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On Writing

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On Writing

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Author Bio

Hannah Sawyer is one of those assholes who gets to the library before everyone else and takes the best table and leaves her stuff there all day, but is never actually there. She is also a junior English major.

ON WRITING

HANNAH SAWYER

1. Natural Selection

The unnatural feeling of a blindfold stifles my eyes. I want to open them, but the tightness of the covering prevents movement, forcing uniform darkness upon me. Maybe I need my eyes to breathe as well because I'm having trouble filling my nose and mouth with air, even though they remain uncovered. But, perhaps it's just the fear that's constricting my intake—fear at the thought that I sit blindfolded and tied to a tree in the middle of the forest. There is no time for this. I must escape.

The rope prickles against my bare arms. If only I had long sleeves. All I want to do is tilt my head backward. The unyielding angle of the tree has forced my neck muscles into an unnaturally straight position. They are quickly working themselves into a knot. If I could just tilt my head backwards, I might be able to think. The outline of my Swiss army knife presses itself urgently against me in my back pocket.

*

The things I write escape me. Reading the words I put down on the page is like hearing my own voice speaking in a heavy Russian accent. “Zis” instead of “this.” The words are changed somehow, laid distinctly bare on the page, and I see amongst them a desperate desire to be understood. I am that girl just off the boat struggling to remember how to ask for *spasite* in English. Do I say help, or aid, or assistance? Which one is it? I hate the neediness in my tone, the way I plead with my readers to grasp the deeper meaning of my words.

It's so different from the insinuation I use, the deception I practice in conversation, that it makes me uneasy. I can imply, exaggerate, lie when I speak. My mom called one Sunday morning as I lay in bed. When she asked what I was doing, I told her that I was just on my way out of the apartment. I had no reason to lie to her. Whether I was speaking to her from under the covers or as I walked out the door made little difference. I did because I could.

As soon as the English heard my accent while I was abroad, they'd ask me where I was from. I used to tell people that I was a Canadian from Manitoba. My friends failed to see the point. But why should I be obligated to tell the truth to a total stranger? I'm uncomfortable when I write for this very reason. My body responds to my sense that I am somehow putting myself at risk. Chest tightens and shoulders tense.

I remember being little and reaching into the wooden hutch to grab my pet rabbit. As I crushed him to my ribcage with the misplaced love of a child, I would feel his pounding heart through his thin skin and meager skeletal frame. He was so frail. I imagine that if you were to pick me up you

would feel my heart race, too, because I also feel as if I'm being laid bare and defenseless, and yet this insipid honesty is not me at all. What if characters are more accurate than portraits?

I can't write nonfiction because I can't write down a lie. I've always thought that books, nonfiction especially, held truth, but nothing I put down on paper rings true to me. I hate the way my words change as they flow from thought to pen. Nothing sounds the way I feel it should. What I produce becomes a random recombination of English genetics. Mutations and dropped signals change my work into a species separate from thought. Nothing is ever as delicate, as clear, as all-encompassing as I envisioned it would be. Maybe I can't speak nicely unless I lie. Maybe the problem is not me, but the truth, which is never pretty.

2. Adaptation

I know that I sit on bare ground because the Earth moves beneath me. Small organisms, ants, beetles, maybe even spiders stir amongst what must be tree litter. I feel the rivulets of bark against my back. I remember this feeling from when I used to sit and read at the broad base of the trees in my yard as a child. The uneven surface of the bark meant that I could chip off tiny pieces. Sometimes I'd skin my knuckles when I tried to break off a particularly large piece. I wiggle a little and perceive that same roughness through my thin shirt; I must be leaning against an oak tree.

My feet are free, and I begin to feel cautiously about with them, searching until I come into contact with something else solid and rough. It proves to be a long extension of the trunk and judging from the size of these roots, which snake outward from the base, this must be a large oak—the type which has been allowed to grow undisturbed for generations.

In my struggles to feel about me, my shirt rides up, leaving a gap of unprotected skin between jeans and hem. Small blades of vegetation scratch me intently. Although they are persistent in their discomfort, there are only a few of them, which implies that not much light reaches the ground upon which I sit.

I hear things drop from up above, hitting branches as they fall, shaken loose by something in passing. There is a sustained rustle of leaves as creatures make their way through what must be a dense canopy above me, leading me to deduce that I sit tied to not just one tree, but surrounded by an entire forest of them. I had always thought that the woods were a quiet place when I walked through them, but they are practically boisterous when I sit here still and blind.

*

I adjust my style to imitate the greats. I want to write with incomprehensible beauty of Djuna Barnes, with the candor of Salinger, with the complexity of Chekhov, the poetics of Keats. I attempt Batesian mimicry of my literary heritage, crafting my useless words into diction as sharp and powerful as Hemingway's, like the harmless milk snake who appropriates the form of the poisonous coral snake, the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing. But I hope to do more than simply adapt to my surroundings. I want to sit down and write something brilliant, too. But I can't. I find a truth perhaps,

but not my own.

I have this desperate fear of not catching every thought as it falls from my mind. I write on supermarket receipts, Post-it notes, the columns of newspapers, the back of my hand, whatever is nearby when I think of something important. I write down everything: observations, notes, phone numbers, assignments, the word “run” so I will go for a jog, thoughts on the relationship of postmodernism to the development of extremist media, a website. Writing is my remembrance. I need the permanence of print to hold my ideas, to keep them from slipping back into the unreachable recesses of my thought, and I constantly worry that I might have missed the great one. Even my grocery list never feels complete.

I’ve always felt this urgent need to write, and I’ve been intoxicated by the artwork of penmanship since I was very young. From the moment I knew what a notebook was, I had at least seven different “journals” going at once, filled with such profound thoughts as “KljM TthHi PIOPH 7.” I loved H’s, I’s, and P’s so much that I put them in my own name, which I often signed illustriously HioPH. I would practice my chunky block lettering for hours and hours. Later, I remember taking notes that my father had written in his careful cursive and tracing them over again and again. A friend’s mother told me that when I came over to play, she used to watch me fill pages and pages with any words I knew and some that I made up, happily stringing together long sentences of incoherency. I’m not sure things are so different now.

The more I write, the more questions I have, and the farther I get away from the truth.

There are moments when I sit deep in thought, jotting down notes and outlines, creating an intricate maze of letters on the page. These are the moments when I believe I’m accomplishing something, that I’m turning over rich, new material: a farmer tilling fertile soil. I write; I excavate; I uncover. The paper touches the tip of the pen that rests between the fingers leading to my arm, which is controlled by my thoughts. This is the moment when everything is connected— mind, pen, and paper.

I love beginning to write for this very reason. The elation of planning, of further discovery, and the hope that all of this thought will lead to something. Yet I go back to the notes I wildly wrote, arrows crisscrossing the page, words and sentences crisscrossing each other, and I find them to be lacking. Gone are the detailed sentences I thought I had, and the insights of the moment, because words are only placeholders. Look at them on the page. Frail, thin, black lines. There is no substance to them, no thickness, no meat. They are in fact a meager substitute for the things they describe, the real smell of wet leaves on a forest floor, the soft fur on a dog’s ears, the scratchy tone of a blown speaker. I write my way to the end of the essay and find that I did not say one single thing I actually thought. Words invoke ideas, but they are not the ideas themselves. They are now the imposters. And so the

moment of beginning, so full of fervor and new life, culminates in a barren end—the paper, an underwhelming tribute to the vivid world of intellect—and I am forced to start again. We have yet to discover the gene that codes for perfection.

3. Evolution

I test the limits of my bounds. The rope is wrapped tightly around the trunk and binds me. There is little room for movement. I can lean forward a barely perceptible amount, and I can push myself upward a bit by planting my hands firmly on the forest floor and bracing my feet against some of the roots.

How did I get here? I must remember if I'm going to get out.

My back pocket is not deep, and as I shift my weight around a bit, I can feel the knife sitting at the outer right corner of it. I push myself upward again, managing to lift my body maybe half an inch off the ground. I rotate my right hand to a painfully unnatural position, trying to get my own body out of the way. Through contortion, I am able to inch my hand towards my pocket and, with thumb and forefinger, touch the knife.

It all happened so fast I think. I was walking on the edge of the forest. I had little on my mind and yet I was oblivious to everything around me. That must have been how I missed their soft step. Otherwise I would have known that the light crunch of leaves was out of place and heard the chipmunk's bark, warning the other animals of intruders.

I was consumed by nothing at all, almost as if I was unwittingly preparing myself for the shock and horror that rushed in when the clawing hands grabbed me and wrenched me violently to the ground. Another pair crushed a bag over my head, sending sight into darkness. But I'm not so sure that the loss of sight was due entirely to the covering because there was also a simultaneous prick—a feeling distinct to the syringe.

Ultimately I have no idea who my captors are and even less of one about whether they will return or not. I grip the knife with all the strength I have in those two little fingers, (never before have they served such a vital purpose), and I yank. It is a Herculean effort on a minuscule scale.

*

I don't know where all of this is going. No one ever said that we might choose to adapt or that we can control natural selection. Evolution is a process that occurs independently of thought, and yet writing is the evolution of our mental landscape. One idea leads to another, and then another, and then to another. By publishing, we load our work into the literary canon and launch them into the realm of interpretation. The sentences which I had so carefully constructed explode into millions of tiny pieces, each reader picking up a single one.

My words in print become public property. While we might rarely think about the fact that we are descended from monkeys, a writer can never forget where he or she came from. I enter into a dialogue begun ages ago, by men like Aristotle, Homer, and Plato: names more sacred than Mary in the intellectual world. Our literary ancestors are as much a part of today's written

landscape as they were of their own. We continue the search they started. After all these centuries, we have amassed words by the dozens, hundreds, thousands, millions. Enough words to wrap 'round the Earth several times—all essentially speaking to the same question: who, or what, are we (writers are not so different from scientists, you see)?

I still think the best answers to this question are Shakespeare's. Not his plays per se, because those are as wandering and inconclusive as any dissertation on mankind turns out to be. No, Shakespeare is a poet for all the ages because he was able to write the most profound things in sentences short enough to put on a coffee mug. Open any number of his manuscripts and you will find, buried somewhere in act three, a line so simple and precise that it's utterly brilliant. And yet, we might miss it in a play that continues on for pages.

I sometimes think that our problem as writers is that we never know when to stop. Someone may have written the truth about humanity a long time ago, but we continue to cover it up with piles upon piles of useless paper. I think truth might have been lost somewhere, by myself and maybe others.

There are many methods of searching. Some of us stop and stand in the middle of the huge stacks of canonical literature, Mr. Shakespeare's included, because we must start somewhere, so why not start with the best? We gobble them up and spit them back out in literary essays which proclaim to have discovered *the* meaning. I've written hundreds of these pieces, and I can't honestly say that I've ever believed any of them. Others among us either determinedly or ignorantly plow onward, believing that we will write the new truth, or at least lead ourselves back to the old one. Yet, how can we even be sure we're headed in the right direction? No one ever promised us a plan. Writers base their work on assumption and literature is a grand experiment.

"I never found a man who knew how to love himself."

-William Shakespeare, *Othello*

4. Epilogue

I manage to pull the knife a little farther out of my pocket, to touch it with thumb, pointer, and middle finger now.

*

Who am I in all of this? In all of these letters, words, and sentences that I selfishly contribute to the stacks of paper, and in the myriad of books I devour? I still don't know. I'm not sure that any of the stories I put down on paper are ever really mine. I think they might just be on loan, really, from someone with something to say, who just needed somebody to say it. And then these thoughts found me, an empty apartment available for rent.

It's because of the way my own ideas feel like fiction when I read

them on the page, because of that urgent need to write everything down, as if it's someone else whispering these thoughts in my ear, the way that I can never really own my words because they are public property, that makes me feel as if this isn't really me at all.

Another pull and I feel the blade slide from my pocket.

I'm frustrated, nearly irate even, by the way this is all coming to a neat close, as if my writing were the stuff of fairytales. I thought the truth was ugly, but it's out of my control.

Relief overtakes me as I begin to work my hand out from under my body.

As people, we create characters, and as writers, we become them. Reality is fiction, or maybe the other way around.

I feel my grip on the pen loosening and the knife falls from my hand.