

Fall 2022

Final Semester Portfolio

Introduction to Creative Writing

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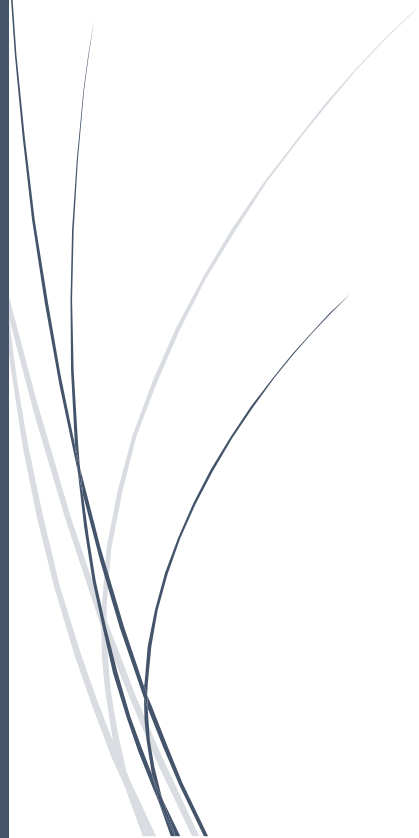


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Thoughts, Reflections and Craft Strategies

Creative Nonfiction has always been something I've enjoyed reading, even more so once I discovered Elizabeth Gilbert in my mid-20's (and found out growing up that Carrie Fisher was a writer). For both, I was attracted to their luminous details (though I didn't know the phrase at the time), and their bravery. I came out of this part of the semester pledging to utilize both more often. (I knew I was going to need bravery to attack the poetry portion of class, at least.)

Filling up notebooks with Star Wars fanfiction was how I spent most of middle/high school. Flash-fiction, writing six-word stories and mini-sagas was a blast. And while I wished I'd been able to write about the first idea I had for the short story, I felt like it was almost fate that I found *State of Affairs*. At times, I'll look over the previous draft and smile, thinking about how improved the new version is. I do wish I had more to add to the portfolio for *Ellie and Charlie's Day Off Mental Health Day*. I feel like it's a great little hook though. It's going to be an ode to the era of John Hughes, books like *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*, movies like *Booksmart* (but less extreme) and fellow Minnesotan Diablo Cody.

I struggled the most going into the Poetry section of the class. It's always something I've struggled with. Fiction? Great. Essays? Awesome. I can't remember which week it was, but we learned about poetry having a "sense of play," and that's something I really tried to dive into after that. I feel like I got braver as the poetry section went on in terms of how I composed stanzas; I started very "by the book," and revisited a few free write poems to reflect that. The ekphrastic poem was where I really thought I had my breakthrough and began feeling more comfortable writing poems.

In the student survey at the beginning of the semester, I wrote that I could be harsh on myself and would talk myself out of sharing fiction I'd written in the past. Even though it wasn't accepted, I was still extremely proud to submit *State of Affairs* to Floodwall, which is something I wouldn't have done back in August. It's hard to balance being a wife and mother with hobbies, and I feel like writing for fun fell off the bandwagon for me. Not anymore.

At the beginning of each section, I've added a quote from a prolific writer that I feel describes my feelings towards each section of class we 'played with' this semester. These people, these quotes, are another window into my creative process and how I write. It was an honor and a pleasure to be able to take this class this semester.

Poetry

“A good poem is a contribution to reality. The world is never the same once a good poem has been added to it. A good poem helps to change the shape of the universe, helps to extend everyone’s knowledge of himself and the world around him.”

-Dylan Thomas

The World and Twenty Minutes

Based on The End of Poetry by Ada Limon

Enough of exhaustion and weakness and lethargy
and torpor, terrible pillows, anger, tears, and angry tears,
enough pity, enough of doom and gloom and doomscrolling
day in and day out and day in and day out and
day in, enough of having not enough time and energy
and ideas but mainly hours in a day

enough of the will to go on and not go on or how
a certain light does a certain thing, enough
of having questions but not energy to find the answers
and enough of not having answers, enough blathering on
with meaningless blather that will be forgotten about
enough shouting into the void, enough of shouting at all
and not shouting enough, enough not knowing
of the world and what to say
and enough of not knowing what to do

just tired every night and through, enough of expectations
enough of caring too little, enough of caring too much, enough
I am just a Mom, enough I am not Wonder Woman and I am done,
enough of the same-old-same-old, enough of the status
quo, enough of kids dying while learning, enough half-truths,

I am asking you to give the Moms out there twenty minutes.

Madness, Revisited

BRIGHT. Busy.

Some would say *MESSY*.

Told to be **OURSELVES**

But *derided* when we leave the box



A **DRUG** for everyone


But no *connection* for anyone

INSTANT GRATIFICATION takes too long

Real life is no #Hashtag

Stuck in a **LOADING SCREEN**

Calling it a **mid-life crisis**

They're *always* watching 

but what if we gave them

NOTHING TO WATCH

Minnesota Nice

It's cold here, but don't leave. Squalls,
blizzards, they come to an end with a silvery-white
winter wonderland, and not the harsh and bitter
apocalypse in the movies. Snow is special,

from the way the world smells
before the flakes
come down, even though you're praying
your car starts the next day.

I've loved snow even before my last first kiss
happened when the flakes were falling. I love snow
even more after watching my son ride a sled for the first time.

Shoveling snow can be difficult,
but you get used to it. The payoff is snowball
fights, diving in to make snow angels,
and playing king of the hill.

It's cold here, but it's home
and the memories are always warm.

Ode to Borders: What Bookstores Were Like Then (Revised)

You could spend hours
in a bookstore

winding through aisles
and gathering piles
of new friends
and new adventures
to bring home
with you.

The textures,
the colors of the covers,
the feel
of the paper,
the ink,
getting lost
in that new book smell.

Whatever you
wanted,
there would be
something there.

No one could tell
you what to read
or how to feel
about it.

If you weren't sure
about a book,
helpful workers
were there to
guide you.

The outside world
never mattered
when you were in one.

In one,
there was no
limit to what
you could dream
and imagine.

Creative Nonfiction

“Stay afraid, but do it anyway. What’s important is the action. You don’t have to wait to be confident. Just do it and eventually the confidence will follow.”

-Carrie Fisher

a life in (e)motion

36 Years Old

It's 2022, and I realized I'm closer to 40 than I am 30, but there was snow on the ground for my birthday. So there's that.

34 Years Old

It's the end of April; the end of my shift at Best Buy for the day, in my 11th year working retail and four of that has been spent at the Blue Box.

But that's about to end. Adam is about to head to D.C. for another year-long deployment, and I'm starting school again in the fall. Retail taught me a lot, but as I spoke to my GM and officially turned in my notice, a giant weight fell off me. Holidays were mine again. Weekends were mine again. I liked people I worked with but every night I came home I felt hollow and dead.

And school. School was glorious. I felt home again, learning again.

32 years old

December. I'd been 32 for a month when I experienced the weirdest and wildest and most fulfilling pain of my life. (And yes, reader, that's a thing.)

The classes don't really prepare you, and the movies really don't prepare you for what it's like to have a kid. Sure, my body, by virtue of being born female, has evolved to prepare itself to shove a tiny human out a tinier hole, but can we just consider that? Human head out a tiny hole.

It's about midnight when it's finally time to go to the hospital. Apparent baby boom meant the lady who needs to be induced must wait. We hand Will his eviction notice, but he decides to hang out a few more days. We follow up that first notice with a couple more, but nope. Stubborn, stubborn, stubborn. (Not to mention awkward for me.)

Things get blurry after I finally take the epidural, though that seems to have made the kiddo want to leave. After three hours of contractions, active pushing, and a few stitches, I was staring at a

tiny human with blue eyes, a button nose, who looked entirely too much like his father for the amount of work I'd put in over the last nine months.

30 Years Old

Donald Trump won the Presidency and I turned 30. It was a wild, emotional year for many reasons.

I had always told myself I was going to make one of those "30 under 30 lists," but I suppose I'll have to shoot for a "40 under 40."

And Trump...as a female, a Democrat, wife of a soldier...that wasn't a great night.

26 Years Old

Borderlands 2 released, Diablo III released, Journey released, the Tomb Raider reboot was a few months away, and I swore to myself that I was going to work in the games industry one day.

Best Buy disbanded their dedicated gaming departments, so I left (the first time) and took an opportunity across the street at GameStop.

24 Years Old

To the twelve-year-old me who swore she wasn't going to get married, I'm sure this was a weird year.

This is where my story really began. I married my best friend, and learned family is more than sharing a bloodline. Emotional abuse is abuse, and those people don't deserve to be in your life.

I left a lot behind that year, including Minnesota, but I left that scared twelve-year-old behind too.

Here's To Us: Ode to the Misfits

We were the misfits who didn't care who sat at the cool table or knew the latest high school gossip.

We were the misfits who were some of the loudest at the cafeteria even though we were at one of the smallest tables.

The misfits who raised their hands in class, finished tests first, set the curve and aced all the extra credit.

We could quote everything from Shakespeare to Star Wars at the drop of a hat, recall the lyrics to "We Didn't Start the Fire," and during gym, we were all pretty good at dodgeball. (If I do say so myself.)

We were the nerds, the geeks, the LEGO builders who never got enough credit from bringing back awards.

We were the misfits on the bus, traveling every Monday night to another school to meet other misfits who were also the nerds, the geeks, and the school team that never got enough credit from bringing back awards.

From the author: *Bring a part of Knowledge Bowl and Academic Decathlon teams in high school shaped a huge part of who I am today. Being a geek, a nerd, a fangirl...it still cool even before "The Big Bang Theory" made it fashion.*

Hero of Lake Wobegon Review: Heroes Never Die!

Hero of Lake Wobegon, from a small, independent games studio in the upper Midwest, released this week, and it's a charming endeavor that I would love to see a sequel to. (If you'd like to skip this main review, the score breakdown follows at the very end.)

I was immediately enthralled, as the first thing I saw when booting up the game was the splash screen that said:

*"Names have been changed to protect the awesome. And the **not** awesome."*

As this studio is based in Minnesota, the name *Lake Wobegon* is very much a loaded reference. The opening sequence of the game, showing green John Deere tractors driving through fields, a meal at a tan-bricked, red-roofed Lutheran church, older children and teenagers using hooks to grab hay bales from a rusted baler and throwing them on the back of a wagon and a high school football game taking place all made me think of Garrison Keillor.

There's a river that runs through the town, bending where the football game takes place, and trees line either side and are peppered throughout the overhead view we get. It's as pretty as a postcard.

The game then introduces us to the house of our titular Hero, white, two stories, and has seen better days. Some siding is missing, windows are covered in plastic from the cold weather to come, and there's a door that looks like just won't stay latched. She's getting ready for school in the opening cutscene in her tiny room that has no door, just a dark fabric curtain with white stars.

Our Hero is a girl, no older than eight or nine. She has long, mousy brown hair that needs a brush, but instead of helping her get ready, her mother is focused on what looks to be an older brother, who, by all accounts, looks like he should be able to get ready by himself.

A picture of her fourth-grade class is one of the few things on the wall, as well as a certificate for having the most amount of Accelerated Reader points. She looks at it, and for a moment you see sadness across her face. A worn bookshelf is full of books, ranging from *The Babysitters Club*, *The Saddle Club*, *Harriet the Spy* and *Star Wars*. The books all have one thing in common, though, cracked spines show they've been read more than a few times.

The gameplay starts when she gets to school, where it's easy to see this is where our hero thrives. Gone is the sadness from the morning, and every time you interact during class, she comes out of her shell. One other kid seems to be pointing fingers and offering snickers, though, but she doesn't seem to hear him. Or at least, is good at ignoring him.

At recess, you get to know her few friends, and you also get to know that The Hero would rather read than hang out on the swings or play kickball. She was talked into playing kickball on

this recess, but you can tell by the deep frown on her face and her slow pace to get to the makeshift diamond it's the last thing she wants to do. When it's her turn she's able to kick the ball, but it's easily caught by the second baseman, who just happens to be her neighbor Lucas.

I didn't write about it in the review, but there was a sequence on the bus on the way to school where he made of fun of her for reading. (Excuse my language, but Lucas seems like a real prick.)

Recess is almost over when Lucas strikes again, but to my surprise, it wasn't The Hero he picked on this time. We saw her friend, Kim, during lunch break with our hero. She had black hair, was shorter than our hero, a bit round, and came off as kind of shy. He pushed her, laughing as she stumbled, and shouted a remark that could have only come from a fourth grader.

The same look of sadness that flashed on The Hero's face in the morning came up again, followed by what I could only describe as steely resolve, and before I knew it, I was following a quick-time event that ended in The Hero giving an almighty punch to Lucas's shoulder. (It looked like that was the only part of him she could reach.)

Our first adult dialogue, directed at The Hero, comes at this point, and it comes from what looks like a gym teacher. He started pulling her out of the group of kids entering the school, making a comment about how she's the last person they'd expect that kind of behavior from.

The game ends with one last look at The Hero, who, for the first time, seems to have a genuine smile on her face as a few kids cheer, and Kim stands with a shocked smile. There's a moment where you see the flutter of a cape starting behind her, and you can tell that moment probably meant as much to her as the friend she defended. After seeing some of the books on the shelf this morning, I think she became as much of a hero to herself as her friend.

Score: 9/10
(Score Breakdown begins on the next page)

Score Breakdown

Concept

- It's the origin story of the titular 'Hero,' based around a formative experience on the playground. When I started playing, I thought the story would go one way, but by the end, I was pleasantly surprised by what way it went.

Playability

- I felt like I was back in fourth grade again. I could feel it when she didn't want to play kickball, or that simmering of rage when Lucas went after her friend. It was also exciting seeing her come alive during class.

Sound

- The country music soundtrack that serves as the backdrop of the game helps set the stage for the small-town location.

Replay Value

- Low, but personally, I'm yearning for another story with The Hero. I also want to know why she was sad while looking at a certificate showing what seems like a major achievement.

Fiction

“Individual science fiction stories may seem as trivial as ever to the blinder critics and philosophers of today – but the core of science fiction, its essence has become crucial to our salvation if we are to be saved at all.”

-Isaac Asimov

Selected Flash-Fiction Works (Mini-Sagas and Six Word Stories)

Lists

Lists are great.

Lists keep me organized, lists remind me of things, lists remind others of things. A Target run is on my list, followed by laundry, meal prep, an oil change, pay bills... You know, stuff a 30-something does.

The last item though, always brings a giggle.

REVENGE

Resolutions

I *hate* New Year's Eve.

You're '*supposed*' to make resolutions. FOR THE WHOLE YEAR.

I can barely decide and get done what I want to accomplish in a week, for fuck's sake.

Whoever came up with this concept sure as hell doesn't have to deal with anxiety, that's for sure.

Six Word Stories

To Do List: – Number One – Revenge

Anxiety Trigger: New Year's Eve.

One mid-life crisis leads to another.

The diploma was my ticket out.

On a mission to civilize!

Preview: Ellie and Charlie's ~~Day Off~~ Mental Health Day

It started with a text message.

If someone dared to reboot *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, it would start the same way.

Ellie, I can't deal. I think I need to take a mental health day.

Charlotte had been going through a lot. Her parents were splitting up, her little brother Will was going to live full time with their mom, but Charlie was old enough where they were letting her choose who she wanted to live with.

Me? My parents divorced when I was six, so I was more than used to it. But she was also taking the same AP classes and studying for the SATs like me, and I know I was nearing a breaking point. Everyone yammering on about what a good score means and the boatloads of college pamphlets coming in the mail weren't helping anything.

You want me to come over?

The three dots hovered for a while until I saw her response.

idk.

Omw in 5. I'll bring coffee

**

Six-year-old Will met me at the door with a big hug when I got to Charlie's house. He was a cute little kid with brownish-blond curls and big blue eyes. He was going to be a heartbreaker one day, that's for sure.

"Ellie!" Charlie and Will's mom was an accomplished lawyer who worked with my mother, but I had a moment of panic as I wasn't sure how to address her now. The divorce wasn't final, so was it still Mrs. Duncan? I didn't even know what her maiden name was.

Thankfully, she seemed in a hurry, so I just responded with a wave and a tip of one of the cups I was holding. “Charlotte is upstairs. Are you going to get her to school today? I haven’t seen her yet and I’m late already.”

“She texted me with a coffee order. She was up late studying last night, so the extra burst of caffeine was needed.” I said, lying through my teeth. I was pretty sure she was still in bed, but that was the last thing her mom or little brother needed to know.

“Oh good, good.” She gathered up her bag and what I was sure was Will’s bag and started looking for her keys. I saw a set on the table behind me and handed them to her. “Oh, thank you, thank you, dear. I’m so glad Charlotte has you, and I’m grateful for it too.”

I nodded along as a good daughter does, letting Charlie’s mom get out the door in a hurried rush.

Charlie’s room was dark, aside from a small light that projected some stars on the ceiling. I’d given it to her for her birthday last year. “Is that you Ellie?”

I set the cup on her end table, rubbing her shoulder. “Who else would it be, bearing some Caribou?”

“You’re the best.” She said, sitting up slowly. “I’m so sorry I’m like this. Between everything with Dad and that stupid paper for European History that’s due next week, I just don’t even know what I’m doing.” She looked at the clock and rubbed her eyes. “I’ll get ready.”

We hadn’t missed a day of school in high school, aside from the rare sickness or family funeral. I was pretty sure that we were the only ones in our class to have that honor. I had a crazy idea, but I think it’s just what Charlie needed.

“What if we didn’t go to school today?”

Short Story: State of Affairs

“She looks like that girl they were looking for a few months ago. The one who somehow got out of the Institute during that raid.”

“Yeah, but didn’t they find a body with her ID with it something like, two weeks later?”

“Don’t ask me, the whole thing was above my pay grade. Maybe we should call it in first. Imagine how much shit we’d get if this is just some skinny kid who’s breaking curfew in No Man’s Land.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at the exchange happening behind me. Sure, it was my fault that I was standing next to a Warden patrol truck, my hands in a set of cuffs in an area I ‘wasn’t *supposed* to be in.’ None of the four Wardens that found me were even remotely looking in my direction, meaning I could have probably taken off at any moment, but I had to figure out if they had managed to get a picture of me yet.

Your average eighteen-year-old, I was not. These weren’t average times, either. The buildings we were standing around used to be tall and mighty, now reduced to ruin after a decade of clashes between The Coalition and rebels. This was Minnesota, once; it one of the last states to fall when The Coalition was coming to power.

You see, the world went insane twenty years ago. A political party called The Coalition took power, and all they cared about was order, obedience, and strength. Those who spoke out against it were killed, schools were co-opted and turned into indoctrination centers, orphans were given a drug making them subservient and grooming them to be the next generation of the army. The drug also turned them into exceptional fighters, and as far as *they* knew, the drug was 100% effective.

Except it's not. I couldn't remember how, but I became an orphan at six and was sent to an Institute where I received the drug. When they started fight training, I excelled, but realized quickly I was still different than everyone else. I became good at mimicking my peers, until an incident nearly blew my cover. Soon after, there was a rebel raid on the Institute center where I had been, and it caused enough chaos for me to be able to escape. They were raiding the Institutes to try and figure out if there was a way to reverse the drug, but I'd been living with its effects so long, I didn't know who I'd be without it.

"If it's not her, it's her identical twin. I swear. I had a brother who worked HVT Rec. Her picture was fucking everywhere. I mean, the picture was younger and her hair's a different color, but still. I don't think they ever were able to confirm that was her body."

It didn't take a genius to figure out what that stood for. I'd been on the run for a good six months since being broken out of the Institute; I'd been the very definition of a *high value target*.

"Let's take a damn picture and send it in. We're the only ones in the area and these empty buildings are creeping me out. Call it in, I'll find a cam."

My name, my real name when life was still simple and easy, was Olivia. I still went by it to some, but these days it was easier on most people I met if they didn't know my real name or real story. Right now, my identification card calls me Amalia, and I carry nothing else.

"Command, this is Patrol RX-5. Can you run a name for me?"

"RX-5? You actually found someone interesting?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out. Name on her card is Amalia Dawson. 22 years old. ID number is three, six, eight, alpha, golf, eight, zero, one."

“It’s expired, so cite her for that.” The other end of the radio crackled. “Hasn’t shown up for work in a few weeks.”

And she wouldn’t be again, either. I’d grabbed the ID off a man who’d tried to steal something from me a few weeks back, and he had had a sack full of ID cards. People went missing every day here, most of them were never found. Some by choice, some *not* by choice. I’d have to assume that Amalia was probably not by choice.

“No red flags from here. We can hold her for a night on the expired ID and run a more detailed check from her if you want to bring her in and question her about the work desertion.”

“10-4. We’ll be back to headquarters in 30.”

Damn. My eyes started scanning the ground for anything I could use to get me out of this and settled on a pipe not far from my feet. I wedged my toe under it, waiting for the officers to walk back towards me. “Get her in the truck. We’re going back.” The leader said as he clipped his radio back to his belt. I assumed he was the leader from the plumage on his uniform.

“We’re going to bring a work deserter back to headquarters?” The second asked.

I pretended to double over and groan like my stomach hurt, which caused them all to rush over of course. And that is when the other part of me turns on; the part of me that *they* trained. I know it’s not *all* them, that I had to have had something inside of me receptive to the physical training they gave us after the drug, but it doesn’t matter. What matters is that I’m good at it.

The pipe flies up into my hands, and I’m spinning around in a circle. It connects with two of the four Wardens, sending blood flying from their mouths and their bodies crashing to the

ground. For one that manages to miss that, I use the pipe as a pole vault and my boots meet his chest and he falls to the ground.

Warden number one, the leader, thinks he found a dark corner to hide in, but he doesn't know my brain is wired just a little bit differently than his when I use the pipe to bring his legs out from under him. His head hits the ground last, but it's with such a force it knocks him unconscious. The lighter in his pocket makes short work of my stolen ID and a quick search of his pockets finds the key for my cuffs. I take back the weapons and backpack they snagged from me after I was put in the cuffs.

Their truck is a gold mine; there's a pouch full of food and a couple bottles of water. I take a minute to enjoy the taste of an apple in my mouth. It's been ages since I've been able to get my hands on fresh fruit. I know I don't have long to make it back to the safehouse before these guys are missed and more patrols are sent out, so after shorting the radio in the truck and making sure I don't have any unwanted company, I slip further into a dark alley.

Back to being a ghost.