

Jeffrey Martin
Portfolio for Writing Fiction
Due Dec 23rd, 2018

Hysteria

My children have been taken. My little girls. Jessie and Margaret. I don't know where, or by who. I just know that those round eyes that look at me, and their voices that call my name, and their soft hands that touch my face, do not belong to my children. They're not my Jessie and Margaret. They're imposters. Doppelgangers. I want to grab them by their scrawny shoulders and shake the living shit out of them. I want to scream, "Where are my babies? Where are my girls, you little sluts!" But I can't let on that I know. I can't. I'll be next.

I can hear them at night, when pale moonlight stabs in through the drafty windows. I can hear them whispering in their rooms when they should be sleeping. One night I crept up to their doors, careful to avoid the warped floorboard that creak when you put weight down on them. I held my breath and listened. And the words and sounds that their little red tongues made weren't natural. Weren't human. I can still hear them at night. But I don't go to their rooms anymore. I don't dare to.

"Mom!" they call in unison with their voices that are sweet and intoxicating, but aren't my children's voices. They sound the same as them. Their cadences are identical. But I know. A mother always knows.

They look up at me with their feigned adoration as I stride into the kitchen, doing my best to don a countenance of supreme confidence and stability.

"What is it, girls?" I ask and my stomach instantly plummets to the depths of my bowels. Did my voice quaver? Oh Christ, I think it did. Did they notice? They must've noticed. I busy myself at the kitchen sink, turning on the water and plugging up the stainless-steel basin. The stream of water pouring from the tap is warm. Not good enough. I turn the heat up. It quickly becomes scalding. The steam rising upwards dampens my face and is pleasant in my lungs. I hold my hands under it. Hot like fire. Joy.

Dirty dishes are stacked precariously high on the gray, tile counter. I squeeze soap into the sink and begin to load it with the dishes, pots, and cutlery. They clatter against one another as they drop to the bottom of the sud filled water. I want to throw them down on the kitchen's linoleum floor. I want to break them.

I remember watching a news broadcast a few years back. I'd been flipping through channels on my old tube-television. Eventually I settled on a story discussing a mother in the UK. I remember thinking she had a nice face. A seductive face. It was round, with soft features, and pink, kissable lips. She had lovely hair too. Long and brunette, ending in little, perfect ringlets. She'd hacked her three girls to bits with an ax. The authorities found their rotting remains buried in the mother's basement. Her pink lips were pursed into a broad smile as the police led her through a swarm of bustling reporters. I remember how it made me feel: sick and nauseous. It didn't make sense to me, at the time. It felt evil. Ungodly. I remember turning off the television and hugging my girls. My babies. They were young then. Barely able to walk. I remember holding them tight and feeling their quiet little hearts beat against my ear. Now I

sympathize with her, that woman with the round face and kissable lips. I sympathize and wonder, did she go through what I'm going through?

"Are you alright, Mum?" Margaret asks.

"You look tired," Jessie adds.

They're sitting at the round kitchen table. Papers are strewn across it. A pack of crayons are cracked open - raided, half empty. Bright colors adorn the pages: drawings of animals and forests, of clouds and castles. Everything seems typical. Everything appears normal. But beneath it all. Beneath it all...

"I'm fine," I say. My words are sharp. Maybe a little too sharp. The skin on my hands has turned a deep red. I don't feel the heat anymore. "Didn't sleep well, that's all."

That wasn't a lie. I haven't been sleeping. At first I'd try to. I'd lie down in my over-sized bed, turn off my phone and swathe myself with varying blankets and pillows. But I just couldn't slip off. My thoughts would get stuck, kind of like the needle on a vinyl player getting caught in a deep groove. I'd get hooked on something. Words, images, things I did decades ago. And if I did doze off, it was a teeth grinding, night-sweat kind of sleep. And that was before I noticed the girls. The change, or switch. I guess I still doze off, time to time. But for the most part, I've just done away with sleeping altogether. Sleeping's a vulnerability, anyways. A lowering of one's guard. I can't afford to be careless. Not with them watching me. Watching and smiling their surface-deep smiles. Smiles that are actually snarls. I just smile back.

"Can we have grilled cheese later?" Jessie asks.

"Are you going to make it?" I say.

"I was hoping we could make it together." She sounds disappointed. Good. It's fake. I know it's fake.

"Well, If you want one, make it yourself." I can hear the rustling of paper, and the sound of their breathing behind me. Its grating.

"Would you want one, Mum?" Jessie again.

"Would you make a mess?"

"I'd clean it up."

"So you would make a mess?"

"I.." She stutters. "I don't know."

"Then no, Jessie. I don't want one."

Silence. For a moment, sweet silence. Then Margaret's shit eating voice shatters it.

"Did y' see Jessie's drawings, Mum?"

I stop paying attention. I just nod. I grab the metal scrubber and begin to muscle away the grime and grease from a burnt pot. It's hypnotic. I can feel my eyelids becoming heavy. I'm scraping hard, leaving scratches behind. The sink is nearly overflowing with white suds. The water's still hot. I think I can feel blisters forming. I'll poke them later with a needle and watch the liquid drip out from the little skin sacks.

"Jessie drew a picture of Miss Conway. That weird librarian at the school."

"That's nice," I manage.

"It's funny. Her arms are so long. She kind of looks like a..."

"I said that's nice," I snap. Silence again. Beautiful silence.

Though I said no to the sandwich, I can feel my stomach rumbling. I've been forgetting to eat. Focused on more important things. My girls. Where are my girls? Who are these things?

I look up from the dishes and out of the small, single pane window, set over the kitchen sink. Family vehicles are parked against the low curbs. The sky is clear, with scarce tufts of clouds here and there. The summer sun is harsh and casts a shadow across my lawn from the little spruce I planted two years ago. My neighbor, an old man with thick fingers and wandering eyes, is watering his square lawn. He waves to someone out of sight as he moves the hose back and forth. He's pressing his thumb against the metal rimmed edge of the hose, making the water fan out widely. His wife died the previous summer, she was a quiet woman. I rarely saw her. When I did it was usually on Sunday. They both would load into their little red car and head to Sunday mass. She usually wore a long dress. I don't think I ever saw her legs. I remember she liked to have flowers in her hair. Since she died I've noticed the widowed husband has grown obsessed with his lawn: the little daisies in his flower beds, the slightly off green grass he mows twice a week, the chest level hedges he meticulously trims. A smell hits my nose. I look down. The trash bin needs to be taken out.

The warmth of blood tickles as it slowly rolls down the side of my torso. I reach under my sweater to feel the gash with my wet hand. I'd gone deeper than I usually go. Lately, and regularly, I've been cutting myself. Not on the arms though. It's not smart to cut anywhere visible. I learned that when I was younger. I used to cut as a pimple smacked teenager, wrapped up the melodrama of puberty and high-school. My homeroom teacher, a hag with gray hair, and a nose too big for her face, had seen the cuts on my arms. She informed the school who, in turn, informed my parents. My dad beat me. It was a more tender beating than his usual ones. Sympathetic almost, saying, 'I love you', with his fists. That's how I read it, anyways. Maybe that explains why I let men fuck me over. I've heard it said that everything we become can be traced back to our childhoods.

I cut under my left armpit this time, where the skin is thick and tender. The orange glow of candles lit my bedside table and I put on music - sensual strings. I slid the blade down, along my side, feeling the skin open and split. Then I curved the blade to finish beneath my sagging breast. The razor's edge hit bone for a moment, I'm sure of it. The relief was instant and sweet. My eyes rolled back and my toes curled as if a tongue was working gentle circles on my clit. I could feel myself get wet. Pure ecstasy.

One of the girls asks for a glass of something. I don't respond. They're looking at me. I can sense it. I can feel both of their eyes on the back of my head, boring through my skull and drilling into my thoughts. I imagine a wall, a psychic barrier to block them out. But I can feel them. Battering down my protections. For every new defense I put up, they come with new weapons. A new plan of assault. I'm wilting. Running out of resources. They're winning.

I hear the fridge open behind me. It closes - louder than it needs to be closed. I grit my teeth and squeeze my eyes shut. I can't let them get to me. Not with my girls missing.

A dull crash startles me and I turn fast on the balls of my heels. Jessie is standing in a pool of milk. The jug lays open at her feet. She's looking up at me with large, round eyes. There are tears in them. Crocodile tears. The little bitch.

"What the fuck did you do?" I shout. It feels good to shout.

"It... it..."

"Do you expect me to clean this shit up? Do you?" Finally getting release. Been hiding for too long. Been holding it in for too long. Finally letting it out. I can feel the crippling vice that's been crushing me for months finally easing off.

"It... was an accident."

"An accident? There are no accidents, you little bitch."

Margaret is crying now at the table. Crocodile tears, the both of them.

"What are you crying for? You're just as much to blame as this little bitch."

Jessie begins to retreat back to her sister. She's leaving little white footprints behind her.

"Well are you going to clean it up?"

I'm violently waving my hands. There's a knife in my left fist. Sharp steel. I must have grabbed it from the sink. I don't remember. The blood vessels in my neck are expanding. My heart is pounding.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Mum." Jessie blubbers.

"What'd you say? Stop your crying." I'm walking towards them. Margaret's fallen off her chair and is cowering in the corner of the kitchen. Jessie too.

"I said... I said I'm sorry."

"Sorry, always sorry. Sorry for this, sorry for that." It's time. The dam's breaking. I can't hold it back anymore. I have to let it out. "I know. I know, you little sluts. I know who you are. What you aren't." Finally I can breath. I wave the knife at them. "Where are my girls?"

Margaret's cries are deafening. Jessie's arms are around her. They're both looking up at me.

"What... what are you talking about?" Margaret sobs.

"What am I talking about? You can stop the fucking act. But damn the both of you are good. Give them an award!" I clap my hands together loudly. It's concussive and Jessie blinks and shakes with each sound.

Margaret buries her head into her knees. A little puddle forms under her. She's pissed herself.

"Oh god. Now look. Are you a child, Margaret? How old are you? Your going to piss yourself? Do you still need fucking diapers?"

"Leave her alone," Jessie screams.

"Where are they?"

"What?"

"My girls. Where are they."

Margaret lifts her head again and wails. "We are your girls."

"You're not my girls. Your sluts. Your fakes. Where the fuck are they!" I pounce on them. The knife moves up and down. Slides in and out of their little, delicate bodies. They're screaming, but I hardly notice. Jessie strikes at me. She hits my face and I can feel her nails cut me. The knife slices her cheek and she falls backwards. I move to Margaret. She turns away and I claw at her hair, pulling her towards me. Jessie reaches up. She makes for the knife. I hit her with my head and feel her little nose crunch. She falls back onto Margaret. I stab at her back. The blade wobbles as it punctures her spine. I'm covered in their blood. The blood of frauds. Of fakes. I feel no hesitation. It feels good. The floor's turned a deep shade of crimson.

My arm's tiring. Up and down, up and down. They aren't moving anymore, but I can't stop. They aren't my girls. They aren't.

My chest is heaving and I'm sweating profusely. The knife falls from my hand. It clangs on the floor, its blade bent. I slip in the blood and fall to my butt. Jessie's slumped over Margret.

My left hand, the one that held the knife, is stuck in a clenched position. It aches.

I clamber to my feet and walk to the sink. I dip my hands into the soapy water. It's still warm. It quickly turns red.

I look back outside the window. The sun's still shining. The sky's still blue. The neighbor's moved from mowing the lawn to weeding the edges of his driveway. I feel tired. Relaxed. I feel like I can sleep. A deep, coma like sleep. I close my eyes and breath deep. Free. Finally free.

"Mommy."

My eyes burst open. That feeling again. The drilling into my skull. I'm rigid. Frozen. Slowly, I turn. The girls are standing, covered in their blood, smiling. The knife's in Jessie's hand.

"Now it's our turn."

I'm too scared to scream.

Fragments

A red cardboard box sat next to her on the bedroom's bare mattress. She'd moved its sheets, blankets, and pillows to her living-room couch. She hadn't slept in the room since her husband passed. They'd spent some of their sweetest moments there: reading books, listening to music, talking late into the night, making love. The memories felt embedded into the walls. Wherever she looked, their story together. The wooden dresser that leaned to the right; the cracked mirror held together with tape; paintings scavenged from local charity shops and overpriced farmers markets. Each item with a story. But this was a new chapter. Her chapter. And she was alone. She thought she'd already cried herself dry, but tears welled up in her eyes.

She winced from a knot that festered in the small of her back. A cushion on the couch that jutted upwards had tormented her at night. Half asleep she'd shift her body, or try to scrunch it down, but it was stubborn, and her efforts usually made it worse. She pressed against the knot with her knuckles, trying to roll it out. It was firm and tumorous. If he were still alive he'd have gotten it out. He had a way with his hands. A way of relieving her tension, of finding the spots - of making her right.

The phone had rung a week after his death. It was Jim, a rather amicable co-worker of her husband. He sounded somber. She imagined there'd been a disagreement as to who should make the call. She guessed he'd drawn the shortest straw. Some things in the office, he'd said, the contents of her husband's desk. They weren't sure if she wanted them. She did.

It'd been a month since the call and she'd just found the time and energy to go to the office. They'd written her a card, and those she passed on her way in, and out, expressed their deepest condolences. She thanked them for their words, though she didn't want their commiseration. Some of them even had the gall to hug her. She hugged them back - only for their sake. These people were just faces to her. Names thrown around at the dinner table. She saw them fleetingly at Christmas parties, work dinners, or new years events. But that was the extent of it. To them, she felt, she was just his wife. The arm piece. But now, without her husband to accompany her, she was just a wife. Worse yet. A widow.

Feeling achy, she stood from the bed and stretched. The knot in her lower back released a little and her spine cracked pleasantly. She looked out of her room's seventh story window. Heavy clouds threatened to pelt the city below. They were dark and gray and the air was thick with the electricity of the coming storm. The glass shuttered against the wind that stirred from the west.

Their apartment overlooked the downtown nightclub district. They used to sit on their small, rectangular balcony, covered in blankets, with hot cups of tea, and watch as drunken crowds stumbled about. Three venues faced their apartment: The Red Room, Gentlemen, and Frisky Tropics. The clubs humming neon-lights sputtered to life when night crept over the city. Each weekend they attracted a swell of boisterous, rowdy customers. When fights broke out, as they often did, they'd place bets on who'd emerge the victor. Unethical, maybe, but up here, in their domain, with their bars of chocolate, and their fluffy slippers, they were the rulers; the people below were their subjects. He used to call her his queen.

She turned from the window and looked at the box. It appeared small and unimportant sitting alone on the bare bed. One corner of the box was creased as if it'd been dropped. She

hadn't opened it yet. Hadn't even peeked inside. She almost did, on her drive home from the office. It was on the passenger seat and she was stuck at an infuriatingly long light. She found her eyes gliding from the road to the box and she reached out to open it. Her fingers had just touched it when a car behind her honked. The light had changed to green.

"S'pose I should open you," she said. "I mean, why else are you here?"

Her hands were perched on her hips, then she crossed her arms. She looked at it for a while, as if waiting for a response, then sat back down on the bed. She took a deep breath then exhaled slowly.

"It's just a box. Don't get all worked up over a box." But it wasn't just a box. It was more than just that. She knew it was more. Underneath its unassuming facade, there was a piece of him. A part of her husband. And that's all she'd ever have of him anymore. Little fragments.

She noticed her fingers were shaking. Trembling actually.

"What's this about?" she muttered, examining her hands. She straightened her fingers out, then closed them tightly into a fist. She did it twice, then three times. The shaking didn't stop. If anything it got worse.

The springs squeaked as she dropped backwards on the mattress. Her arms spread out in a crucifix position. She stared up at the popcorn patterns on the ceiling.

"I'm too young for all this."

A light rain began to patter against the bedroom window. Its rhythmic drumming was soothing, cathartic. She closed her eyes and listened. She always loved the rain. The way it would bend and batter the leaves on trees; how it gathered and flowed down the curbside, guzzled up by drainpipes; she loved how the day after a heavy rainfall everything seemed clean and new. The muscles in her body relaxed and her head slunk against her shoulder. She fell asleep.

A boom outside woke her up. She lurched upwards. The wind and rain were heavy now, assaulting the city below. A flash of light outside filled her room with shadows. Another boom sounded. This one deeper but softer.

She rubbed her eyes and noticed that the knot in the small of her back wasn't bothering her. She reached for it and felt around. There was some remnant of it, but for the most part it had released its paralyzing grasp.

"Finally," she sighed, shifting to the left, then the right, enjoying her freedom of movement.

She lay back down on the bed and rolled to her side, facing the box. Her room had grown dim, but the light streaming in from the window was just enough to see. She let out a short, quick exhale, then reached out to lift the lid. At first it felt heavy, like the stone cover of a sarcophagus, but once off it shed its weight and she tossed it aside. She put her face over the box and inhaled through her nose. It smelt like him. Or, at-least, she thought it did. Deep down she knew it was likely a triggered olfactory memory. But she didn't care. Coconut and pine. He always smelled like coconut and pine.

The smell dissipated and her stomach turned. For a moment she felt the emptiness of the room. The crushing loneliness of her apartment.

She reached inside and grabbed the first thing she touched. It was cold, and when she pulled it out she chuckled. It was the mug she bought him for his thirtieth birthday. 'Well S**T',

was written in bold letters. He hated his birthdays. It became a tradition for her to find something that expressed his discontent. Tacky shirts, key-chains. The mug was her favorite find. She set it down carefully.

She reached into the box again and fished out the usual, mundane things you'd expect to find at someone's desk: pencils, pens, sticky notes, a stapler. She removed them all and lined them up.

She dug deeper and her hand touched something interesting. It was larger, and buried at the bottom of the box. She gripped its edge and pulled it out. She recognized it immediately and laughed. Inside a tacky Las Vegas frame, with JACKPOT written in gold, was a picture of the two of them. It was from their honeymoon. The image was a little out of focus, a little overblown, and by no means flattering. They were seated at a green leather booth. The table in-front of them was covered with a respectable number of empty bottles and he had his arm around her shoulder. They both looked far too inebriated. He had a big shit eating grin on his face. She never understood why he liked the photo so much, but she got it now. She kissed the picture and set it next to the mug.

She reached in once more and felt three, little objects. Without having to see them she knew they were stones. She sat up and bent over to turn on the bedside the lamp. The rocks gleamed underneath the light. They were finely polished and oval. Two were green, his favorite color. The other was red, her favorite. She held the red stone under the lamp's yellow light, examining the fine little silver veins that ran throughout the stone. She turned it to see one particularly thick vein but it slipped from her hand, fell to the floor, and bounced beneath the bed.

"Clutz," she said as she lifted herself from the bed and dropped to her knees.

She tilted her head to look underneath, but instead of finding the stone, her eyes settled on a heap of fabric. She grabbed it and pulled it out. It was his jacket, his favorite jacket. It was an old denim piece with torn elbows and a brown stain on one sleeve. Its front pocket was bulging out and she unbuttoned it. Inside was a pack of gum. When they were younger it would've been cigarettes, or rolling papers. She buried her face into the jacket and smelled. This time she knew, it wasn't just a phantom memory, or her desperate mind playing tricks, it was real and genuine. The jacket smelled like him.

Tears streamed down her face and she collapsed against the side of the bed. She held the jacket tight against her chest. His jacket.

"I miss you," she said, knowing that, just like him, soon the smell would be gone.

Men of the Tide

A wave, tall and black as coal, crashed the ship's storm-worn bow. It spat a cold, salt mist that passed from one man to the next and bit worse than wild dogs. The old ship, by the name of Belle, was made of wood, steel, rope, and rot. She creaked and moaned as she rose and fell with each giant swell. Harsh winds slapped the men's faces like scorned wives and froze them deep to the bones. Rain stabbed from the sky and stung the skin. The storm screeched and howled, whipped and flailed. The sea was hot and mad; mad with a rage that stirred men of faith to cry out and plead for grace.

They toiled in the dim, cloud-dulled light of the moon. Tight on the ropes, true on the wheel and high on the masts. No fear broke their ranks. They were hard men: men of the tide, of star-lit nights and cold love, men of quick graves and long lost homes. Men of death.

A voice, rough and deep, stung by a life of drink and smoke, strained to be heard over the strong winds, but heard it was.

"Keep y'er wits, men. The bitch 's in heat an we ain't got room f'r her ways. Get that rig tied, an watch y'er feet. Brace y'er..."

The gruff voice was drowned out by a stiff wave that smacked the port side. It rocked the hull as if they'd struck a wall. Those up the masts, to furl the sails, clung to the thick poles for dear life. A hand-full of men, caught off guard by the swift hit, fell hard to the ground. The ship rose on a steep swell and the men, sprawled on the salt-slicked deck, slipped down to the stern. They clawed at the planks to slow their fall. Some cried out for help. Men, firm and quick, reached for them and pulled the lads back to their feet. They rose and, with no qualm or thought about it, were fast to their posts. They knew the score, the truth of the storm, of all storms. To give in to the fear, that clawed and screamed in the back of all men's minds, was to drown, to sink. To quit was to drag the ship and its whole crew down to the deep. To the dark. There was no time for fault. No room for fits or flaws. Not when the sea could chew you up and spit you out in a blink of the eye and not give a damn.

A young boy, not yet able to grow a full beard, wiped the rain from his eyes with the back of his hand. His name was Jean. His hair blew on the gale as he pulled hard on a thick rope. It was latched to the main mast which moaned with each gust of wind. He could hear the boards at its base warp and bend. The boy turned his strained gaze up the mast, to its tall, gray sails. They were full, ready to rip, then went slack; they tugged left, then right, back and forth. The sound they made was like the wings of a giant bat. So new to the sea and her ways, but he knew the score. If the sails were not furled, and soon, they'd tear, or worse, bring the whole rig and mast down on their heads. And if it did, well, then his days at sea would have been few and short. So he pulled hard on the coarse, hemp rope - though his arms throbbed and ached. And when he could feel the thick skin of his palms tear, he bit down and bore through the pain.

His dad, Jacques, had been a tall man with deep-set steel eyes and a broad chest. He was stern, made cold by his time in the great war. He fought in the trench, as most men from his town did. None but him came back. When the war met its end, he found his work on the sea. He hopped a whale boat, then found time doing freight. When Jean was a child he would sit on the

rock strewn shore with his mum. They'd look out at the mouth of the Saint's gulf and pray. Pray for calm seas and kind winds.

A salt mist stung his eyes as he tied the rope down to a steel peg. The fore mast was furled, as was the rear, but the main sail still hung loose. It flapped and its seams looked ready to tare. The men up the mast fought to tie it down, but the cold numbed their hands and kept them from going fast.

The voice, which called before the crash, boomed again. "Ye almos' got her, men! Keep on it!"

And so they did. One brave man, with a bare chest and long, tied back hair, had leapt from from the crow's nest to the ports yard. At first it looked like he would fall, but he gripped tight and did not slip. He pulled at the sail, on the ropes and links. The crew, with a fresh fire lit by the man, worked twice as fast and hard. The cold lost its grip, as did the pain. Soon the main sail was furled and the crew let out a loud cheer.

Free now to feel, Jean winced and grit his teeth. In the dim light he could see his palms, the blood, the torn flesh. He hid the wound. There was still work to be done. He reached for a pail when a thick, Welsh voice barked next to him.

"No ya don't, lad. Let's see." Hands gripped Jean and turned him round. The voice Came from old Tom, a squat man with zig-zag scars cross his face. A red glow came from a lit pipe at the edge of his mouth. How he kept the flame to burn in such a storm Jean could not guess. He grabbed Jean's hands and was quick to shake his head. "No more work for ya, boy. Not with this."

Wise to the fact that Jean would give him a fight, the man left no room for words and raised his hand.

"No way round it, now get down 'n clean it up."

Jean still felt like he should put up a fight, but knew the man ranked him, and his words were true. His wounds could turn bad. And what would be worse? Down one man for a few days, or down one man for the whole trip. Jean gave in, and left the deck.

The wounds were deep, more than Jean had thought. He cried out when he poured drink over them. It stung and the pain crawled up his arm. He took a long swig of the drink to ease the pain. He saw black spots and felt sick, but Jean clenched his fists and fought through it. He dried the wounds, rubbed in cream, and found clean white cloth to wrap round his hands. He tied the cloth tight and took one more swig for a good sleep.

Jean changed his clothes, then lay on his cot. His head spun from the drink, but his hands hurt less. He thought of his mum. He knew she'd be on the rock strewn beach.

Jean prayed. For calm seas and kind winds.

The ship rocked and the sound of the wind was fierce. The storm was not done. It would kick and bite still. It would toss the boat and its crew round like a toy. But the masts would stand, and the sails would not be torn, and the men would live.

Jean closed his eyes and soon was in a deep sleep.

Course Reflection

With my second creative course coming to its end, it's time, once again, to reflect on what I've learned, the pieces I've written, what I need to improve, and the course as a whole.

The story *Hysteria*, which is my magic realism piece, came to me after a literal fever dream. I spent most of this semester terribly sick, unable to sleep, and with awful sleeps when I did. I wanted to attempt a first person/present-tense story. I rarely read first person, as I tend to find they read like a diary instead of a story, and I rarely deviate from past-tense.

It was a challenge, to put it lightly. Not because I was slipping up the tenses or perspective, but because I felt such constraints. Regardless I continued and finished the piece. It was a good exercise and as I had to find a way to push myself. It expanded my view of first person and, though I will very rarely write it in the future, it is best to sharpen all of your tools. Leave no stone unturned.

Fragments displays the strange and complete evolution of a piece after re-reads, re-writing, and editing. It formed, at first, from the, 'Where were you last night?' assignment, and was slightly mixed with the, 'find an object to write about,' exercise. I believe it is an example of the required malleability each story must possess in order to reach its fullest potential.

While writing it, I found that I kept asking my character, where were you last night, instead of a character prodding another character with the query. It was an interesting perspective to take, and eventually I had to answer it. She went to her dead husband's office. She picked up a box. A box of his things. The story initially had the wife calling out to her dead husband in a time of need. However it felt melodramatic, and honestly, a little trite.

The writing is in third person, past-tense, so I felt far more comfortable writing it. But shifting the story so drastically over the course of writing was, in itself, a difficult step. I feel the piece is more organic now, and that it flows much better.

The last piece included in this portfolio, *Men of the Tide*, comes from the one syllable exercise. This was hell for me. Absolute hell. I wanted to push myself to make it over one thousand words. Yet, unintentionally, I chose a dreadfully difficult subject. The one syllable restriction meant that I couldn't use words such as: sailor, water, ocean, under, over, current, below, salty, distant, voyage, captain, etc. I found myself struggling to piece together the story in a manner which did not contain archaic language.

It took me nearly two weeks to complete, which is a rather long time for such a short piece in my opinion. But that longer writing period really highlights just how complicated the exercise was. I found that it was a good way to push my boundaries with the language, to learn new descriptors, and scour the dictionary for alternative synonyms.

Beside that, however, I came to the realization that the quick, one syllable words really carried the action along at a nice, fast pace. It makes sense, when looked at objectively. If the story is moving at a fast pace, and the language is using long, flowery words, and sentences that just carry on and on, there will be a disconnect between the pacing and the language. If you really desire to lessen the speed of a particular scene, then you should utilize longer, more

complicated words. To tighten it and make it speedy, use short sentences and snappy words. (As I just demonstrated in this last paragraph.) This lesson will certainly benefit my future writing.

Over the duration of the course I analyzed, *Becoming A Writer*, by Dorothea Brande. Before starting the book I was a little frustrated with myself. I was finding it difficult to sit down and write daily (mostly because I was sick). And was getting extremely irritated with the lack of reading I was doing (mostly because the book I read prior to *Becoming A Writer* was pure drivel). Because of this frustration I decided to look at a book on writing.

Becoming a writer offers some very poignant messages to anyone interesting in the craft. Brande discusses how first, before the technical elements of writing, the individual must shift their personality and mentality. As a teacher, she proposes that most individuals struggle with motivation, dedication, and the overall drive that writing demands.

Reading this disturbed me. I already was feeling like a fraud, due to my lack of writing and reading. It made me look inside myself, to look for flaws and characteristics that stunt and neuter my ability to write. I came to some startling realizations. They are, however, somewhat personal, and I will keep those secrets to myself.

The course, writing fiction, really pushed me. Harder than any creative writing class I've taken before has. I really struggled with the daily exercises, and was overall discontent with my work. It did teach me a very important lesson though. One that Miss Brande covers extensively in her book. Perseverance. If I want to be a writer, I have to write, irregardless of the quality or content. This process, Miss Brande suggests, scares away many would be writers. They realize it is hard work, that some days you don't want to write, or you are feeling little to no inspiration. It doesn't matter. You still have to write. You need to pull it out of yourself, even if it's painful or the content is not a pleasant read.

So in the midst of being horribly sick, lacking motivation, and feeling like a fraud, I persevered, just as Miss Brande suggests you should do, and just as the course required. I participated in the exercises, I attend the classes (when I wasn't hacking up a lung), and I completed the portfolio. I believe the experience, of struggling and doubting myself, has paid off. I feel more confident, maybe not in my writing, but in my wanting *to* write. And that is the most important part, isn't it?