

STUDENT WRITINGS

from
North Park University's Writing Retreat

March 4–6, 2016
Covenant Point Bible Camp, Iron River Township, Michigan

The following writings were composed throughout the weekend and read by the students to their peers. They are presented here without major revisions, in order to show what these students are able to achieve in a few days of concentrated learning and writing.

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TRACKS

After a lesson on tracking animal prints, the students were given the prompt, “The tracks tell the story of what happened.” The following pieces respond to that prompt.

Untitled Poem

Stephen Nielsen

English – Creative Writing Major

Yeti tracks.

Pictures of long nights out,

Memories of what has come, and never to return.

Summer camps, the final call for “lights out.”

As the graceful deer weave their way through the thick forest,

So too, that smile, splitting the thunderous hooves

Of important tests, and their scores:

A nest of B's.

Walking.

We packed our boots with feet of snow

Spying animal tracks.

Searching their history to obtain their present.

Present.

This gift of God we call nature,

Emancipated places

Underappreciated.

Stepping through time,

We think of those we love,

Have loved, and might never love again.

Those who left the biggest imprints on our lives.

Wet shoes
Swimming on ice
Bald Eagles,
Oh how nice?

These are the things of the past,
Tracks that can never be reprinted.
But now that our tracks have crossed,
Shall we keep making new ones?

My Father's Hands Track the Story of His Life

Damiano Taietti

Graduate Student from Italy

This is the first time I'm writing something about my father, and I guess this is my weird way to thank him for all the love that I have received.

My father and I have a pretty cold relationship, or at least this is what can be deduced from a first glance. As far as I remember I have hugged him two or three times in my life, and the last time was just before leaving home for Chicago.

He is a taciturn and reserved person, and he is definitely not used to starting conversations. He barely replies when he is asked something, and most of the time my mother answers for him. I guess many wives behave this way with their husbands.

My father is 68 years old, and he has been a carpenter since he was 16. Now he is retired, but he perceives his retirement as just a label that doesn't affect his routine at all. Indeed, despite his age, he wakes up every day at 7:00 am to go to work, and he comes back home at 6:00 pm. Every single day of the week, Saturday included. Unfortunately, I haven't inherited this dedication to work. It's one of the values which I admire most in my father, and if I think about it I feel pretty ashamed, weak, and useless.

Sometimes, deeply looking at some parts of the body we can read the story of a person's life. Everyone can tell that my father is a carpenter by observing his hands. They are big, strong, thick, and they carry the marks of a life devoted to work. They have multiple scars and a finger tip has been partially cut because of an incident with an electric hacksaw. His hands also track the story of the love that my family has received in an unconventional form. Those hands, so weak when they were asked to express a gesture of care, have always been present in my life when they were required to fix something.

My father belongs to that category—which is now sadly disappearing—of men able to fix literally everything. He expresses his creativity using his hands, and throughout my life he has been able to fix every single object that my sisters, my mother and me had broken.

Since he was born just after the end of the Second World War, his childhood has been tough, and he learned the importance of recycling things as much as possible. I guess that this obsession for recycling has its roots in that period of his life. This makes me smile, thinking about the relationship between my parents. Probably because he almost risks to be buried by the massive amount of stuff piled in our garage, my mother hates this trait of his character. However, I consider this recycling ability a form of art.

My father's hands have been able to give love more than words could have, and I am grateful to him, even though I have never found the courage to thank him.

Hopefully, one day I will write him a letter. I know that expressing my gratefulness by talking to him face-to-face would be too awkward for both of us. I might be wrong: maybe he would appreciate it, but still the wall of silence between us would be too hard to remove.

Around two months ago I had a serious car accident, which made me realize that we are not as in control of our lives as we think. We are pawns on a chessboard in a match between life and death. So, I would like to suggest everyone think about a person that you love and try to find your own way to communicate your feelings to that person as soon as possible, because it is never too early.

Untitled Poem

Axel Rejler

SVF Exchange Student

Blind due to snow
bright as whoa
walls our of trees
protecting from breeze
silent and empty
but home to plenty
paths from animal feet
are here to greet
only to be destroyed
by our own
scarring the silent
and staining the bright ground
but look what a great track we found

Ashamed of What?

Ricardo Huerta

Philosophy and Biblical and Theological Studies Double Major

Her appearance still gives it away.

Maybe not to everyone,

but I know all the small stories that her look tells.

Everything about her would point you to the fact that she had to work hard for a living.

My cotton t-shirts she always asked to borrow and I would reluctantly agree to.

She'd bring them back with bleach stains and I'd swear to God to never lend her one again.

The next morning I'd cave in. "Yes, you can take one."

She's been wearing the same blue jeans for years and

I'm not sure if they'll ever wear out, even if her body does.

I think Levi Strauss knew what he was doing.

I can still see her old tennis shoes.

She probably bought them at Payless to save a few bucks.

She always tried to find the most comfortable pair,

even if that meant sacrificing style.

She'd usually end up with some bright colored shoe that never really fit her personality.

They were cheap.

That's all that mattered.

She wears her hair in a ponytail.

It's been like that for 30 years and experience me tells me it'll be like that tomorrow.

I kind of like it.

She has a long pointy nose.

I think it knows the smell of Clorox better than fresh air and

I've always wondered:

Do cleaning supplies cause cancer?

I hope not, or else she'd be out of luck.

I imagined holding her hand last night when I was praying.

It was cracked and leathery, but I found it so comforting.

I met my friends' moms once and after greeting them

I wondered why their hands were so smooth.

My mom's aren't like that.

All this leads to something,

but sometimes I shy away from it.

My mom cleans houses for a living.

I don't know why, but it feels like some sort of shameful confession I have to make.

Growing up, there was no question I dreaded more than the typical

"What does your mom do?"

in which my reply was usually followed by an awkward

"Oh."

What was so strange about my mom's job that it couldn't even elicit a real word?

I was ashamed, but ashamed of what?

My mom has spent 30 years
Cleaning toilets,
Scrubbing bathtubs,
Mopping floors,
Squeegeeing windows,
Wringing rags,
And God knows what else.

All this for me,
All this for my sister,
All this for food,
All this for a tiny apartment,

All this for me to be ashamed?

No, I refuse to be ashamed.

My mom isn't a lawyer,
Or a doctor,
Or a professor.

She's a house cleaner and a damn good one too.
She's at the edge of her field constantly finding ways to take stains out of carpets,
Gunk off of stoves,
And marks off of walls.

Remind me again, what am I suppose to be ashamed of?

WALKING

[Listen here](#) to the students' responses to the prompt "Walking is..."

The following piece was based in the prompt "I remember walking..."

Beginnings of Essay on Walking

Jessica Sardar

Politics and Government and Philosophy Major

I remember walking on the cobblestone ridden streets of Munich to forget what happened. Ten hour layovers after nine hour flights do not allow for much forgetting, but I could at least try. Crossing my fingers, I boarded a train to Marienplatz, a tourist destination full of just the right amount of Forever 21s to distract me. I remember wishing I liked traveling by myself more. Or at least not when it's 8am, a completely unacceptable time to meander into a pub and spontaneously spark up a conversation with an attractive German man who happens to ask good questions and love poetry. But, I did get to watch the city wake up sluggishly from its deep Saturday night slumber. Beautiful, yawning blonde people surrounded me, but I couldn't keep my mind off of the little teary-eyed brother hugging me tighter than I could handle. "Are you sad?" I asked clutching my suitcase in one hand and catching a falling tear with the other. "I never saw much of him anyway so its not gonna be very different." He paused. "Besides, they still talk like they love each other." I wished I could stay and listen to him speak about talking love for an eternity, but instead I kissed his salty skin and said an all too familiar goodbye...

PLAY

The following poem developed from a creative writing exercise called “Homo Ludens: (Hum)Man(ity) At Play.”

NOT YOUR LITTLE GUY, molly

Kelsey Wilp

English – Creative Writing Major

salmon scales on a
dogwood tree, storks of a
feather, honey bee.

corncob forest
smoke plume mustache,
holy pilgrim lips
and North Carolinian whispers.

Doctor Santilli's prophecy-
your own fulfillment

psycho shining silverware and
blanketed boxes of
off brand action figures.

my anxious gremlin docked on your carpet, molly.
it's your bony buttocks now, other molly.

ATTENTION

The following essay responded to the prompt, "Write about an experience of paying attention."

Essay on Attention

Lova Nylén

SVF Exchange Student

To pay attention, to invest your time, your curiosity into just one thing. Focus.

A sacrifice you will never get back. That's dedication.

To pay someone to give attention to, the attention you want to give.

Like a Bruce Springsteen concert. I pay him, so he can get my attention away from everything else.

To focus on just his awesome songs for an hour or two.

But I guess that's an easy kind of attention, though I'm a big fan, but also because it's entertainment.

It's harder with the small stuff.

To pay attention when the leaves are shifting color in the fall, the first sip of coffee, or the wind coming in over the tree tops. To take it in, really. Because then your mind has to be open for everything; it demands your full attention. Every single little detail of what's around you. Your surrounding screams, "Embrace me! Get inspired by me!" It's chaos.

It feels like that at first, like I need to bring something out of it. To produce something, make a conclusion, make order. That's stressful.

No! Give attention what it deserves:

Time. What would attention be without time? Like mustard without mayo?

Time makes you a part of your surroundings. You don't just see the wind making those branches wave at you. You are a part of it. You affect the tree just as much the tree affects you. Everything has to embrace you. Quiet. Calm.

Now you pay attention.

To find rest in this small, beautiful part of the world you are located in now. To be grateful for the ability to pay attention to it.

COMMENTS

The following pieces either comment on the overall writing retreat or an experience from the student's life.

Sightless Eyes

Kaylyn Sweitzer

English Major

Listen for the sound of silence. It's drawing you close; it's calling you near. Everything that surrounds you has a heart, beating, throbbing with life. This life shall fill you if you so choose to allow it. Even that lone cabin standing deep in the woods has breath. The one with the rickety stairs and creaking floorboards. You know the one. Though desolate and empty, it is filled with the bright spirit of solitude. It is the home of none, but it houses many a visitor. From the small and meek to the tall and sleek.

There is a notable difference between being lone and being lonely. Being lone means finding comfort and pleasure in a state of solitude. Being lonely is one of mankind's greatest fears. In a world filled with billions of people, it's hard to feel alone, and yet, people still do. I find great enjoyment in finding lapses of silence. It's always a pleasant surprise. It's almost like finding a nickel when expecting a penny.

The sound of silence in nature rings differently than any other. Often, it is filled with more natural sounds: birds, water, wind. Though not being a complete state of silence, it is a complete absence of human infringement. The world would sing a different tune without the taint of human involvement. We say that we're trying to make it better, when we're only making it worse. Humans often try to improve on what is already there, as if the world, a natural state of perfection, needs improving. How can something so flawless possibly require anything? If anything, we should spend time improving ourselves and one another. We are the only flawed creations on this planet, and we've done it to ourselves. Oh, how man is a fickle thing, swaying this way and that. Even the towering birch trees know this to be true. With branches high and long, they without eyes see so much more than us. Their sightless eyes are clear while ours are blind. Man fails to see through such blindness. Therefore, we have never truly seen what is really there. We all live blind lives.

*Untitled Song Lyrics***Markus Tenfält****SVF Exchange Student**

The land of equality
democracy too
Well, that's what they told me
and what they told you
Was it just a lie?
Well, it seems to be
Is this what we call
a neutrality?

For now we work with
a dictatorship
A state where they punish
critics with a whip
They have public caning
for people to see
Would Badawi consent to
our neutrality?

More than two hundred years
of peace we pride
We sell them weapons
but that we must hide
What it's all about
is sending a fee
It's money that matters
in our neutrality

For they disregard women
and gay people too
We say don't turn a blind eye
but that's what we do
Yes, we help them out
their society
Is this what you call
a neutrality?

Excerpts from "Mushing and Sailing Rules for Life"

Claire Higgins

Philosophy Major

Do not aim for the spot you want on the shore. Read the current. Adjust to a hard ferry angle if necessary.

One person cannot man the mizzen, the tiller, the main sheets, and the bow. One man trying to do the job of five is not prowess; it is ignorance.

Anchors are hard to pull in when entrenched in clay or caught on coral. Asking for help will get you under way much faster and with less injury than preserving your pride.

While small and light, the necessity of the shrouds cannot be underemphasized. When everything is going well they should be relaxed and at ease, but when the wind shifts they keep everything from going to shit.

Always make sure the compass is lined up to the bench or else it tells you nothing.

The center board needs to be down in headwinds and up in downwinds. Be stiff when the time calls for it, but don't be your own blockage when everything is smooth.

The deeper the water, the more line you need to let out so your anchor doesn't pull up and set you adrift in the night.

Going with the wind isn't always the most fun. It's easy, but it's boring. Going against the wind takes more work, but you can feel the breeze.

If you hold onto the dock as you push the boat away from it, you won't be able to hold on to either.

Not all barracudas bite. Not all tiger sharks are out to get you. Sometimes stingrays leap five feet out of the water, and maybe there's a reason, but maybe that reason is partially because it's fun.

If the water is moving, deep, or dark, do not swim in it leisurely. Get in and out without having your toes bitten off or getting caught undercurrent. But yes, you do have to get in.

Take time at the beginning of every day to chart a course around any obstacles. That way you know what is coming, and though you may be zigzagging, you will not be off course.

If you're at the tiller and you aren't looking straight down the king plank, you can steer incredibly off course. Perspective is everything.

I'm not sure I trust anyone who hasn't brought themselves through a night with but one point of light ahead of them. I'm not sure I trust anyone who hasn't sailed by the stars.

Look out for the pinches, Water flows fastest through tight spots of pressure.

The dogs come first. Always.

Falling through the ice on the first day is actually okay, because it satisfies any looming bad juju.

When you do fall through the ice, the appropriate response is panic. Once you get out of the water and are now slowly turning into a block of ice yourself, the appropriate response is laughter. Ice melts faster if it's warmed from the inside.

Sometimes you will feel like you need to sit down and cry for no reason. But you can probably walk and cry at the same time.

Slow and steady might not always win the race, but it will get you across a hundred miles of frozen tundra, and that's what really matters, right?

Always look back and appreciate your day. Tell people what you appreciate about them. Tell people what you need.

Keep a record of where you've been.

Pick one spot 15 feet in front of you. When you get halfway to it, pick the next one. Complete as many cycles as is manageable before resting. Rest for no longer than one cycle. Continue.

If you blow your snot into the wind, it is courteous to check if there is someone close behind you.

Sometimes breaking your own trail seems like the best option.

Sometimes, you spend three hours hacking through a forest of dogwood in four feet of snow and get to the place you thought would be a path only to find it impassable and then have to turn around.

Then you find the first path and cry, because what the hell, and you only have three days to get home.

Sometimes, one person in charge will tell you that it's okay to take your liner gloves off if you're hot, because you've earned the right at that point to make some of your own damn decisions, but then the next day another person will yell at you for it. You are not a child. Do not cry because this is not your fault.

Something inside changes when you wake up every day expectant of hardships and challenges from the moment you open your eyes in the morning to the moment you close them at night. Something else changes when you wake up excited for them.

Resurgence Calling

Clarissa Sutton

English Major

Wood smoke ghosts through the
crisp winter air, fluttering
along among the branches.

In that deep throated murmur, the trees
learn to breathe, dancing to
the bells of a distant birdsong.

The snow is melting;
equanimity slips in—boots
meeting a patch of unforeseen ice.
but the landing is easy
on unpacked snow—gentle
stillness filling the cavity in my chest

Birches tucked among the evergreens
reach for the sky—fractured sun
falling from behind patterned clouds,
mirroring the child-packed snow
fort, giving hope for the
resurgence of life.

We fold ourselves in to layers
of warmth, and venture off
to the wilderness, wondering
if we can find new purpose

in the drip of melting ice, solace
in snow and soft morning light

Hot coffee skates across my
wind-chilled lips, a comfort
I can always find, energy bound
to the inside of a mug. Words
filter out, resisting the pen, but
I'll wrangle them together out of spite.