

Portfolio Submission

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Statement of Purpose

The first work in my portfolio, "My Double Life," is about a concert venue called The Pageant. I've been going to concerts there for years, and it represents an important aspect of my life and personality. Even though I'm seen as somewhat of a "brain" at school, The Pageant is somewhere I can interact with new people who don't know anything about me, and where I can be a punk rocker rather than a valedictorian. I included this piece because the descriptive details about the venue capture the strange juxtaposition of the physical confinement of being in a crowded place and the freedom I feel when I'm there.

"My Grandfather's Book" is a short poem I wrote about finding an old copy of Thoreau's *Walden* that belonged to my paternal grandfather, Peter, who died when my dad was very young. I've never met him, but I feel a connection to him because of my relationship with my dad. His book is a physical symbol of his legacy: my curiosity about his life and the way my relationship with my dad compares to and differs from his relationship with his son.

My final piece, "Metaphors," is one of the stranger pieces I've written. The story came flying out of me all at once, and I simply wrote it down so as not to forget it. It's my experiment with a more open and modern style, and I included it to show a more abstract side of my writing. Its themes are similar to some in my other works, but the format is unique.

My Double Life

The boy whom I have affectionately dubbed "ska kid" is flailing his arms with his elbows stuck out angularly, jerking up and down as his small oval glasses tip precariously toward the end of his nose. He is not an epileptic but is dancing, and I do not know his real name. What I do know is that he has been at every ska show I've ever attended, including this one at the Pageant in St. Louis, Missouri. The smell of sweat invades my nose as it mixes with the stale odor of smoke and beer, and as I try to make out his figure in the dim, shadowy light, I am rammed into by a 200 pound guy with a shaved head, whose wet, heavy shirt saturated with sweat feels rough as it makes contact with the inside of my arm. I can feel a bruise forming already. There is no place I would rather be.

As I look to my right, I see a boy about my age, the tips of his long, shaggy brown hair damp with perspiration. He is wearing a leather jacket with a colorful assortment of patches on it. One of them proudly proclaims his tolerance, showing a swastika with a thick red line crossing it out. He is the combination and embodiment of every guy I have ever wanted but known I was too white-bread suburban teen to ever catch the interest of.

"Are they letting more people into the pit?" he screams to a security guard dressed in a light blue shirt a few feet in front of us. We are at a break between sets, but the booming bass of the second band warming up pierces through my skin and shakes my organs. I lean over the railing and glance into the pit a few feet ahead of us. The floor groans under the weight of hundreds of people crammed into the space between the stage and the bar. The stage looks down on the pit, and so from where I'm standing, the members of the band look like sweaty, alcoholic gods.

"Yeah, man, go ahead!" the guard screams in reply, and the anti-Nazi squeezes by a horde of middle-aged women and disappears into the pit. I quietly follow him past the women whose shiny magenta lips and dark, heavy raccoon eyes are outshone only by their loud, over-exaggerated cackles of laughter.

I lose track of leather jacket boy fairly quickly in the huge mass of people, which is understandable because, as

the next band starts, the crowd's transformation is immediate. Before the music started there was no room to breathe. Once the music starts, there is no room to exist. I instantly become a part of the pack, and as it sways back and forth, so do I. There isn't even room to fall down because, if I begin to tip in any direction, I am supported by the weight of the five people within five inches of me. All sense of personal comfort is lost within the first two minutes. Perspiration forms on my brow and drips off my nose; my clothes become completely soaked, and my mouth goes so dry that I learn what my insides taste like. My body is screaming at me to sit down, drink some water, just to stop moving, but I am supported by the people on all sides of me; we all jump and kick and sing along. I could keep going that way for hours, so I do.

Something is alive here tonight at this fast-paced ska show, the place where huge, hairy men joyfully dance with anorexic hipsters, where middle aged women with their obnoxious laughs and somewhat drunken swaggers bump arms with seven year old kids of parents with questionable ethics, and where bookish band geeks can lead double lives. As the music blares and pushes my eardrums to the breaking point, I see the dim outlines of a familiar cast of characters around me. They are occasionally illuminated by a jet of light coming from the stage, and as more bruises begin to form on my shins and ankles and my body cries out for water, I jump and flail and jerk my elbows back and let myself disappear into the crowd.

"I've seen Streetlight about four times this week," boasts the guy standing next to me. Between sets, the roadies for the band Streetlight Manifesto test the mics and instruments as feedback rings through the room. "I followed them all across the state, and I'm going with them to Ohio tomorrow. They're my favorite band. How many times have you seen them?"

We somehow manage to casually chat amidst the deafening roar of the crowd attempting to casually chat too. Soon, the booming bass starts up again, and I feel it in the center of my bones. A pale hand near me holds up a solid, forest green slip-on tennis shoe above the crowd. Another hand extends up and makes its way towards the shoe until the two are reunited. This is how lost articles of clothing are returned at concerts. Jake and I dance around each other for the rest of the set. I feel the impact of random knees and elbows crashing into my stomach and limbs. A tall girl with flaming red hair and a checkerboard wristband slams straight into my side, quickly shouts an apology, and returns to the middle of the pit to slam against some other people.

The band strikes its final encore chord, and the crowd goes absolutely insane, yelling themselves hoarse and begging for more. But we all know it's over, so people begin to make their way out. I stick around and call my friends, trying to find out where they've gone.

"We're outside!" they yell into the phone. "Where are you?"

"I'm gonna get a T-shirt really quickly. Just wait for me a few minutes, okay?"

I reach the T-shirt line and survey my surroundings as staff members begin cleaning up the place. Now, with the houselights on, The Pageant looks like a different universe from the one I knew ten minutes ago. The swaying crowd has been replaced by trash and spilled drinks, and my numb happiness has been replaced by the dull ringing in my ears, the aching soreness in my arms, and pictures in my mind of the mounds of homework I have waiting for me at home, but then I spot ska kid leaving, and he gives me a nod. I know that the real world is really just a bumper between shows so that we can get some rest every once in a while.

My Grandfather's Book

Hidden in a chestnut bookcase, seemingly unimportant, I find
Walden, or, Life in the Woods
1893 edition.

My grandfather's
then my father's
and now mine.

Its musty pages seem to shy away from the light as I open the book gently.
They are yellow and sickly with age,
but their ideas are not.
The margins are unusually large
so the sentences have space to breathe.

Its stiff, sturdy, dark green cover
 has attempted to contain monumental thoughts
 for over 100 years,
 but as soon as I dive into the first page
 they all spill out.

On each page I see
 the light in my grandfather's eyes
 as he scans the pages quickly, clinging to a rare free moment
 in the midst of raising ten kids.

Reading it, he didn't know he would one day have a granddaughter.
 He didn't know that his life would be cut short
 and that my dad would lose him at age 15.
 He didn't know that this book, with its ideas now firmly planted in his consciousness,
 would make its way to me and still be treasured
 in 2007.

And now, at age 15,
 I know
 that objects are more than the sum of their parts
 and that stiff, sturdy covers can never contain
 the absurdity
 of being.

Metaphors

These are the lies we tell ourselves to get through the day.

Maybe J.D. Salinger found the fountain of youth. Maybe he's the only one who wouldn't abuse this awesome power, and this is why he's a recluse.

Maybe bumper stickers and t-shirts *are* activism. Maybe there's thought enough in buying them and wearing them, and maybe all this world is missing is a catchy Bob Marley slogan.

Maybe real art comes all at once. Maybe nothing takes work because true inspiration can't be stopped and misery isn't desirable to anyone sensible.

This is what happens today.

Two teenage girls finally perfect their dance routine for the school talent show. A man walks into a café and orders a jelly donut. Someone decides his life is not worth living and jumps off a bridge. An old, frail woman threads a needle, her hands shaking. A mother finds a fashionable hat at a vintage clothing store. A family torn apart by the death of their dog learns to love again.

This is what happens now.

Janine stands in the shower, the water rolling down her scalp and passing over the kinks in her spine. Her salty tears mingle with the streaming water until finally she turns the knob and stops the flow. She brushes aside the shower curtain, her body glistening with water droplets, but her wet hair makes her look like a drowned rat.

"What are you doing in here, Kurt?" she asks.

This is a story-poem. It's a story *and* a poem. You have to extrapolate. The water dripping out of the faucet, it's a metaphor for the human condition. Yes, the chaotic nature of being, you've got it! The absurdity of living, you've got it! The alienation of human beings, you've got it! These are dark times, my friend, but you've got it, you've got it, you've got it!

My name is Kurt because my responses are often curt. My tempter is curt. I have harsh, jutting, angular sounds in my name, so I'm predisposed to violence. It's a sad thing to be predisposed to violence by harsh, jutting, angular

sounds, but I'm telling you it happens every day.

Janine and I had a fight today. It's always my fault because of her soft, flowing vowels and because I am the creep who is sitting there when she comes out of the shower. We moved in together to share our suffering, a terribly romantic notion that we sang to ourselves as we writhed under the covers at night and went about doing terribly mundane things like eating sugary cereals and paying bills. It's all ironic juxtaposition. Janine would capture it in her typewriter, and I would keep up the façade, working in a cubicle just like they want, but they will never know that it's all just a joke and they are the fools.

I hope you've noticed this spacing because it's extremely significant. Do you see the way I have a break after almost every paragraph? It's because I am jumping from topic to topic and rapidly switching perspective.

It's brilliant, really. We're brilliant because life works in symbols and metaphors but never similes because those are manufactured and forced. The pigeon picking at the bread crumb on the street corner...symbolism! The old man with the newspaper boy hat sitting in a used bookstore is alone because he's lonely and we're all lonely and it really can't be helped. We use this to elevate our existence and feel bigger than we are because we are small small small and feeling bigger is our only hope and our goal until we transform into rotting carcasses in the ground. We're always rotting because no carcass just sits there and smells like flowers.

Janine walks by me, a drop from her hair flying onto my shoulder and spreading out into a misshapen blob on the cotton fabric of my T-shirt. I follow her into the living room where she sits down at the typewriter, one hand tucking her towel into itself so she doesn't have to waste time getting dressed. The freckles on her left shoulder blade condense as she lifts her arms. She punches at the keys, getting it all down until she's crying so hard that she can't get out another damn word.

She wants to have children because children are the future and the light and the choice of a new generation. Look at how redemptive they can be! Look at their innocence! We could have one, and it wouldn't be sold into slavery or anything and could maybe even be happy. She could be a hip earth mom who never gives into convenience and only buys organic foods so that Baby X will grow big and strong and will live the way life's supposed to be lived.

I tell her, "Janine, baby, we don't have any money! We'd have to be a cog in the system and sacrifice our ideals. You know nothing in this world is as important as ideals." Then I quote Plato, who may or may not have had kids, but it doesn't really matter because I would rather leave her than give up my ideals for some unborn baby.

Did you find the stream of consciousness yet? That's a technique very popular among modernists who responded to the ambiguity and confusion created by one or both world wars by doing away with the traditional rules of writing. I've made Janine cry today, and we create our own misery, maybe, but I'm unhappy, and I don't know why. Isn't that a goddamn metaphor?