

### **The Beautiful Stuff**

“We are cups, constantly and quietly being filled. The trick is, knowing how to tip ourselves over and let the beautiful stuff out.” – Ray Bradbury

Teenagers write bad poetry. It’s what we do, in between hating our parents and asking them for rides. Depending on what corner of the herd one belongs to, poetry might be acceptable and even prized, the goat of creativity sacrificed on an altar of sheer output. As the editor of my high school’s “literary” magazine, I was inundated with the stuff, although perhaps it just felt that way because of the generally craptastic quality. There should have been a caution on the office door akin to those one finds posted around hog-rendering plants, warning people to not get too close, lest they find themselves overcome by the stench and falling to their demise in a sinkhole of offal. Rarely did we collect enough submissions to compile an issue that was halfway decent; it was laughable to dream of putting together an issue without any cringe-worthy material at all.

One might think the general badness of their work would put a halt to ambitions of...whatever those kids thought writers do, which, as far as I could tell, seemed to be taking lots of drugs, convincing people to join them in inappropriate sexual encounters, and mixing metaphors. But every year, we got poems and stories about boys who betrayed girls, girls who cuckolded boys, grandmothers/pets who kicked it, the awesome stuff the author saw on acid, the crushing feelings of loneliness inherent in being the only boy in the flute section, and whatever other inanities that seem paramount to adolescents. I was no exception, by any means. In some ways, I was worse because I was very sure that I was above all the nonsense, but in reality I just existed on a different plane of being obnoxious. A more quiet plane, one that was isolated, apart from everyone, where I existed alone with no one to understand meeee...\*sob\*.

I started contributing to my high school's literary magazine, *The Royal Crest*, my freshman year, but that was pretty much the extent of what I shared of my writing. I don't think my parents have seen anything I've written since early middle school and I still rarely show anything to my friends. It was partly that I was never satisfied with what I wrote and partly that I was too satisfied; I just didn't want anyone to tell me that I wasn't as good as I hoped/thought I was.

I was named editor of the *Crest* at the beginning of my junior year. Some are born irritated, some achieve irritation, some have irritation thrust upon them.... I got thrust by virtue of every senior staff member graduating the year before. With two years of frequent contribution but limited layout experience under my belt (thanks to my control-freak predecessor), I now found myself in charge of the only thing holding back the flood of blood from teenage wrists.

Or so I assumed. Inevitably, my first semester as editor was marked by a distinct drought. In previous years, we had a copious, if somewhat tainted, flow of submissions to mock and choose from. Perhaps karma was blowing raspberries at me because by the time the November print date rolled around, I was desperate for even the dregs of adolescent angst. The faculty advisor (a newcomer to the whole game) and I cobbled together a proposal to do a mega-volume in the spring to buy us some time. This was immensely successful, until the second print date loomed ahead and we were still short on entries. It became clear that my co-editors, the staff contributors, and I were going to have to pull from our private stocks and apply some creativity to making up pseudonyms. In that edition, I count eight of my own pieces. Only two were published under my real name, the rest divided up between four fake names and one uncredited back cover.

Unfortunately, I was in the midst of my own drought, as well. Scrolling through my files did nothing but tell me what I already suspected: anything worth submitting was the product of my last relationship, which presented something of a dilemma. Did I want to expose those feelings to a rather large group of readers, even under one or several pseudonyms? Did I really have any right to use those poems, having meant them for one person only? Was I willing to sacrifice the quality of the *Crest* to spare myself some anonymous squeamishness? Was I secretly wanting someone else to pat me on the head and tell me I was a good girl? Frankly, with the deadline bearing down on me, I didn't have the time to ponder the intricacies of my quandary. I put my pieces in.

My predicament had its origins in the events of tenth grade, when my boyfriend wrote me a poem. He gave it to me on the sly, slipping it into my binder while we were surrounded by a number of people who would be surprised, to say the least, that we were dating. This wasn't the first note he had given to me. Our correspondence, as it were, had started with a square of folded computer paper that fell out of my locker shortly before we would see each other at a project meeting. A response to a year-old post on my blog, it landed on the toe of my combat boot, one of a pair that would later become the subject of one of his more inventive poems. This was a preview of sorts to what I could expect; every so often, I would find something in my locker, until we finally worked our way up to exchanging our communiqués in person (albeit clandestinely). The poem in my binder was the first that he had written himself, though. It likened me to autumn, in a roundabout way, which still makes me smile, despite knowing then and now that it was not a particularly original comparison. But it was unused on me, and I felt an unprecedented need to reciprocate with my own clumsy sincerity.

I soon replied with some scribblings of my own, and the practice rapidly took on a significance that neither of us expected. We were not particularly prolific; we wrote when we had time and were inspired, but for me, at least, the words in each individual piece came quickly enough, more quickly, actually, than most of my other writing. I couldn't explain it, but I could snatch a fragment out of the ether and make it concrete faster than I was ever able to before; one line became a stone in a wall that was soft and solid and shimmering all at the same time. It felt like what I scrawled on any available paper, at lunch and in math and on the walk home and at night long after I should have been asleep, was just better. It was a sensation akin to hearing a note sung true amidst ones that have been ever so slightly off. There was a lack of self-consciousness that I think had been there before, when I was writing to be like whoever I was reading that week or being tugged between doing what I wanted and doing what assignments told me to do. Writing for him was freeing in a way that writing for a teacher or even myself was not. With teachers, whatever I turned in was judged based on literary merit, as far as that could be applied to a high school student. They were interested in grammar and syntax and how well I imitated the style of *Beowulf* or used symbolism like Hawthorne. As for myself...well, I was no more permissive a critic of my own work than I was of submissions to the magazine I edited. There were periods when I wouldn't write anything because I wasn't building that wall, I was beating my head against it. I cared what he thought about my writing, on a level both personal and academic, but at the same time I knew that he would love anything I gave to him because it was from me. (And, yes, I almost did just throw up writing that line, so you're not alone in any puppy-love nausea you might be feeling.)

I had a tendency to space out the giving of my poems. I liked to be able to present one every week or so, which had two benefits: first, there was a nice little tradition happening, and second, a productive week could give me a stash for when the well was running dry. Generally, we followed a pattern – something to eat, some walking around, some driving, what I shall dub “quiet time,” and then home. Anything we had (not always poems but usually) was given during quiet time, when we would find a secluded place to sit and talk. One night, during a lull in the conversation, I dug out a poem from my purse, where it was tucked inside whatever book-cum-security blanket I was carrying around that day.

“I’ve got something.... Here,” I said. Despite our slightly grandiose custom of expression through verse, I lacked a proper grasp of pomp, especially if niggling doubt became nagging anxiety, as it occasionally did, though in general I was as confident as a fifteen-year-old could be in this situation.

“It’s not great. It’s not, like, horrible, but it’s not as good as the one from a few weeks ago. That one was really good. I should have stopped there, ended on a high note. It’s okay. This one is, I mean.”

“Should I read it now, or wait until you run out of oxygen and pass out?”

“Hold off till my lips turn bluish.”

He turned the rectangle of paper over in his hands; as usual, I hadn’t mangled it into any fancy shape or written anything on the outside. Everything important was folded inside, in a plain black font that rarely varied from one note to the next. Eventually, he opened it and read it, squinting a little in the orange glow of the streetlamp.

“When did you write this one?”

“While I was watching the equipment and everyone was playing Frisbee.”

“That was, what, three weeks ago?”

“Ish.”

“You’ve been sitting on this one for three weeks?”

“Ish.”

“Kate....”

“What?”

“You always wait so long.”

“I *know*, I’ve *explained* it.”

“I *know*, but I want them as soon as you finish. I want to see them as soon as they’re done and be able to pinpoint what, where, and when you were feeling whatever is in there. They’re not eggs, they don’t have to be hatched after they come out.”

“Ew.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Even if they’re on looseleaf with a million bazillion cross-outs and rewrites and doodles and lists?”

“Yes.”

“What about backwards and upside down and in Navajo to protect them from the Nazis?”

“You’re too lazy to do all that work, but yes.”

“Or written on my arm with a Sharpie because I didn’t have any paper and I happened to be wearing a short-sleeve shirt that day?”

“Especially then.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, good. And I do like this one, a lot.”

“Yeah? Good.”

We broke up at the end of the school year. I cried for three days and then packed away everything he gave me, much of which fit into a small gift bag. It now sits on a shelf in my bookcase, behind glass where I can see it but can't get to it unless I unlock the doors, which I don't usually do.

I read my poems to him only slightly more often than “never,” so it was strange seeing them reproduced several hundred times when they were published the following year. But paging through the finished product showed me that mine were not exactly standouts, in either caliber or content. Perhaps it was their sheer invisibility that set me free, so to speak, because I experienced an odd echo of that feeling of liberation I had when I first wrote those pieces. I wondered to myself how many of the other poems or short stories had started out being for someone else, whether that person knew it, whether he or she actually ever saw them. The significance of my fellow contributors' work was not at all apparent to me, the same way they would never know why exactly I had written mine.

Ultimately, I think I was able to share my pieces not just because I was in a bind, but because I had already run the gauntlet with them, albeit one armed with squooshy pillows and a hug at the end. In the past, I had often felt that there was some film, like a piece of plastic wrap, that separated me-as-a-writer from everyone else. The first poem he

gave me made the initial incision in the thin but undeniable barrier; giving it all back forced me to wriggle further out of that membrane of reticence, and now I felt ready to do the same on a larger scale. There was a difference between biding my time and avoiding the outside world that was clear in a way it hadn't been before. I had shown myself, in a limited way that I could now extrapolate, that other people could read my writing without causing me to simultaneously shrivel away to nothing, burst into flames, and implode. Obviously, I wasn't always going to like what I got back, but I had known that from the start; there was a reason I was being so craven, but it seemed less daunting now.

In the end – but I suppose it isn't really the end, because when does a writer ever stop? Most of them manage to dictate what goes on their tombstones, so maybe it ends there, and I'm far from that point. For now, I'll say, I am a better writer than I was four years ago, though one would hope that is true of most people. I have certainly improved my phraseology and structure and plotting and grasp of whatever an accomplished writer is supposed to grasp. None of that would do me any good if it never saw the light of day, however, and that is where I'll give myself a Most Improved Player trophy (the only one I shall ever earn, I can guarantee, as I am not *sportif*). I can take creative writing classes with only a minimum of dread, and every once in a while I'll ask a trusted friend for an opinion. It's still difficult to not retreat at the least sign of adversity, but when I do, I recover much faster than I used to. A critique can still feel like a knife to the heart, yet I can think of it now as a surgical scalpel, slicing my writing to ribbons so it can put it back together – to thrive.