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TW Flash Essay by J.p. Lawrence

A Commencement Speech for Writers



I graduated from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism this May. I watched the pomp and circumstance, and I watched the awards, and I thought of oranges. I thought of those Renaissance painters who, as apprentices, were instructed by their masters to paint an orange, a single orange, over and over again.

The idea was to grasp the form of an orange. Whatever paintings they might be working on in the future, they'd at

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least have the knowledge of how to paint that orange. I thought of that orange, and I thought about writing.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote that when writing was hard, he'd look over the Paris rooftops and tell himself he just needed to write one true sentence. If there was one thing Hemingway knew he could write about, it was traditional masculinity lost in a rapidly changing world. It wasn't the only thing, but he'd clearly thought about it enough to breach the surface more than others had. Hemingway had an orange.

In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the aging philosopher Mr. Ramsay realizes that in the alphabet of human understanding, he'd progressed from A to Q but had never reached R. Many writers and thinkers have themes or projects they return to in their work. Either through repetition, genius, or dumb luck (Kurt Vonnegut in the slaughterhouse of Dresden), they progress from A, past E or wherever most people stop, onward toward X—or even Z.

When I read the masters, I think about how much mental toil and spent genius went into sharpening those thoughts toward perfect refinement. It soothes me to think of Hemingway in rough draft, struggling to write one true sentence, succeeding not because of sudden inspiration, but because he persisted.

An odd quirk of the orange is that the color was actually named after the fruit—a bit counterintuitive. Recently, I spoke to a professor about how eager I was to enter the world of writing. I told him I'm still in search of my orange; that I'm a young writer aware of how much fruit I'm unable to paint. I, with my graduate gown ready, was rushing ahead, but my professor said, in so many words, "You'll find your orange after you already have it."

A bit counterintuitive again. But if you continue to write and to live, if you continue to search, your orange, with luck, will find you.

Art Information

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J.p. Lawrence is a TW contributing writer and a graduate of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and Bard College. He is a Iraq War veteran and has published recently in [VICE](#) [5], [Christian Science Monitor](#) [6], [Guardian](#) [7], [Westword](#) [8], and [Salon](#) [9].

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