

Bad Brain Blunder

You want to write ~~a poem, a story~~, *something*. You can feel it at the back of your mind, sometimes stumbling upon it, but then the feeling is gone in a moment. You don't actually know if it's anything good. It's like hearing a noise in your apartment late at night and asking "Is someone there?" and not getting an answer; maybe it's nothing, or maybe there *is* someone, they're just not answering you. You're not sure it makes sense. You've explained that feeling to your creative writing teacher, he didn't look surprised. He told you a lot of writers experience this. He also told you about a colleague, friend of his who published a book she was writing during university two years ago, or twelve years later. You don't want to wait that long. What if you lose your marbles before that and never get to write this *something* into existence? He told you you're still young, you still have plenty of time. You get peeved whenever someone tells you that; no one knows how much time they have. There is a clock pendulum swinging over all of us, like Damocles' sword, and we never know when it's going to come to a halt. You understand he is not trying to be preachy or anything like that. He's cool, and you respect him a lot. It's just that it's not what you *wanted* to hear. You just gotta keep writing, no matter what.

One writing advice that you hear a lot is that you shouldn't be afraid of being *vulnerable*. You're ~~fucking~~ awful at being vulnerable. It took you a good long while to really open up to your therapist and talk about what was truly eating you from the inside, because you were worried that he didn't really care about your problems, that you were just being dramatic and attention-seeking. It's not that you don't *want* to be vulnerable, that you don't want to open up or anything. It's just that there is so *much*, and you never know where to start. Should you ease your audience into it with jokes and mention some of the lighter traumas, or should you just rip the bandaid off and open with the fact you grew up so ~~fucking~~ poor¹ that you had to share the same bathwater with your two siblings, even as a teenager? Anyways, it's the same thing with writing; the first page is always the one you struggle with the most. Someone once told you that when you write for the first time after a while (of not writing), it's bound to be shit at first. It's like changing your car oil months after you were

¹ Food stamps, second-hand clothes, no heating during the winter... Being yelled at for not licking your plates clean, not asking your parents to buy you more school material because you *knew* they couldn't afford it.

supposed to; when you first empty your oil tank it's all black and gooey and maybe even gunky, but it's a necessary part of the process of starting anew.

So, you pick up a pen, then change your mind and pick up a pencil instead; This way, if you make a mistake, you can erase it immediately.² You open your notebook. You bought it at Miniso for seven dollars – it's not too big nor too small, and the same colour as *Werther's Original* caramels. You freeze in front of the page for at least ten minutes. Your right leg quickly moves up and down. Frown, ~~bite~~, chew your nails. The clock continues ticking, the pendulum continues swinging. You scroll on your phone. You ~~look~~, stare at the ceiling. The ceiling is horrendous; it's one of those "popcorn" ceilings that nobody likes and may or may not contain asbestos. You make yourself a cup of tea; orange pekoe, with whole milk and two sugars You sigh, before closing your notebook. You go on a walk.

*

You dirty, dirty liar... You didn't go on a walk! Instead you got distracted by fast-paced media, school and other inconsequential bullshit. You lock yourself in your room and work on *essays*, of all things. Everyday, one of your teachers is giving you another thousand word essay to write, and the more you write, the more stupid you feel.³ You lose at Scrabble a lot. When you talk, the words come out of your mouth like cookies that were taken out of the oven too soon; soggy, searing and falling apart. Your fingertips grow cold. You feel like Sisyphus, pushing his boulder up a hill and having to start over and over again for eternity. You roam the apartment sighing and whimpering, like some sort of wraith. Your roommate calls you dramatic. You eat your leftovers. The cat bites your ankle.

The only reason why you're even going outside today is because your PE teacher told you to. Looks like being promised a good grade if you go on a simple walk does the trick to get you to ~~finally~~ take care of yourself. When you push the doors open, you're surprised by how blue the sky is, how comforting the breeze feels on your cheek, and how beautiful the trees look now that they are covered in peridot leaves. It's all just so real, and you remember how much you love spring. And yes, you are

² You can never remember which one is ink and which one is graphite. You have to look it up on Google, or ask someone close by every single time.

³ What do *you* know of marxism in literature? What do you know of Shaw's *Pygmalion* or Henry James's *Italian Hours*? You don't even *know* how to insert quotes properly, even if you've been using MLA format for the past two years! Who should trust your opinion on *anything*!?

still distracted, but at least it feels *good*. Now, it can be the truth when you tell your therapist that *yes*, you've been taking care of yourself. Or at least, half the truth. It is much better to be distracted by the cute dogs in the park and the roars of the leaf-blowers than by meaningless papers or those rogue memories clinging to your brain like a film of sweat under your breast on a hot day. And you might be calling yourself distracted, but this is the most you've written for yourself in the past two weeks. Twenty lines in a row! A record!

*Don't throw yourself flowers yet
You're writing a completely different poem
Than the one you intended to write today
Why are you even writing this poem?
This isn't The Poem you want to write
This is like
Scratching your face when it's your back
That itches.
You got something beautiful within you.
Why can't you just put it into words?*

*

When you were younger, you often found refuge in the school's library. Your parents had just divorced, and both got bankrupt at the same time, and you were given up on by most people – your family, your friends, your teachers... But there was that one secretary, who was also the school librarian, who noticed you. She saw you, alone, waiting outside the school in the middle of winter, with no gloves and your eyes full of sleep. She opened the door for you, and let you inside. It was so warm inside. She never mocked you for the way you talked, or for how zoned out you always were, or how scrawny you looked. One day, she asked if you wanted to learn how to put the books on the shelves. She showed you how it worked, and you became her little assistant. She gave you warmth, and made you feel like you were not a burden, at least not to her. Not in this space she was the mistress of. You don't know where she is now, how she is doing or what she is doing. If she's even still alive. You hope she's well, even if you can't quite remember her name. You remember she was tall, and had long auburn hair. Her eyes were gentle, like the ones of a tired old cat. You wish you could hug her and thank her for what she did for you. Tell her she probably saved your life.

Your mind is like a library; Understaffed, underfunded, under siege, but wonderful and filled with knowledge and memories and stories. And safe, for broken little girls and other lost souls. It's a bit backward, but you think "If my body and mind align, maybe I can get through this one stanza?" So, you go to the library. Time slows down when you're there. You scout the aisles, looking for *something*. Maybe a book that a friend once recommended to you, maybe a book you've heard of, maybe a book with a unique and eye-catching cover? You walk up the grandiose staircases, stare out the prismatic stained-glass window. You run your fingers against the smooth wooden bookshelves. You follow the smell of petrichor and amber. There's an old grandfather clock ticking somewhere.

You don't find anything, but the beast within you has been appeased. You let yourself fall into a vintage leather sofa, and breathe out. You take out your notebook and your trusty ~~pen~~ pencil.

*You search through songs and sonnets
 You scratch off sentences from the pages
 Why is it so complicated to live up to the expectations
 Of your predecessors?
 Couldn't they have put the bar a bit lower?
 You don't find the heart of the ocean at the surface
 So go and dive deeper, and deeper*

*

You attend the literary program academic conference. Not as a presenter, but to support your fellow classmates, and also because you need to attend it to get a decent grade. It's almost some sort of academic walk of shame – to be forced to celebrate your classmate's successes while also having to ignore your own failures. You don't think you're the only one who thinks like that. Our bodies are there, but nobody's home; our eyes stare at nothing, our limbs limp on the sides and our expressions remain unchanging. The room is colder than the rest of the school. There's a clock ticking, because of ~~fucking~~ *course* there is.

You feel inadequate. You've worked so hard on your own research paper, and yet you weren't chosen to present. Not that you necessarily wanted to, because you dislike public speaking, but it still stings. Deep down you wanted your essay to be chosen, and to be told that your writing was good enough, that *you* were good enough. You want to smack yourself for being so self-centred. This isn't about you.

You've had your fair share of failures recently. You submit your best poem to the school journal. It's titled **The Eye**, and it's about trauma, and hypervigilance and paranoia. You're pretty proud of it, but maybe you shouldn't be. It goes something like this...

*You should know, I have defeated ~~the Eye~~, before;
I locked it away behind a tightly sealed door
Made my allies promise to never open it again
And then fled like a deserter runs from the war*

*Even my own eye does not dare look up and meet
The glare from the shadow I see across the street
Beyond the trenches, or above my shoulder
Look closely and you'll see it, ~~the Eye~~ watching me*

*And now, I don't know why, I went back home;
And now I'm here on the same grounds I once fought on.
Maybe it was human once.*

~~Maybe we both were~~

I can feel it, humming under the skin at the back of my neck

*And then the flashes happen
~~The Eye~~ whispers memories of punches being thrown,
Of foodstamps and cold baths and fucked up love
That made me feel whole, that made me feel seen.
And I wake up, the sheets drenched in cold sweat*

I am so fucking scared

Why did I

~~Come Back~~

!?

This time is different

I angered

the Eye

By being belligerent

Why wasn't I more cautious,

Why wasn't I more vigilant?

And so ~~the Eye~~ watches

the Eye
Watches
the
Eye

You get rejected because “(We) really liked the graphics that you used for 'the Eye.' It really helped your poem come alive. Unfortunately, we would not be able to reproduce (the graphics) in the issue itself” and “Though you start off with sort of a rhyme scheme, it disappears as you go along. (We) would have liked to see more rhythm in the poem, which would have added to the mystery and dread of the speaker as if it's a chant.” You're not angry at the editor who sent you that email; she's one of your classmates, and a friend, who's also a talented writer, and a good person, and you *know* it's not personal. It's genuinely good criticism, and *that's* the worst part. You just have to accept it and move on and use it to improve yourself.

If anything, you blame yourself for submitting the poem in the first place and thinking that it was ever good enough. A few days later, someone in your creative writing workshop group describes that same poem as “It's definitely interesting. It's

not great, but it's... It's a poem." ~~Fucking asshole.~~ Is that what he calls constructive criticism? That comment makes your blood boil. It's like when you introduce or show a picture of the person you're seeing to your friends and they say "As long as you're happy," or "Well, they seem... nice!" ~~Shut the fuck up, nobody asked for your opinion.~~ Except, you kind of did, and just like the journal's editor email, you just have to sit there and take it with one of those awkward, frog-like smiles.

One does not taste failure in their mouth; it is not like the taste of blood or medicine that clings to your tongue, it's not something that you can easily spit out or wash away. Instead, you taste failure somewhere deep in your chest – it's swallowing a piece of food without chewing it all the way through first; it's being hit in the solar plexus, it's not being able to tell if your heart is beating faster or slower but knowing it doesn't feel good.

*

It's late. You're staying at your mom's house in the Laurentides, deep in the woods, so the signal isn't too good. The air is sickeningly sweet with the smell of pines and lilac, and thick with the promises of rainstorms. It's good to finally be back home, and not have to worry much about school anymore, now that you've *unofficially*⁴ graduated. The clock in the kitchen ticks softly. You spend time with your brother, and your mom. You drive around, you buy a burger with too much mustard at a diner and eat it by the river. You clean your room and donate stuff to the nearest charity counter. You have nosebleeds everyday, you get a migraine and your bones hurt. You should probably see a doctor.

You borrow your mom's computer. It's too slow, and it doesn't properly connect to the internet, and the wallpaper is a photo of you and your brothers with your mom. You remember it was taken when you were fifteen or so, and you were on vacation. You still had long hair then. Everyone's skin and teeth have been smoothed and blurred too much. The fact your mom uses light mode hurts you, and the fact that her monitor is so zoomed out pains you even more. It'll have to do, though.

⁴ You're supposed to graduate this summer, because you've got one last class to complete, but everyone knows summer school doesn't *really* count. It's also more complicated to explain that way.

So, yes, you borrow your mom's computer to finish writing this *something* that you've been working on for the past month or so. All of these have been slowly collecting in your notebook, like dust on a window still, and it's time you organise your thoughts. Your mom asks you what you're writing about. You don't really know what to answer, yet. This *something*, it's about writing, but also about the time passing, and failure. You haven't even found a title yet. The placeholder title is *Bad Brain Blunder*, because you liked the alliteration, and because you've written most of it when your brain was "being bad" and also because writing sometimes feels like a mistake to you. Anyways, instead of explaining to your mom what it's about, you make her read it. She laughs at the line about "popcorn ceiling" and asbestos. You ask her questions about what she thought like "What's a passage that marked you? What do you think of the title? What would you *change*?", but she doesn't really answer them. She tells you she's not an expert, that it's been a long time since she read or analysed anything, that she's not as fluent in English as you are.

You text your friend Lea "Hey, I'm working on something to submit for the QWF writing stuff, would you be willing to take a quick look at it before I submit it?" She answers with an enthusiastic "Yeah sure!" You wonder how she's going to react when she sees you mentioned this. If she's going to chortle or get embarrassed. You two once had a conversation about where your love of writing came from; for her, it was from creating with her best friend, making up stories and characters and giving them life on the page, both with words and illustration. You're glad that her love of writing came from such a beautiful, pure place. It's such a rare thing, especially in a world that believes artists must be inherently tortured to be good. You hope she knows how much you respect her as a writer, and how much you cherish her as a friend. She presented her essay *The Metamorphosis of a Disney Princess: An Analysis of The Princess and the Frog and Mulan* at the literary conference⁵, and in your humble opinion, she was one of, if not the best ~~god damn~~ presenter. You even said so in the conference review you wrote for that class. You hope you don't lose sight of each other after you graduate and when she leaves for university.

⁵ Now that time has passed, and that you're not drowning in school assignments and ~~fucking~~ essays, you don't really care much that you weren't chosen to present at the conference. You're just genuinely glad that your friends got the credit they deserved, and that you're all done with that class.

You look up your friend Eden's work *Misremembering*, which won last year's College Writers award. You always enjoy reading Eden's writing, essays or poems or news features. You're not surprised she won last year. Her essay was also chosen for the conference, which was also not a surprise because, just like Lea, she's extremely competent and knowledgeable. You respect her opinion a lot; how honest she is about what she likes/dislikes, and what she thinks would make your writing even better. You hesitate a while before asking Eden if she wants to take a look at what you want to submit; you don't know if she's busy, and it's a bit last minute, and you don't want to bother her or put her in an awkward situation. You also don't want her to think that you only value her friendship because of what guidance she can provide you. But you trust her, and she *told* you she'd love to give you pointers and take a look at it, so you send her the same text you sent Lea. A few hours later, she tells you that although she's busy, she'll do her best to find some time, and that she's excited you decided to submit something. You're relieved. You want her to know that the fact she did it before you gave you the courage to at least try. You want her to know that you read the word she left in your yearbook and that you agree; it's not the last time you both make magic in the same room.

I'm suddenly very aware of how *meta* this is all getting. I want to apologize to the reader: this is what I feared would happen by being too vulnerable – that it would become *too* real. The clock pendulums are crashing into one another, and yet it's not the end. It's terrifying. It's beautiful. The universe comes crashing down on the both of us, and it feels like that moment right before the Big Bang, when/where everything was compressed together before the Great Explosion. Your heart beats faster, or slower... You can't tell. Lightning strikes. The past is over. We don't have to worry about it anymore. The future has yet to come, so why even think about it?

I don't know if you have what it takes to live in the present, but you don't have a choice. I know that something beautiful awaits us, so you have to keep going.