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Growing Pains

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Self-Analysis: Asking Question

I spent a long time thinking about my honors project before finally writing my proposal in November of 2019. A part of me really resented having to write a proposal at all. It seemed like such a commitment. I mean, I have no idea what I'm going to write until I write it. I thought for awhile I would write a character study on my stepdad because a few of my peers had told me they liked my character building. There were many times throughout the writing process that I wished I had done that instead of writing essays on something as abstract as pain. In that sense, this project was a very big challenge for me. It was always going to be a challenge because knitting together several essays to make a cohesive small collection was something I had never done before. And I never ever could have predicted that a pandemic would bear down on the world after the revision of my first essay.

There has been a lot of talk about how COVID-19 would be a gift to creatives, having so much time to work. I resent this. Sure, writing is a very lonely craft. It's just you and a keyboard or you and a pen, depending on your preference. It's understood to be an introvert's pastime. This generalization probably checks out most of the time, but I'm an extrovert. Feeling isolated from the world was far from a gift to my creative process. I have felt deeply uninspired being stuck at home. This time has been draining. Since March, I've been spending all my energy getting out of bed and like, feeding myself. I had been accustomed to writing out of the overflow, and now I was writing on an empty tank. It was difficult, but it was also a learning experience. There are parts of my essays that I'm proud of, especially after some time and distance away from them when it's slightly easier to disconnect myself from the writing (but only slightly). A lot of "Growing Pains" I find underwhelming, but I have never known a writer who was not overly self-critical.

Though I had been writing throughout high school, when I came to college and signed up for my first writing workshop, I thought, *alright it's time to take things seriously*. All the essays I wrote for my first workshop were serious. Too serious, really. I was not having a lot of fun. Everything I wrote was too sad and emotionally one-note. It wasn't until the following semester when I wrote a personal essay about my grandpa Jan that I remembered writing can be funny. A lot of what I was most proud of writing in high school was humorous. There was a creative writing class I took my junior year of high school where we sometimes read our work aloud in class. There was a short story I read that had the class in hysterics and a poem I read that sent some of my classmates into tears. I'm not sure if you've ever had people cry *at* you, but I much preferred the laughter. It's more rewarding. I feel the same about this collection of essays. I don't consider myself a very funny person, truthfully, but I know I enjoy writing about things that make me laugh. When I wrote the line, "for every snack after 8pm, a family member dies" it made *me* laugh. I wasn't sure anybody else would find it funny but if I can't at least make myself laugh once in a while, what's the point? It's also easier to dig into the hard stuff when there's joy in between. I feel accomplished when I read about the local swimming pool or my grandma Edie because the joy makes them feel alive.

I'm also proud of my efforts in revision. Before my honors project, I had always struggled editing and revising. That's why "extensive" revision was a goal of mine laid out in my proposal. Part of this struggle derives from my unhealthy relationship to perfectionism. God, I want everything I write to be perfect. It never ever is, but I do try. In striving for perfection, I have a habit of editing as I write. By the time I've finished an essay, I can't imagine my writing any other way. This makes revision difficult. I still battled this as I worked on my project; however, taking Writers on Writing the same semester that I began working on my project

helped me understand the relationship between perfectionism and editing. Being aware of it made me a better writer this time around. There were whole sections of essays that I changed completely. The second half of “The Space Between Unbroken Bones” is not the half present in my final draft. The end of “The Revolving Door in My Amygdala” was redone more than three times. My essay “Conversations” was restructured and expanded on for clarity of message. It is the essay I feel turned out the most like I’d hoped. Possibly a little better. Though I still have a long way to go in overcoming perfectionism and improving my revision skills, this project offered valuable practice that I will continue to carry with me. It is worth mentioning that these changes would not have been the same without the insight and skillful feedback of Professor Giffels and my readers.

There were other parts of this project that I struggled with that I don’t have solutions for. Firstly, I am unhappy with the endings in three out of the four essays. I have a lot of difficulty figuring out how to end my essays. Do I end them too soon? Am I lacking reflection? Do they require answers to questions I don’t have? I’m not sure. To my surprise, Dr. Chura complimented them. He called them “clipped endings.” I am glad he finds them sufficient. I will try to describe how they feel to me. Ending an essay is trying to breathe out all of the air in my lungs. Breathing out as much as I can until I can’t anymore but knowing there is still the air in my lungs my body won’t relieve me of unless I keel over and die. The end just won’t come in a way that feels complete.

The end of “The Revolving Door in My Amygdala” was particularly challenging. As I mentioned in my previous paragraph, it got multiple makeovers. When I had set out to write the essay, I was thinking about the interplay between fear and pain. I think that comes through. When I was conceptualizing it in my head, I was thinking a lot about the idea of being in the

closet. There was no mention of sexuality or the closet in my first and second drafts. I didn't feel ready to share it, it's too heavy and too real. I tried to avoid the heaviness of the essay's subject matter by writing fun adolescent anecdotes to illustrate my idea about fear and pain. Then I told myself it wouldn't make sense to drop a bomb like that at the end of an essay that was mostly fun. After trying to write the ending on several occasions, I realized there really was no other option. It's what the essay is about, being trapped in that revolving door of fear and pain. So I wrote that ending. I tried to anyway, but then I ran into the problem of writing about something too close. It is difficult to find perspective on issues I'm still working through. I wish I had something better to say about escaping that revolving door, but I don't because I haven't attempted it myself. It is because of this that I am still unhappy with the ending of this essay. At this time, for this essay, I will need to deal with real life before I can deal with the page.

It's worth it to say that I don't think this is always the case. In many ways, writing nonfiction has been a way for me to make sense of my life and the things important and close to me. Small things that offer a way into the big things. My first essay "The Space Between Unbroken Bones" grew from a conversation I had with my stepdad into a meditation on my relationship to family, which became an essay about generational trauma and repression—the pain that goes unspoken. I also like the restraints on nonfiction. It can be harder to carve narrative out of real life than to carve it out of nothing. I am entranced by the ability to stitch events that were years apart into the same essay. I also appreciate the ways creative nonfiction allows me to pay homage to the people and places I have encountered in my lifetime. I love detailing the cracks in the sidewalks near my childhood home, the way my old roommate left clothes everywhere, the familiar patter of wet feet on pavement. There is a scene from the movie *Lady*

Bird where Sister Sarah-Joan asks the titular character this question: “Don’t you think maybe they are the same thing, love and attention?”

When I’m writing these essays about real people, I think about Sister Sarah-Joan’s question. Maybe she is right about love and attention being the same thing. I don’t really see things I don’t care about. If I write about it, I care about it. Even when I write about people like my dad, who I describe as “someone I work really hard to love” in “Conversations,” I mean to write it with that a way that honors who he truly is to me—neither my idol nor my enemy, but a complicated person with whom I have a complicated relationship. I love writing, I love writing the truth or at least trying to. I treasure the vulnerability it requires to write about real life. When I first decided to take a workshop in creative nonfiction at the university, I did so because I thought it could teach me to write with vulnerability. I think it’s done that for me. It’s shown me how closely love and attention are related. My chief anxiety about writing these personal essays is that the people in them will not recognize this relationship or see it the same way I do.

Would the people in my essays be bothered? And if they would be should I even write it? Who am I writing for? These questions encircled me since I submitted my proposal over a year ago. Writing about real people makes me feel grimey because I do not have the courage to tell anyone that I’m writing about them. Though I mostly write for myself, there comes a point when I want to share my work...dare I say publish it? I can’t bring myself to do that writing about my family and my friends. I certainly can’t bring myself to do it writing about my sexuality. I miss the safety of the closet, I miss the comfort of fiction, I miss anonymity. It’s worth noting that I have written at length about sexuality in my fiction. This project not only reminded me of the gift of restraint in nonfiction, but in barring me from it, reminded me of the freedom of fiction. Somewhere between November of 2019 and now, I decided not to pursue an MFA in nonfiction

immediately following my undergraduate career. Instead, I will be taking some time off to figure out what I want before promising to pay tuition to another university. These essays prompted real self-analysis in my day-to-day life, and I am grateful for that.

This project has been profoundly important to me. Despite its challenges, or perhaps because of them, I feel accomplished. I have long felt that good art asks more questions than it answers. I think “Growing Pains” does that. The question, “What is pain?” became “what is my pain? What is relative pain? What is collective pain?” and “Is fear pain? Is loss?” This project surprised me in the ways it evolved and in the ways that it allowed me to evolve as I wrote it. In that sense, the title of the project is apt. My only hope is that my readers asked all those questions too. As I struggle to find the words to end this essay, I feel thankful to have had this experience and dedicated myself to a project in a way that I hadn’t before. The questions I’ve asked have gotten me here and will continue to push me further and deeper into the craft of writing, regardless of genre.

My Abridged Literary History: A Critical Essay

There's a famous kind-of origin story Patti Smith writes about in *Just Kids* where she attends a Doors concert, takes one look at Jim Morrison and thinks, "I could do that." The subtext, I'm sure, is that Patti Smith actually thought "I could do that better." I wonder how many creatives start at their craft with a story like that. Maybe, in one alternate reality, I read *A Farewell to Arms* and said to myself, *this hotshot thinks he can throw together some crap about rain and a woman's hair and call it literature? Sure buddy, you got a little talent, but can you do that same trick sober? I bet I could.* Truthfully, I had no natural inclination to write stories and I never would have dreamt I was a better writer than Jim Morrison was a musician. Although, my temper did splinter the first time I read Hemmingway. His writing was ostensibly misogynist, or at least ostensibly masculine, and I hated that. Before I read Hemmingway, I read *Of Mice and Men* and boy did I hate that too. There was a woman in there who had no name, who was treated ill, and then got murdered. My outrage was good fuel for my academic papers, which was all I thought of as writing. Writing stories, writing poetry, was nothing if not a school assignment. I loved those assignments, though. I poured over them for the entire length of time between when it was assigned and when it was due. Writing assignments were the only thing I didn't procrastinate. I couldn't rest until I got them as close to perfection as I thought possible (which wasn't very close) and then I made everyone who cared about me read them.

When I wrote my Steinbeck paper, I remember turning it in to my teacher, Mrs. Roberts—she had thyroid surgery that left a Frankenstein scar on her neck, her favorite movie was *Rocky*, and she let an all-white class decide if they wanted to read the n-word in *Huck Finn*—who looked at the title of my paper and said, *You're taking the feminist approach, I see.* In most small towns, or at least my hometown, feminist is a dirty and offensive word. It carried that

outdated stereotype of a bra-burning, manly, man-hater. *I am not*, I had said to her, though of course I was lying.

It was around that same time my friend Emma, who I had forced to read all my papers, told me, *You're pretty good at this. You should be a writer.* To me, Emma's voice might as well have been sent straight from God. I always ran for Class President, but she was the girl who ran for Vice President and won because she knew she could, she had a healthy relationship with expectation. I lost every year. She always seemed to know everything, so if I was a writer in her eyes, I guess I was a writer. So, scribbling my literary rants was how I found out I was a writer and a feminist.

Ironically, I have few literary heroes and they're all men. This does not bother me. I like *Annie Hall*. I think The Beatles are great. And I don't think I would mind Hemmingway so much anymore. In the words of Roxane Gay, I am a Bad Feminist. In truth, I think the literary influence that looms the closest is that of whatever I read last. Amid my English-major semester, this could range anywhere from Keats to Alcott to Roth or to Morrison, Chabon, and Salinger. Any reading I do for fun has to be bite-sized, consumed in between volumes of Norton Anthologies and Penguin Classics. Over the past few years, I have returned to Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist* on a languid Saturday afternoon or an easy Tuesday. Her quippy, authoritative voice on subjects of intersectionality, rape culture and pop culture is worthy of admiration. And it is admired. One of the things I appreciate about Roxane Gay is that she instills in me the feeling that storytelling *is* still important. This comes from the way her work transcended beyond literary culture and found its way into the hands of women everywhere, from Black women like Roxane Gay herself to my white grandmother Loretta who lives in the rural fringes of Licking County, Ohio. In my freshman year of college, I was lent *Bad Feminist* from a friend who heard about it

online, and then I gifted a copy to my aunt for Christmas who almost yelped when she peeled the wrapping paper away to reveal the author's name, "I've been wanting to read this! This is so exciting."

Then my grandmother, my aunt's mom, said "Melissa, what is it?" and scribbled down the book title on the legal pad sitting on the end-table. The previous year, my aunt Melissa had given everybody in my father's family—even the men—Jessica Neuwirth's *Equal Means Equal*, a short book about the Equal Rights Amendment. We were like suffragettes trading around Mary Wollstonecraft, giddy that there were people out there who understood our anger and frustrations and could put it better than we ourselves could. I had come a long way from the fifteen-year-old who flinched at the word feminist. Part of that had to do with the freedom that came with a driver's license, when I could more frequently traverse the 50-minute drive it took to visit my paternal grandma and the rest of my dad's family, who were partial to MSNBC, or at least The Daily Show.

Most of my childhood and adolescence was spent surrounded by mom's loving family, who took rather to Fox News or no news at all. My mom told me frequently that I got my reading from my Dad, though he favored golf magazines whereas I was taken with my first love, adventure series. The Scholastic bookfair was my favorite time of the year as a kid and I made sure to remind my mom and stepdad of the event at least a week before it came to town. Rarely was I given enough money for more than a trinket eraser, but it was still exciting to see all the shiny untouched books.

More of my reading was done on a library card, which I had worn down so that the plastic tore off on at least two occasions and had to request another. By the end of every summer, I felt pretty convinced I had read every book for my age group that the Dresden Branch of the

Muskingum County Library System had to offer, but I was timid to request books from the main branch because that involved talking to the librarians, who wore their eyeglasses cartoonishly on the ends of their nose. Instead of finding new books, I read and re-read and read again my favorite—The *Percy Jackson* series by Rick Riordan. The preteen main characters in the five-book adventure series inherited preternatural abilities and powers from a parent, who was a Greek god, usually to the character's surprise. They were tasked, of course, with saving the world and restoring balance to the universe. The books were wildly entertaining, funny, and immersive. I had a habit of checking all five books out at once (if the librarian would allow it) and reading them in one weekend—on the floor of my bedroom, on the couch in the living room, in the tree in the backyard, in the tree in my neighbor's backyard, at the local pool, in the car. I was intent to read wherever possible but never on the toilet, which felt offensive to the books. Though there were plenty of morals to be learned from the series, the thing that strikes me most about those books is just how fun they were. It is a blessing to have access to fun books, and those ones led me into a lifetime love for reading. A healthy love for reading, born at a young age, is almost every writer's elixir. Drink it and forever be changed.

If Rick Riordan's books were a sweet campfire song, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was scripture. I knitted it to my soul, absorbed it with fanaticism and attempted to recruit everyone I knew into my religion. In the tradition of *The Catcher in the Rye*, the novel follows a boy named Charlie through his freshman year of high school, as he navigates sexuality, family, mental health, friendship and all the other most important things to a high school freshman. In its conversational and hypnotic prose, I felt it held the answers to the universe. It helps that I was 14 when I read it. Though I had read plenty of books before then, I think *Perks* made me aware that there were good books, really good books out there that had important things to say. It was still

funny, like the books I read as a kid. But it was also serious and sad, though not in the procedural, cliché way of a Sarah Dessen novel. It is a work of fiction but Chbosky's novel felt full of real people and at the age of 15, I saw a little of myself in every character and still do today. *Perks* had an identifiable impact on me and the way I think, and as I said in my essay "Conversations," I can never be sure if a thought is my own or if I borrowed it from this novel. I question how it operates in my subconscious. Had I devoted myself to my English papers because Charlie did? Did I need someone to tell me I was a writer because Charlie needed someone to tell him? If I did, it wasn't conscious. There were other revelations introduced by the novel that I incorporated into my life with intent. That everyone has a complex internal life; that suffering isn't an excuse for someone to make others suffer, but it's important to acknowledge and understand that someone's suffering anyway; that romantic partners should not encompass your life; that the people you surround yourself with are a reflection of your self-esteem; and through its metatextual through line, that art is revelatory. Like I said, it was scripture. It transformed my worldview. The novel made me believe in storytelling as a worthy and powerful cause. In the moments when I hate myself for being so indulgent as to think anything I have to say matters, I try to remind myself that the world would be a different place without Shakespeare or Fredrick Douglass or George Orwell or Toni Morrison. I have to remind myself that I would be a different person without Stephen Chbosky or Roxane Gay or Andre Aciman or James Baldwin and other authors whose work changed the way I think about myself and the world around me.

And because *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was my single prized possession around the time I started writing my own short stories, it was also the first book I read with a writer's eye. A mark of good writing, I learned, is that it can make readers feel understood. Part of this

comes from knowing who your audience is. Chbosky can't be faulted for lines like "I feel infinite" that have been caricatured as pretentious or "fake deep" when they resonate so *deeply* with its readers. Though anyone can and should read the novel, *Perks* is unabashedly for teenagers. Its intimate understanding of what that means ultimately makes it a better novel for any reader. I often struggle with understanding my audience, but it is something I strive for, understanding its importance in the success and coherency of any literary work.

Secondly, writing needs a rhythm. Good rhythm, just as much as plot, propels a reader forward. The blunt, almost robotic-like voice of Charlie makes for a slow and entrancing rhythm that appeals to me still today. "It was one of those days that I didn't mind going to school because the weather was so pretty. The sky was overcast with clouds, and the air felt like a warm bath. I don't think I ever felt that clean before," says Charlie. The plainness of language in the novel is a risk, but the book is better and more earnest for it. I like how earnest the novel is. The vulnerability of its characters can be sometimes hard to read—almost invasive, like you are encroaching on the lives of these fictional people. There is a tension between wanting to read something tender or frighteningly honest and feeling it is somehow indecent to do so. This works well in literature, I think, because it is so much more difficult to be sincere and honest in real life that reading someone who is uninhibited by any fear of vulnerability is a relief. When I signed up for creative nonfiction courses in my sophomore year of college, my thinking was that it would require a level of vulnerability that would improve my writing across genres. I'm not sure I ever would have valued this quality in writing if I had not read and cherished *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

Finally, *Perks* has a moral center, but it is never moralizing. This is important because being told how to think, what to think, the correct way to go about life—all that stuff requires a

level of authority beyond the page that few writers have. It's why I don't take to self-help books. I will accept moralizing from my preacher, my elders, and activists. This is not to say I think writers have nothing important to say or share with the world. I obviously do, otherwise I would not have spent so much money on an English degree, and I would not spend so much time at a keyboard. I just think it's better and fairer to readers to unravel insight in storytelling instead of instruction. Like I said, I learned a lot about life from *Perks* and between the ages of 15 and 17, I consulted it religiously.

One writer who speaks with such authority that I would not fault him for any moralizing is James Baldwin. His talent and skill go beyond writing. He is capable of writing beautiful sentences, steadily emotional, but he hurdles all his efforts at the truth, truth with a capital T. Most writers do this, or at least try, but Baldwin has such a profound understanding of truth and its high stakes, that he seems to me a prophet more than a writer.

I read Baldwin for the first time in college, "Sonny's Blues," and then I was hooked. I loved his sentence structure, his word choice, the images he built, all writerly things. I also love his sense of America, of family, of any individual person. He sees through it all. Then I see a photo of him, with his moonlike eyes, and I get the sense of a poetic world that built him to be an observer looking in on all of us. I got very romantic about it. And I wanted to talk about him to everybody, which proved difficult because on at least four occasions I was asked if he was related to Alec Baldwin. I was and am the same obsessive girl who went to the local library to check out the same five books repeatedly. Only I couldn't find Baldwin at my local library, and being in my small town, there was only one small bookstore. They didn't have Baldwin either. I resented ordering his work online. The summer after I read "Sonny's Blues," I went to New York City for the first time where I bought a copy of *Giovanni's Room* on a street corner. It was

among a few cardboard boxes filled with old books. I was kind of glad that there were no copies in my hometown because now I can say I got my first Baldwin book on a street corner in New York.

My interest and felt connection to Baldwin may surprise some, given we have so little in common on the surface. He is a black man from New York, and I am a white girl from Ohio. We are from different generations. It is a credit to him that his insight transcends these assumed barriers. One of the reasons for this, I think, can be gleaned from something he said about *Giovanni's Room*: "Giovanni's Room is not really about homosexuality. It's the vehicle through which the book moves...it's about what happens to you if you're afraid to love anybody. Which is much more interesting than the question of homosexuality." Baldwin always asks the deeper question. He is also prepared to meet those questions without an answer, or at least without a neat one. At the typewriter, he says, "you don't know a damned thing. And you have to know you don't know it." I feel that I have learned the most about what it means to be a writer from Baldwin. He wrote essays, fictional novels, drama, and even poetry. He could write anything, I think, because he understood writing on a very existential level.

If I'm quoting Baldwin more than the other authors in this essay, it's because Baldwin is so quote worthy, ever articulate and precise. "The truth is," says Baldwin—and when Baldwin declares truth you listen—"I don't think that, seriously speaking, anybody in his right mind would want to be a writer. But you do discover that you are a writer and then you haven't got any choice." Baldwin doesn't believe himself a romantic, but I think any writer is a little romantic to believe in storytelling or the power of words. For me, I have always looked to books to define the world around me. Some people feel that way about cuisine or football, there are enough sports metaphors that suggest as much. Being completely enthralled with storytelling,

what it means and how writers do it, it seems only natural that I should try to do it myself. The greatest gift is that so many brilliant people have done it before me. I don't think I'll ever be as great as Baldwin, the way Patti Smith might have felt about Morrison. I don't think I'll write the next *Perks of Being a Wallflower*. And I don't think any elementary students will wear out their library card reading books with my name on them. I do think that legacy of these writers and these moments in my personal literary history will make me the writer I am supposed to be, and I reflect on them as I pursue that dream. I'm not sure who that writer is yet. I just know that I want to write. I haven't got any choice.