

Portfolio 2 | Familiar Essay

Value: 15% of your final grade.

Due: Draft—In *Tutorial*, Feb 6-8, Final—In *Lecture*, Feb 13

Length: 5-6+ double-spaced pages (approx. 1700-2000 words), excl Title page/works cited + CR

Instructions:

- Compose a full *familiar essay* as per the requirements above. For this paper, your audience is “well-informed layperson,” Imagine writing for *The Globe and Mail* or *The New York Times* and their readership. Consult course models in matters of style.
- For this assignment, you are required to use at least two published sources (essays, novels, short stories, poems, and so on, as per 1.3), one scene (1.2), and include a *Beginning* and *Ending* for your essay. Your paper must show *movement* between sources and ample *thought-reflection*. You may include a third source, or close off your narrative with a second (short) scene that acts as a resolution to your *Journey*.
- Essays of this type do not ordinarily call for a “Works Cited” list; citation is normally done within the text, without parenthetical documentation. For this essay, omit the parenthetical documentation within the text; write in your sources (as per Catalli). But include a “Works Cited” list at the end of your essay.
- Bring one copy of your draft to your tutorial on the day your draft is due.
- Please review “Housekeeping” in the Syllabus for formatting requirements.

Please Note:

- You are not locked into a final scene or source until the portfolio is due. You may change your mind about your subject or source at any time. All Portfolio assignments must be completed once and included in your final submission.
- Remember the structure of *the Journey* and incorporate it into your work. Do you return and reintegrate (show evidence of growth and new understanding)? Remember, *the Journey* can be physical, spiritual, or both. Show us yours!
- Remember, if your *Journey* has not been completed, then this is not a good experience to discuss. Avoid traumatic, personal events, in favour of positive learning experiences. Avoid literally naming your paper “How I Learned to Be Awesome!” but that is the general idea. If you got to University, you are a success story. Tell us about it!
- Overall, your purpose in this paper is to use an example, experience, or moment from your life that illustrates a moment of growth or understanding for you. **Communicate this wisdom** to your audience using your *scene*, sources and *Idea* developed in prior assignments.
 - Take into account all the feedback you have received in order to help you continue to analyze and fine-tune your *Idea/Preferred reading*.
 - In other words, do not tack on, **integrate** and develop. Be *recursive*. Your work should show evidence of an ongoing writing process.
- You must hand in your **complete portfolio for Portfolio 2**, including:
 - Your composing reflection
 - Your final version of the essay (right under your composing reflection), marked clearly “FINAL VERSION.”

- Your peer reviewed drafts, marked “DRAFT.”
- Your assessed exercises in reverse order: Exercise 2.1 should be at the very bottom of the portfolio. If you do not have an assessed copy, you can turn in a clean copy. However, all pre-assignments must show evidence of revision and not simply be excerpts from your final assignment.
- **Students who do not hand in the required exercises will not receive a grade. Your tutorial leader may also choose to apply late grades to incomplete assignments.**
- Your TA may have additional advice for success on this assignment.

What Lies Ahead

The sun hung for a few moments longer in the sky that day. At around 4 p.m. the great blue January sky blushed, and the shadows of buildings spread in a yawn that seemed to chase the squirrels scampering across the birch boughs. I was 21 years old and freshly unemployed. So freshly unemployed that the words of my chef that morning had only just begun to sink in.

“You’re just not seeing the big picture.”

In that moment, I felt relief. Relief and horrible, aching flu pains pulsing through my body. The relief was nice though. The sun’s blustering light inflamed the dusty storefront of the immigration office across the street; I longed to feel its hot caress.

The walk home from the restaurant (my former place of employment) was through several inches of hard snow, baked into ice by that great orb and pressed into crunchy and treacherous crags by gravity’s paternal embrace. At fourteen below zero I had trudged with an odd lightness in my head, as if my mind had come untethered, perhaps in an effort to escape from my half-frozen, flu-ridden, unemployed body. Now that I was home, I missed that lightness, the psychic lightness of being unmoored in the sunshine.

At 4:30 p.m. a cold sweat replaced my relief, and the wind whistled low through the single-glazed pane of glass in the window of my bedroom. Everything was falling apart, not least of all my house. The shower had fallen out of the wall just weeks earlier, and our landlord hadn’t exactly rushed to fix it. I sat hunched in my salvaged hammock chair and blew on a bowl of vegetable soup, my thoughts resembling eerily the nonsense of my alphabet noodles.

I can’t say I was in despair. No one had died in my arms, no true love had been lost. Yet I felt disembodied, as if inside of me a dark water was slowly rising from the pit of my stomach and my organs had climbed up on the furniture to escape. I felt unreal, captured like a freeze-

frame between planes of motion. On the one hand I desired to propel myself forward, to meet the future with a straight back and willful stride. But on the other I wanted to shrink further into my drooping chair, hide from the world and nurse my ailment. I felt a detached sadness that I imagined Albert Camus carried with him always.

I admire Camus' talent for describing so eloquently his existential angst, while at the same time seeming to transcend it. In his essay "Love of Life" he writes:

Today is a resting time, and my heart goes off in search of itself. If an anguish still clutches me, it's when I feel this impalpable moment slip through my fingers like quicksilver... At the moment, my whole kingdom is of this world. This sun and these shadows, this warmth and this cold rising from the depths of the air: why wonder if something is dying or if men suffer, since everything is written on this window where the sun sheds its plenty as a greeting to my pity?

While the world suffered around him, Camus embraced his own despair. He knew the shadows could not exist without the sun and that the rising cold, the depths of his anguish were an indelible element of life. When confronted by the meaningless suffering of existence Camus rejoiced, for he felt grateful to exist at all. It was as if he felt it was his moral duty to be happy, that his self-pity was an affront to the glorious rays of the sun. The thought of Camus' defiant mindset gave me strength as I took stock of my situation.

This particular moment (4:47 p.m., Thursday, January 3rd, 2013) marked my release from employment, and the end of a tumultuous foray into the world of fine-dining. I had survived six months in a position I was absurdly unqualified for, and in the process received a trial-by-fire education in the culinary arts that remains one of my greatest achievements and one of my

deepest downward spirals of stress and anxiety. I put my whole self into the job, and I failed. At least, I failed to see the “big picture.”

Perhaps in the eyes of Camus, however, failure is a fact of human experience. As in the myth of Sisyphus, the stone will always roll back down the mountain. Perhaps what Camus saw in the sunlight playing across his grubby windows, and what I saw in that moment as well, was that existence is fundamentally a choice. The world, with or without me, will continue in its absurd and ineluctable flux. It is my choice whether to pity myself or to praise my good fortune. It is my choice whether to dwell on the past, or to look out from this moment’s summit and take in the view.

5:00p.m. The sky was dark, and outside my window Ronnie’s Local 069 was coughing into life. That feeling of lightness, of slight delirium I had experienced during my walk home still lingered in a corner of my mind. I thought of the red glow in the trees outside, and the small office, now shuttered, across the street. As I pondered my situation, the words of Italo Calvino rose up like steam between sips of soup:

...what he sought was always something lying ahead, even if it was a matter of the past that changed gradually as he advanced on his journey, because the traveler’s past changes according to the route he has followed: not the immediate past, that is, to which each day that goes by adds a day, but the more remote past. Arriving at each new city, the traveler finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places.

I have always identified with the archetype of the traveler. In Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1972), the character of Marco Polo sits with Kublai Khan and entertains him with tales of the fantastical

cities he has visited. But the story isn't really about cities, but about the journey of the human soul through life.

In *Invisible Cities*, what Marco Polo seeks is always "lying ahead," even when it is his own past. For him, the process of travelling is a process of remaking the past, of re-contextualizing one's own identity. I felt relief that while one chapter of my life had ended, it meant necessarily that another was beginning. I was so focused on my job, my world had become so small, it was no surprise I didn't see the big picture. However, it wasn't the chef's, but *my own* big picture that I sought. And to see it, I realized I may have to go far away, if only to look back at who I was to see who I wanted to become. I imagined that the further away I got, the closer I would get to another version of me, a vague shape of an ideal form.

If Calvino were to be believed, this new chapter would lead to a reimagining of the past; the dark and anxious period in my life would draw to a close, be shed like a scab, perhaps to return as battle scars, a source of pride. My past trials might even become future wisdom – a foundation of knowledge through which I could find gainful employment on the other side of the world, funding further travel and further self-discovery.

The insight that Marco Polo gained from his travels is the simultaneous affirmation of both the sublime, unplumbed depths of the human soul, and the absurd inadequacy of human comprehension in light of this fact. That evening, alternately shivering and sweating, in and out of sleep, the imagined heat of a foreign sun slung high soothed my pain and anxiety. I felt at that moment, whoever I was, mattered little. For in a year or two I knew I would no longer exist, that another me would inhabit this past – a happier, healthier, sunnier me.

I decided then that I would escape for real. I would get out of Toronto, far away, where winter couldn't reach me. The decision filled my head again with lightness, this time

accompanied by a tremendous warmth, like the sun had somehow climbed up inside of me. I also realized I probably had a pretty serious fever, and promptly went to lie down.

9:00 p.m: I lay in bed, moaning slightly. A former co-worker messaged me about a job. I knew that night that everything was going to work out because I had a plan: an imaginary itinerary to an invisible city. Beaches and blue skies filtered in and out of my consciousness before I sank, finally, into the deep.

Works Cited

Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York: 1978. Print.

Camus, Albert. "Love of Life." *Lyrical and Critical Essays*. Knopf, New York: 1968. Print.