (a guy you and your friends approached about his tee-shirt on the first day of school) standing as another guidepoint, too.

*We're both holding back tears but masking it very well with really bad jokes and overly-dyed hair. We think so, at least.*

*"I'm sorry you feel like shit," I manage, beyond the jokes and nothingness we were spewing. "It sucks. I'm glad you're back, though. I missed you."*

*"I'm sorry YOU feel like shit," he responds. "Maybe next time we can go on that 'vacation' together. You'd probably like it there. The nurses are really nice."*

*I laugh a little, but I know he means it. I cover up my forearms with my sweater. So does he. "We're both awfully sorry, huh?" I say.*

*"Yeah," he says decidedly. He pulls a knee up to his chest. "And awfully shitty. But we'd be way too cool if God made us mentally stable, happy, AND hot."*

*I chuckle heartily. “You’re probably right,” I say, hand fiddling through my purse. “We do tend to ask for too much, don’t we?”*

*I find my phone. 11:34pm. Far past my bedtime, but I’m in no rush to get back to my cold, dark, solitary room.*

The sea foam laps and bubbles and is always different – but it’s always there. Just like me, it can be ever-changing, struggling against a current and sometimes unstable, but it’s always, always, always there. Consistency and commiseration – these attributes make for excellent pals. Knowing that life is hard but that life is never solitary gives strength to everything I do, and watching something as beautiful as sea foam ebb and flow and struggle and shine lets me know I have it in me, too, that I can struggle and shine, too, no matter how much I think I can’t.

There’s also the house finch perched on a perfect oak branch (the girl you met before college started but only because she was brave enough to DM you first on instagram).

*“Thank you so much for being there for me,” The girl across from me says, tears filling her eyes. I have no earthly idea what she means. I’m barely here for myself.*

*“Of course,” I say with a small chuckle. I place a hand on her shoulder and she sighs.*

*“You just mean so much to me,” She replies, wiping her cheeks. “All of you guys do. You’re just so nice. And so funny. And I love you.”*

*I still don’t follow. Me? Mean so much? “Of course,” I say, “I love you too.”*

*We hug and I see a place for me — exact and finite. I am not only me. I am a friend, a neighbor, a daughter, a woman, a person, a power.*

When the house finch tweets, I know I am not alone. When I spread birdseed and show kindness, I know I can help it fly. The fulfillment of watching a house finch grow stronger and

greater with each seed and moment is enough to want to keep going in itself. I am more than a debilitating mental illness – I am a force who can weather her own storm, and also dole out umbrellas. I am a part of something greater, and I watch the effects of this reality every day.

Beyond the water, the sun, the sea foam and the house finch, there's an old, distant, dusty memory of someplace warmer, someplace kinder, before everything got so bleak (a cousin re-intertwined with your life, the one you felt was more like a brother than anything else.)

*"I got it," he says at the bar. "It's your 21st!"*

*I can barely hear him over the roar of the speakers. "You what?"*

*"I'll get your tab," he says louder, this time with a smile and an eyebrow raise. "Don't go too crazy, now."*

*His hand extends to tap the card reader.*

*In his eyes I see a man who grew away from me. Who changed.*

*But in his eyes I also see a boy who was silly, and fun, and always included me. Who slowed down on walks and held my hand on stairs to make sure I didn't fall.*

*And through my blurred state of mind, I think I see that boy more than I see that man.*

*The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb, but I guess the water of the womb isn't too thin either.*

*We all heal ourselves back together, it seems.*

In the past, there is pain. But so too in the past is there potential for the present. For the future. My present is gone without a sense of hope in the past. It doesn't exist. The happiness I

feel today would be dust in the wind had I not fought yesterday. Or the day before. Or last year. Or three years ago. Or five years ago. Finding the joy of yesterday can only help the joy of today. The will of today.

The sense of spite against this hellish mental illness only grows with each happiness I remember. I will overcome it. How can I not? With all this wind under my wings, it's infallible.

In my glass of water, I found safety and comfort. In the shining sun, I found growth and development. In the fresh sea foam, I found commiseration and strength. In the finches on the tree branch, I found a joyful, communal purpose. And in yesterday, I found hope, healing, and a rekindling of my past.

I keep finding these touchstones here and there and as they light up I remember. I remember what it is to be alive. I remember what it is to heal. I remember *why* I'm healing.

I remember what it is to steal a kiss from a boy I've liked for months. To travel rolling hills and isles with my closest friend. To spill my closest, darkest secrets in a rush of passion. To be a shoulder to lean on and to lean on a shoulder myself. To remember the good old days and find them again, today. To be. To be, without remorse, without penalty, without tapping my toes three times every time I get up in the morning.

Off come my bindings. I am no more than me, and I am perfectly happy with that.