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Essay by Jennifer Popa

Learning How to Lose



I write to play. Before I even had language or tangible letters, I had a yellow legal pad where I scribbled my stories, mostly elongated curlicues squished between blue lines. I liked the certainty of my pen on paper. Once complete, I folded each story and placed it in my pocket, a paper treasure kept warm and flecked with lint.

I write to fashion all my lost people into paper, their bodies into stories.

I write to name. When I was seven years old, I began writing full sentences and kept a journal that detailed upcoming birthday parties and each occurrence of pizza. I began as a documentarian, but when my vocabulary grew fat with language, it became something else. If I wondered what it would be like to move into a haunted house, I wrote myself into one, only I renamed myself something pretty: *Arabella, Rebecca, Madeline*.

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I write so that I might learn how to lose. It's a way to account for what's been lost, to inhabit a memory by swimming inside it until my fingers prune.

I write to feel chosen. In the third grade, I wrote and illustrated my first book, a gem titled *My Dream Vacation* that employed the "it was all a dream" trope. I was chosen to represent my class with it at the 1991 Young Authors' Festival in Traverse City, Michigan—a sweet affair at which we read our books to children across town, met local authors, and got to spend a whole day away from school. My mother even consented to let me wear the immaculate white dress from my first Eucharist. I was a little bride of God, ditching Him for the written word—mine.

I write because when love leaves, you must make your own.

I write to believe in the inexplicable, in the singular seed of magic: in mermaids, in tiny people—I prepared a shoebox home for them with a repurposed dollhouse sofa, a wad of cotton balls for a bed, keeping it under my bed for years *just in case*—in the whispered goodbyes to each of my stuffed animals before I left for early Mass.

I write for the simple reason that when the narrative flows, when the sentences align or clap out their easy rhythm, it's a kind of prayer. It's a prayer to the universe, to some Grecian muse who perches on the corner of my desk, popping chewing gum and humming as she braids her hair.

I write as a way to commune with the dead, to communicate with everyone who has ever belonged to me: Bluma, whose socks I wore to seventh-grade gym class after she died and whose photo albums I've inherited; Anjani's father, who swallowed poison but never lied to me, even though I was a child; Anjani herself, who went on to die and leave her child, too; my first friend at the new school, who, in four years, would plant a bullet between his eyebrows—a bullet that wouldn't quite take, at least not until the following day; the beloved kitten, who was flattened beneath the tire of my neighbor's van and buried by the pond without my knowing; my grandfather, who was more of a father to me than my own, a man who will never not be missed—who each time I meet a new person I come to love, I think, "I wish they might have known him"; the dog I will never stop grieving, who has been inked along the ladder of my ribs—I press open palm to his body on my body and feel a heart push back.

I write so that I might listen to the stories of the dead—they who have so much to say about the living.

I write to honor the child who is afraid to learn what it means to die.

I write to feel seen. Not by a reader who admires a particular turn of phrase but by myself. Writing is a love I am quick to dismiss—to ghost, as my undergrads say. I put hundreds of other things before it each day. But when I'm puttering at the keyboard, it seems to me that writing is a great act of love—of faith that so much nothing will accumulate and become something.

I write to muddle. To break something. Because sometimes the only meaning I can make is born of disruption.

I write because I've not yet learned any of these things. And the only way I know to teach myself is through the dissection of my loss, investigating its parts no matter how I tremble. It's as if I'm peeling back my own tissues, marbled with fat, to learn. I want the kind of heart that believes in magic, a tongue that's fluent in soap, hands that, without even the slightest hesitation, hold the dead bird as I did as a girl, mourning the unknown thing, offering it affection without pause.

I write because I am a fool. Writing may be communing with the dead; it may be sacred, spiritual, and inexplicable—but really, it's just me, a grown adult, enjoying her game of make-believe.

I write because I long for the ones I've lost, but also for the previous selves I've discarded—the child left over from another universe. The child who couldn't meet the mall Santa's eyes or Father Denny's when she gave her first confession. Because they knew, as if by magic, all her misdeeds.

I write because for this child, the diary is a lie. It hopes to be found.

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I write to tell the child that though she places the mouths of dolls to her breast, it's okay to love the children she may not want. Not all things worth loving are made from flesh.

Art Information

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For more information, go to [Jennifer Popa's website](#) [5] or follow her on Twitter [@jelopapopa](#) [6].

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