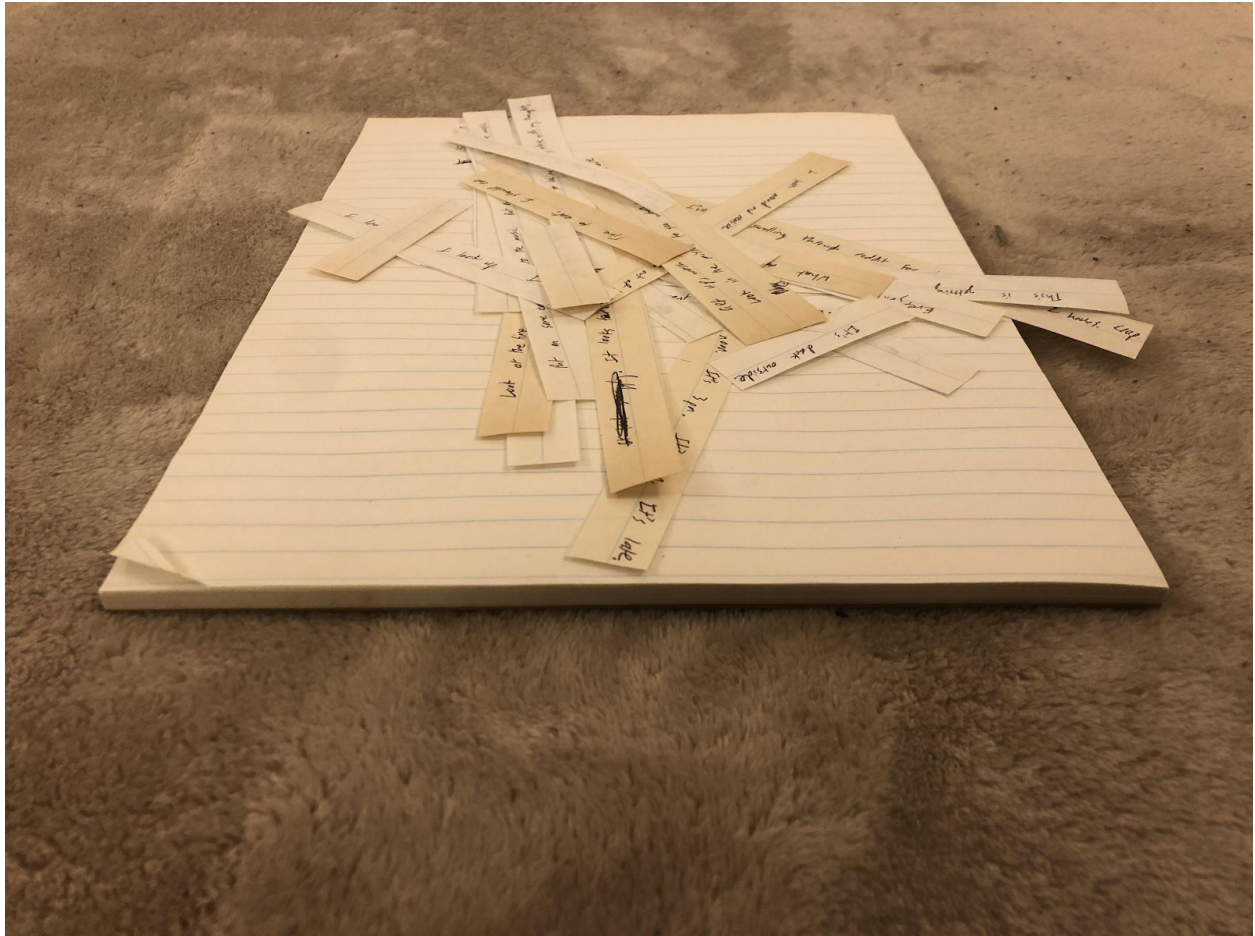


Being Lost in a Fog and a Tangle of Thoughts



by Dylan Nanjad

Final Reflection

When I chose creative writing this semester, it made me happy. I figured I'd have a lot of fun with it, and finally get the outlet that I craved. I never really had much room for creative expression growing up, and it wasn't for any particular reason. It was just something I didn't know existed, not until I started college. I didn't know what to expect when the semester started. And then the first assignment came. "Meet my ___." We had to talk about something that was important to us. I was utterly confused. What kind of trap was this? No one had ever assigned me something like this before. It was a simple task, but entirely different: it asked me to talk about myself. Something I had never been encouraged to do before. I was in shock for a few minutes. Then it hit me: I'll just talk about my cargo shorts that I've been wearing for almost 7 years. It made me smile. And so I sat and typed. I finally had a chance to be me. It was brief, but the fog that had been in my head for years had lifted, and I wanted to chase that feeling of freedom.

The next memorable assignment was the second memoir. Once again, we had to talk about ourselves. I had no idea what to write. I felt so lost. There was only one thing to do: I sat and typed. All the events in my life that had led to this moment, this feeling. I had been so scared of taking a step forward without seeing where I was going. Terrified of reaching or calling out for help only for nobody to respond. I wanted to do something. Anything. And I did. *Tap tap tap*. Letter after letter. Word after word. Sentence after sentence. The result was a portrait of my past. My journey. I hadn't been able to move forward because I hadn't understood where I came from. How I had become me: scared, alone, bitter, angry. I didn't want to feel that anymore. I'd give anything to just be happy with myself. To be happy with being me. But I didn't know how. All these threads that had been running in my mind were suddenly coming together on a screen, and I could finally take a step back and see that they were all connected, in an infinite number of ways but also as one. I didn't stop typing. I wrote the whole thing in forty minutes. It was during this process that I realized I had a voice. This memoir was a snapshot of who I was. Who I had been for a long time. It was cathartic. Writing it was the first step to coming to terms with my past and sent me down the rabbit hole in search of understanding who I am.

The short story came next. I remember not knowing what event in my life to use. I wanted it to be a meaningful one. I wanted the story to be a meaningful one. Something I could pour my heart into. Something that made me feel something. But it was more than that. I wanted to do more than just speak about a time that I felt that something. I wanted to share it. To let others who would read this short story to feel what I did. I didn't know how to do that exactly, but I finally found the memory I wanted: one of the nights during my trip to Alaska. My friends and I had stayed up, talking, and playing around. We ended up talking about books and things that we loved, so I brought up Neil Gaiman's *The*

Sandman, which remains one of my favorite creative works ever. They were fascinated by the world and wanted to know more. So, I ended up narrating a comic book for an hour or two. We eventually started falling asleep and went to bed, but seeing the wonder in their eyes that sparked from sharing a story made me feel something I didn't understand until the assignment: a connection. Just a bunch of people, brought together by chance, united in the world of Dreams. Writing the short story, and subsequently diving into that memory, made me realize what it was that drew me towards those who inspired me: they made me feel like I wasn't alone. J.K Rowling, Phillip Pullman, Christopher Paolini - they kept me company during my childhood, encouraging my mind to wander and wonder. I had company in stories for all those years. And here I was, years down the road, still looking for new stories to find comfort in.

Another good thing came out of these assignments. I started showing them with my friends. I didn't ask them to proofread anything, I just wanted to share these pieces. They touched upon aspects of myself that I hadn't been comfortable with sharing before, and through reading them I hoped my friends would understand me as a person better. It was a success. They were extremely supportive, and also opened up to me in turn. We spent hours in deep conversation just from me sharing my writing, and it made me happy. I had spent a lot of time worrying about our relationship, as quarantine left us with minimal time to spend together in person. We were, in reality, fine. But there was more to this. I was afraid of something else, and talking to them about my assignments helped me find the root of my problem.

My greatest struggle is overthinking. I get stuck in my head. That, combined with the haze that pervades my mindscape, leaves me feeling utterly alone. It makes me scared to call or reach out for help. I want my writing to touch someone. It could be just one person. I want to let them know that they aren't alone and that everything will be okay. I don't want anyone to have to experience the pain of feeling as if you exist in a void, with nothing to anchor yourself with. That's what this class taught me. We learned about writing techniques, dialogue, poetry, all that stuff. Most importantly, it helped me get closer to figuring out who I am.

Second Memoir

Growing up, it was clear what I wanted to do: be a scientist. It wasn't something I ever questioned. I loved learning about animals, plants, biology - everything nature related. I remember my first dream job was to be a paleontologist, because what four year old doesn't find dinosaurs cool? My parents were very supportive and constantly bought me books to expand my knowledge. I couldn't stop and I honestly didn't want to. I spent hours a day just reading about different wildlife and how each of their bodies developed solutions to specific problems, and probably would've never stopped if I didn't have to eat and do all that other boring stuff. I went through middle school knowing that I'd eventually end up being some kind of scientist, one way or another. No specific field, but that was where my heart lay. Then my whole world started to change in high school.

I had always figured high school would be a crazy time, but there's a difference between hearing about something and experiencing it. There was so much that I didn't really know about. One of the main things was TV shows and movies. Disney played a huge role in my childhood and still does, but aside from the occasional martial arts movie I was kind of clueless about the diversity of the entertainment industry. High school was when my parents got Netflix. After talking to friends, I ended up going down the rabbit hole of anime and superhero shows primarily. It was insane how much there was to see. At the time all I could think was "wow, that was cool," but watching TV became a really big part of my life from then on. In my junior year, I looked at myself and realized that I didn't know where I belonged anymore. Science still seemed like home, but now there was a seed of uncertainty. I had taken my eyes off the well worn trail to enjoy the scenery. Somehow the sights guided me off onto a path I had never seen before. I was lost and confused. My mind was in a haze, and I didn't know how to get out of it.

The haze didn't ever go away, not even after high school. In college I was majoring in game design, chasing a goal that my heart knew I didn't belong. Then I was hit with a spark. In one of my prerequisite classes, we had one project where we had to make a trailer for any movie we wanted. I spent about a month and a half not knowing what in the world I was doing, and made zero progress. In my spare time I was watching a parody series which honestly kept me afloat in all the confusion. I had already picked one of my favorite movies: Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*. But I didn't want to just make a trailer. Sure, there was an art to it, but I wanted to add something to this. This movie changed me, in ways that I wouldn't understand until later, and my heart wouldn't let me rest just getting this project done for the sake of it. I had one day until the deadline, not a single good idea, and just a ton of footage from the movie. So basically nothing. The computer labs were open from 9am to 9pm that day for finals, so I got there in the morning and sat down to work. All of a sudden it hit me. I came up with an idea for a story to combine the parody I loved with the film I loved, and got to work. Twelve hours later, it was done. I'd never been prouder of a piece of work. It wasn't until the next week that I realized I had felt completely focused editing that video. There was no haze in my head, no anxiety about not being in the right place. For those twelve hours, I was home. The spark had ignited something I wasn't clear about yet, but I had one thread to follow: movies and TV. After finishing that project, I started to watch video analyses of my favorite films and shows, and began to appreciate the thought and execution that went into them. I kept going, and eventually I found myself watching all types of analysis videos - for books, comics, manga, games - there was no end to this rabbit hole. As I learned to think critically and look back at the things I enjoyed, I found the common thread: storytelling, whether it be visual, oral, or experiential. The haze is still there, and it might never go away. But that's okay. I finally have some sense of self after so long. And that's a win for me.

The First Night

Neil lay in his bed, staring at the ceiling and wondering what the point of going out was. All he could think about was his old friends, and how they were doing. Were they having fun, hanging out at the local bookstore, or learning more alchemy from their apprenticeships? Were they having fun, knowing that they wouldn't see him for an indefinite amount of time? *You know they are*, he thought. His stomach twisted, and he covered his face with his hands and rolled over, trying to hide from it all. He knew it wasn't right, being bitter towards them over something they had no control over. He also knew that everyone was struggling back home, and alchemists were being worked harder than ever before since the incident had left the existing nations without an energy source. *They deserve to be happy, they're going through enough as it is.*

It was almost ten in the night. *I need to do something.* Frustrated, he left the room and walked to the lounge by the dining area. To his surprise, the other children were there too. *Oh. Well, time to head back.* But then he paused. *What change will come about from retreating to my room? I don't want things to remain as they are, let's take a leap of faith.* Steeling himself, he walked over to where the other five were sitting. Everyone knew each other's names. It was just a matter of trying to start a conversation. Juliet saw him approach and smiled, which made any doubts he still had disappear. He sat next to her on the couch, with Angela on her other side. *Here goes nothing.* Trying to be funny he went

"Hey everyone, my name's Neil and I'm new here."

"Hiiii Neil," they all replied in unison.

The same way you'd respond to someone at an anonymous meeting. He instantly cracked a grin. These guys were fun...

"Oh sh-!"

Liberty yelped as her chair flipped backwards and she rolled over onto the floor. She had wrapped herself in a blanket while tilting her chair backwards,

against her own and the newly formed friend group's better judgement. Everyone cackled, watching her get even more tangled in the sheet and look like a weird ghost.

"Hold still,"

Angela snickered as she got up to help untangle the poor soul from her web of questionable decisions. Still laughing, Neil looked around and got hit with a sudden realization. *This is really nice.* It was already midnight, and he hadn't even noticed. Looking at everyone smiling, he was filled with something new. *Is this...warmth?* He stopped. Had it been so long he'd forgotten what it was like to be happy? *Wow, that needs some attention, but we'll get to that later.* Things were going so well, and he wanted to make this last as long as possible.

"Liberty," Olivia said, jogging Neil out of his thoughts, "you look exhausted."

"I thought you were gonna say I look like shit," Liberty replied.

"I mean I stopped myself, but yeah you kinda do," said Olivia.

Liberty grinned and responded by chucking a button that fell off her flannel during the fall as a response. Neil watched the exchange with a straight face, wondering how Olivia didn't lose an eye. *Then again, even if that did happen she could probably regrow it after maybe a week if I use the right spell.* Juliet definitely had better mana reserves, but from what she had mentioned in passing, memorizing the language needed for magic was very difficult. Either way, it would turn out okay.

"Hey guys," said Parker. "Listen up."

He had said maybe twenty sentences since they all started talking, so the others turned to give him their undivided attention. Blushing, he stuttered and took a few seconds to regroup his thoughts.

"I just wanted to say I'm really happy. I thought it would be really lonely on this ship, just like at home...I kind of gave up on the idea of meeting people who make me feel okay with being me. So uh, yeah. Thank you."

Juliet went over to give him a hug.

"I felt the same way too, honestly I was just going to focus on documenting everything we came across during the expedition. After the riots started back home...there's nothing to go back to. It's why I was glad to come along the expedition. Maybe we'll find something that helps fix the shortage. But now things are different. I have good company agaaaain," stifling a yawn at the end of her sentence.

Noticing this, Neil said "Hey, it's been a long day, we worked our asses off this morning. Why don't we all get some sleep."

"Wait up," mumbled Parker. "You said you had some really cool stories that you loved reading earlier, didn't you?"

"Uh, yeah?" Neil replied confused.

Parker grabbed a blanket and curled up on the couch.

"Can you tell them please?"

Neil looked around and saw everyone watching him eagerly. He smiled and softly said "Okay." And so began the first of many nights of storytelling.

Self-Portrait

Most of my time is spent watching, listening
and thinking. In all of those actions I am wandering.

I live in a neighborhood where I grew up in but was
never raised to be a part of.

Music is a huge part of me: Red Hot Chili Peppers, Led Zeppelin, The Weeknd.
I see it as an art form that transcends spoken or written word.

I read comics and manga, although before them I always had books.

I love works that spark wonder in my eyes,
one of my favorites being Neil Gaiman's The Sandman.

The beings in that world are beyond our comprehension,
yet the struggles they face are all too relatable.

Dream, Peter Parker, Eren Yeager, Zuko.

Their relatability is a reason why my passion lies
in storytelling.

I like to ride my longboard through the park, the streets,
on smooth roads, feeling the pavement rush under me
and the breeze caress my outstretched arms.

I love walking in the city, getting excited about the architecture
and admiring how much went into bringing an idea into reality.

Because that's what art is, I think. Anything that you want it to be, for whatever
reason

you wish.

Finding a unique building will put a smile on my face for at least the next ten
minutes.

My friends love teasing me about it, but I don't really care.

I love looking up at the clouds. They make me happy.

Nature is beautiful.

I like museums, and when I go to an art exhibit,

I can sit at one painting for hours, looking at every stroke, every detail.

Silence is something I value with other people. Just being present with them.

Comfortable. But I also love humor and engaging conversation.

I haven't found a sweet spot yet. The search continues, and

It may never end. And that's okay.

I want to enjoy the journey.

There are a few things that I have experienced,
and an infinite number that I haven't.

I hope that the ones I come across will help me understand myself better.

Dialogue

Sanjeev, Sarvesh, and Me

Sanjeev: JV Sarvesh: S Me: D

JV: Ya playin again 2nite?

D: Yeah probably

JV: Bet add me 2 nd I'll prolly play too

S: Bro I feel like my wasd keys gonna stop working soon. I've gotten pretty good at fighting. Once I get the elemental combinations down it's clipped. I've started to use superconductor a lot more.

JV: U tink dat game gon break yo keys? U ain't ever c me button smash ina game yet lmao.

D: LMAOO. Superconductor helps a lot. Also overload.

S: Man this is so much fun. I can't wait to get to rank 16. Almost to 14.

JV: Glad yuh enjoying sum

S: We closing in boyz.

D: Yeah you get to work with other characters when you do co-op.

JV: I ain't touch d game yet. I started an anime yesterday and forgot.

D: What anime?

JV: Mirai Nikki

D: OH

JV: It's pretty good but it's jus like

D: love that one.

JV: Wat the fuck. Shit keeps u hooked

D: It's great. Really interesting thriller.

S: I gotta rewatch that. It's so good

JV: Yeah I'm still waiting to see what else gon happen. I'm only halfway done

S: Oooo. Enjoy it.

D: Yeah shit hasn't started yet.

Journal #3

The memoirs are the first writing assignments I've enjoyed doing in a long time. They allowed me to get personal and express myself to a degree that I normally don't. I'm pretty quiet in person and it takes a while to warm up to people, so writing down my thoughts is an easier way for me to let my guard down. The hardest thing for me is starting. I tend to overthink things and try to figure it out before I do anything. It almost always gets me nowhere. It's even worse when I get a lot of freedom, like with the second memoir. Being able to write about whatever I want is kind of daunting, and combined with overthinking makes for a real hard time. I spent the majority of the week stressing over what I should write about and whether or not my ideas were worth investing in. Eventually, I took a step back and realized that I just had to start, and sat down to work. Freewriting went surprisingly well for me; normally it's a 50/50 success-wise. Eventually I was really happy with what came out. I hope to do more in the future.

Journal #6

Writing short stories was something completely new to me. But much like the memoirs, I ended up loving the process. I spend most of my time overthinking, and tend to get stuck in my head. Writing short stories helps me clear my head. I just look at the blank screen and let my hands type away. The creative process doesn't feel like work: it's something I really enjoy. It lets me explore other aspects of myself without getting lost. Almost like another form of therapy. To be more precise, it doesn't clear my head. Everything is still in there, it's just that putting them on a paper or screen allows me to take a step back and look at everything from a new angle. Simply coming up with ideas for the short stories has helped me realize some problems and patterns that I experience, and this awareness has helped me grow much more than I thought I could.