

I've got this thing – an itch, you might call it, or maybe a bug, or some other pesky nuisance – that insists that I must draw, sculpt, thread, write. Create, in some capacity or another. I'm guessing you've got your own form of itch, too. Most people do.

The way mine manifests is like a sunburn. It pulses, dull but ever-present. Hours spent chipping away at housework or clocking in for shifts at work act like a stiff fabric chafing against the raw, burnt skin. It's manageable, tolerable, and, most of all, necessary, but leaves me feeling raw, empty, and tired. Creating, especially writing, is like an aloe vera salve, cooling and hushing the irritated skin. Every sentence is another small pump of aftersun cream smeared on a blistering shoulder and peeling nose; each paragraph is a refreshing dip in shocking cold water.

Maybe that's a stretch. Or maybe you know exactly how I feel. My point is that it's not some deep seated ambition and drive that my friends and family see when I'm scrawling in my notebook or hastily working through three ring binders filled with loose leaf paper. It's impulse. It's a need, one which lives deep within me.

I was raised by two theatre majors who'd spent a decade working as actors professionally before I came around. They forked over their liberating, creative careers to the past and quickly settled into managerial and administrative corporate positions to keep the lights on and put food on the table. After all, it wasn't just two artists anymore, it was two artists and one small, loud, hungry artist who couldn't pull her weight yet.

One day I learned that my dad had forfeited going to grad school for directing and moving to L.A. for the sake of a slow-paced family life. When I learned this, something changed in me. Not only did I feel immense guilt for a decision I had no part in, but I also realized a truth that had been steadily burning into me through no one's fault but circumstance: art was something you could love, but not something you could live on. Not stably, at least. No, art and creation as a whole was something that you graciously set aside when responsibility came knocking at the door. Something that was play, and never work. And I knew that work came first.

I was a great student throughout all of my childhood. Really, an excellent one. My dad and I used to go out to breakfast every weekend, and as each week progressed I'd tell him a new career I wanted to pursue at my teachers' encouragement. Maybe I'd be a judge, because I loved school and that took a lot of it. Or maybe I wanted to be an engineer, because that's what all the smart people do, and Mrs. Anderson thought I was pretty gifted at it last quarter. Or better yet, maybe I'd be an actor, just like my mom and dad.

"Well, that's an option," my dad would say through a smile. "But you're really smart. You've got all the options in the world."

All the options in the world. I could pick any door and walk through it. And as I scored well on standardized tests and worked my way through college classes in high school, I maintained this ability to forge my own destiny. Money could be no problem. I could shoot for the moon, or higher – I just had to focus. But it's really hard to focus when you still have this red-hot need to *make* living under every pore of your body.

As I worked each of these options over in my mind, I saw neat and tidy futures with predictable paychecks and graduate programs. I know that I could have walked through any of

them and done well, but every time I tried to picture myself stepping through any of those doors, I felt the sudden heat rise again. I kept getting the distinct and familiar sense that I'd be living a life that looked perfect on paper, but didn't quite sit right under my skin.

All the doors were open, but I had the freedom to choose whichever one I wanted. I thought having all the options meant I had to pick whichever one justified my test scores and made my parents' sacrifices worth it. But maybe it just meant I had the option to listen to the nagging, burning itch under my skin, the one begging me with every fibre to create, create, create.

I have the option to choose for myself the thing that keeps me whole - writing. So I do. Whether it's research papers or fiction books, I write to keep from burning up inside. Not because it is practical or impressive or because it guarantees anything at all. I do it because it's balm to my soul and it makes anything else tolerable.

That's why I write.