

I Write Because I Have A Lot To Say; I Write Because I Have Nothing To Say

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I can't see my liver.

When I was younger I imagined the Pacmen inside of me and when my mom told me some of them were sleeping, I wondered if they were dead. I wondered what the ghosts were thinking as they blinked and ran free through the maze of my lobes. I wondered if they knew the Pacmen were dead. I wondered if they cried.

I can't see my liver.

I was in eighth grade when I decided to type *Hereditary Fructose Intolerance* into Google for the first time. They called it HFI, as if enough people were talking about it in their everyday lives. I read over the words *aldolase B* on three different websites, and although I used to picture an empty space where my liver should've been, I learned that all of it was there, it just wasn't working. I clicked through links and got lost, reading the same textbook definition over and over—*deficiency in enzymes, patients are asymptomatic, a disorder, a condition, an inborn error*. I learned that I could die.

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When I was twenty, I wrote a story called *Cake* for my creative nonfiction workshop class. I wasn't dying for people to hear my story, I wasn't begging to look in their eyes and to see that they understood—I only handed it in because I knew it would be easy to write. I waited until the night before my essay was due, and I spilled sixteen pages out on to my laptop in two hours.

The idea of *Cake* came from my 500-word college essay—finally I was going to make *what* I was a statement about *who* I was. I stayed home from school one day and wrote three different essays about being good at math or making up my passion for photography until I finally went against my own fears and thought about what my friend Sandy told me in tenth grade—at least that gives you something to write your college essay on; you've lived through tragedy. I didn't want to use it to sound interesting; I didn't want to say the words, or type the words, but after my three attempts, my story fell out from my fingers and onto the keys of my laptop.

I have a liver condition. It took me eighteen years to say it, and here I was typing it over and over again; as if I knew what it meant, as if I understood. Once I hit 500 words, I tied a nice

bow over all of my self-doubt and I lied and said I found myself. *Now I know that I can do anything I set my mind to. It held me back once, but I won't let that happen again.* After staring at the finished document that only took about fifteen minutes to write, I thought about my guidance counselor, about my English teachers, about my mother who had told me to ask as many people as possible to read over my college essay so they could tell me what they thought. But I knew I wasn't going to show anyone.

When I was in first grade, I started writing poems and songs in a small purple striped journal that I got from a holiday grab bag. After a few love songs about a boy named Paul that I used to chase on the playground, I wrote a story about a prophetic girl (when really I called her a creature) that was born with a curse. *Someone had to have this problem, someone had to be this way, someone had to cry her eyes out every single day.* After writing a full song with 6 verses and two different versions of the chorus, I used my mother's beginner piano book to try to create notes to go along with the song. I hummed to myself so no one could hear the words, and when I was done, I stuffed my purple journal and the music book at the bottom of the piano bench under loose music sheets.

For days I sang that song to myself wherever I was. I'd shout it out to the trees hanging over me as I rode my bike in the small dead-end street next to my house. I'd sing it quietly to myself in the shower where I thought no one could hear me over the running water. And every night I would go back to the piano and memorize the slow notes I strung together to make its melody. At twenty-one I can still hear the words sung in my head—I can still remember how it felt for my two index fingers to push down hard on the five piano notes.

That song became my whole life. I told all of my friends I was going to be a songwriter, and I held my purple journal to my chest while I rode the bus to school every morning. I hid it under my math flashcards in my school desk, and I zipped it up in my lunchbox when I left. But eventually, after a few weeks of humming the song to myself, I spilled my milk all over my sister at the dinner table when my mother smiled and told me she found my "diary."

My chubby cheeks turned hot red and the back of my scalp tightened. My mother joked with my father about having to "snap" for me at my future poetry readings, and I remember just silently staring at her. Her fork was held in front of her chest, but she didn't lift it to her mouth—she couldn't because she was laughing, because she was laughing at me. I didn't even feel the tears forming until I looked down into my lap and everything became blurry. Perhaps it was my

silent response or the fact that I stopped eating dinner or the bulb of water that slipped out and clung to the corner of my eye that eventually signaled my mother to stop talking. I remember the sound of utensils scraping against dinner plates, my sister ripping paper towels to clean up the milk that I spilled, my dad feeding the rest of his dinner to our dog. I looked up at the light.

The thought of my mother or other family members knowing how I felt sent a paralysis from the back of my tongue to the spine of my esophagus. I never actually asked my mom if she read my “Someone” song, and over a decade later I still don’t want to know. My liver condition has never been something I talk about with my family or anyone for that matter—the topic only draped itself over my tongue, hidden from everyone but myself. I couldn’t stand the thought of my mother reading about how it made me cry myself to sleep at six years old, and twelve years later I had no intentions of letting anyone read my college essay besides the nameless and faceless college administrators that I assumed, and hoped, I would never meet.

Still, there’s a reason why these words pour out of me when I sit down to write or when I’m wasting water in the shower or when I’m walking to class and my mind wanders. But I don’t always know whom I am writing them for. I want to validate my own pain, but I need readers in order to do that. Writing these stories, these feelings down makes them real—as if I’m assuring myself that it is not normal to hate yourself at six years old—but I don’t feel vindicated until the documents are saved with proper titles—*Elmer Workshop Piece ENGW384*—and I’ve emailed it or printed 15 copies to pass out to my workshop group. I’m not sure what to call it, but there’s a quick feeling of satisfaction or validation in knowing that my story will be heard. But once it’s my turn and the workshop comments are passed to me and every student in class has something to say about *the part where your mom is cleaning vomit off of you*, suddenly that feeling of satisfaction is ripped away from me like a Band-Aid over hair. I am told over and over again of the parts where people feel sorry for me the most or how they never would’ve known that something was *wrong* with me because I don’t even *look sick*.

There’s a reason why this confrontation—why people knowing that this thing that’s wrong with me affects more than just what I eat—has kept me from saying any of these words out loud, especially to my family. Although I can’t tell you what that reason is, I think I get closest to it when I type fast and raw strings of run-on sentences in the notes on my phone or the corners of my notebooks or when I don’t start my assignment until the night before it’s due.

I haven't touched *Cake* since my sophomore year workshop class. I've read it over, taken excerpts, emailed it along, but I'm not the me that wrote it almost two years ago. I open and close myself every year, sometimes staying closed for too long until I burst open, believing that I'm older, wiser, more mature when I do tell someone. I think that I've changed when I do this, but weeks later I always go back to shutting that part of me away. I go back to feeling confused about if I should tell someone, how I should tell someone, if I even want to know that part about myself.

For the past two years I've heard the workshop comments—*this is a story about love and bravery*—and two different professors calling it an illness narrative, but that's not what I want it to be; that's not what I want to be called. But everyone asks me, *what are you researching, what are you writing about*, and I say it, I say I'm writing my own illness narrative. My friends have told me they want to read it, and I tell them when it's finished, but I know that I've written words that I don't want to face—words I'm afraid my mother will read and call me crying about. Still, I want them to read it—to know without having to vocally tell them or without having to look in their eyes the moment they find out—but if I could, I would spill ink on paper and walk away, and a thousand years from now the splatter would live on as a monument, and people would say it's art from *anonymous*. They could call it an illness narrative and there wouldn't be the threat of being revealed as what I must be—a fraud. No one would tell me that I'm not sick enough, and I wouldn't have to wish that I were. I wouldn't feel those stones poured into my diaphragm as they ask me, *isn't that hard to live with?* I wouldn't have to fight between my outside and inside, wondering if I'm even sick at all.

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I don't want to see my liver.

I will never understand what's wrong with it. I've memorized lines from Boston University, but even I don't know what they mean; but I'm supposed to. Up until my twelfth grade anatomy class, I never even knew which side of the body the liver was on. For the last few months of the class, we dissected stray cats that had been killed by cars or died of old age and donated for "science." We cut our cats open and looked at their organs. The stomach had nothing in it, the rugae looked shriveled and dry. The trachea was still pinkish, its C-shaped hyaline cartilage rings still holding its shape. Then, beneath the bruised external oblique, our cat's liver sat tucked in under the diaphragm. It was reddish-brown, more brown than red, and the different

lobes looked perfectly sliced apart by a sharp kitchen knife. I cut my cat's liver open, but there was nothing inside of it; just an uneven pattern of curved lines, looking as though it had a graveled texture, but it felt smooth beneath my gloved fingers. Even with the thing in my hands I could not understand it.