ON SELLING OUT
by
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Meg and I flipped out the legs of the fold-up table and heaved it upright. It skewed slightly on the gray brick flagstones of Brigham Square, but held. So we proceeded to deck the tabletop in print copies of *InScape*, to litter it with flyers, and—of course—to sprinkle candy over every possible surface. Then, with a flourish, we taped signs to the front edge of the table and to the easels around it: “Poet for Hire.” We were set.

The Poet for Hire booth was a way to promote *InScape*, BYU’s literary magazine, which meant that we had a mission. So—with the zeal of a good cause—we accosted students on their way to and from BYU’s student center, flagging them down with dramatic feather pens, luring them in with chocolate.

“Get a poem portrait,” I cried. “For your spare change, get an original poem written for you by one of our poets right now. On the spot!”

It was a good day for poetry. It was the last week of September 2017; the trees around the square still waved green leaves; pink petunias waterfalled over the edges of enormous cylindrical planters; the sun’s warmth was pleasant, the air crisp.
Soon, all of our poets were busy scribbling away, writing poetical caricatures for people and collecting pennies and quarters as payment in our little lantern tip jar. I myself wrote several poems for passersby. Then, toward the end of my shift at the booth, one particular student halted before me at the table, his eyes scanning the journals and the candy. “What’s this?”

I explained the Poet for Hire concept. “You want a poem written about you?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, but I don’t have any change.”

“That’s okay,” I said. The booth was more about promoting Inscape than turning a profit. “This one can be for free.”

I interviewed the young man briefly, sifting through his life for poetical details. I found out his name was Mark, that his major was computer science, and that he adored his girlfriend. Nodding, I sat at a chair by the table and started to scratch out a poem on a notepad.

Multiple times, Mark said, “I just feel so bad that I don’t have any change.”

I assured him this was fine and continued writing. Then, when I was almost done, Mark blurted, “Oh! I know what I can give you!”

I glanced up to see him fishing through a leather wallet. Then I focused back on the paper. I was on the last two lines when something plopped onto the table in front of me.

My eyes flickered over to see what Mark had given me—and I froze. Because it was a condom.

Unmistakably. Square, orange wrapper. Trojan logo. There it was. I gawked down at it.

And then an uncomfortable, bizarre thought squirmed through my mind: How are you paying me, exactly, sir? What do you have in mind?
Slowly, I raised my head to peer at Mark—and he mirrored me, so that we lifted our gazes from the condom in sync until our eyes met. Then Mark looked away, a flush creeping up his neck.

“That wasn’t what I was going to give you!” he said, snatching the condom off the table and burying it back in his wallet.

He pulled out a fast-food coupon instead and placed it in the tip jar. I hurriedly finished the poem, ripped the page out of the notebook, and handed it to Mark. He took it and raced away, humiliated—poor thing—and I sat back in my chair, alternating between laughing and furrowing my brow.

Thoughts flitted through my mind quick and liquid as a flock of starlings. But Mark didn’t need to worry. I didn’t spend a second puzzling over Mark and his girlfriend, over the BYU Honor Code (which calls for complete abstinence), or over Mark’s embarrassment.

Nope.

I was too busy wondering, with a bemused sort of grin, whether the universe was trying to tell me something. Was selling my artwork for a profit like this a form of prostitution? Suddenly, the phrase “Poet for Hire” seemed disturbing.

Even now, weeks after the Poet for Hire booth, I’m still considering the implications of Mark’s accidental offering—because the fact is that “selling out” is a true concern for artists. It’s an old paradoxical conflict, because most writers do sell their work. They participate in a market for novels, for poetry, for essays, trading their precious artwork for pennies and quarters and royalties.

Yet, for many writers, publication isn’t about the money. Rather, it’s about gaining a readership; it’s about the joy of witnessing your art reach another person, affect them, change them. It’s a deep,
vulnerable form of communication, my soul to yours, and as such feels a universe away from profit margins, from haggling, from the vulgar daily battles waged over nickels and dimes.

For those more economically minded, this is perhaps difficult to understand. For instance, writing this now, I can’t help but think back to an argument I had a few weeks ago with my roommate, Ann, over the purpose of writing creatively in the first place. She said, staunchly, “As an author, your job is to write things your readers want to hear. Your book is like any other product produced in the marketplace. It’s all supply and demand. You need to create a product that people actually want. That’s the whole point, isn’t it?”

I stiffened, a little offended. Still, I stayed calm, attempting to talk to Ann about the nature of art as personal expression, but she obstinately kept coming back to the marketplace, comparing writers to manufacturers of dollar-store soap and combs.

I found myself getting angrier and clamped my mouth shut in an attempt to remain civil. Because what I wanted to do was stand up, clench my fists, and scream, “What would you know? You’re not an artist! And you’ll never be an artist, because your soul is all abacus and humbug, and I hate you!”

Luckily, I managed to keep my tantrum to myself.

Now, writing this essay, I can calmly admit that, of course, Ann has a point. As writers, we definitely need to consider our audience and compose with their needs in mind. However, what Ann doesn’t understand is that there’s an expectation of integrity among artists—of creating works that are true to some elemental part of who we are as individuals. There’s this uncommunicated understanding between us, a belief that art is connected to identity,
that the value of art is about the personal fingerprint of the artist—and so if we alter our work too much in order to placate an audience, if we destroy the personal touch of the self in order to gain a profit, then we have betrayed ourselves, and our art, and our fellow artists to boot. This is the essence of what it means to “sell out.” This is why the title “starving artist” is a point of pride, a badge of honor among writers everywhere. Because an impoverished artist is probably a true one.

At the Poet for Hire booth, I began to wonder if I’d sold out somehow. The booth itself didn’t worry me. I felt no shame about creating cute, poetical caricatures of passersby in order to promote literature. But I did take the condom incident as a comical and slightly absurd warning and an opportunity for reflection on a larger scale. I wondered: Was I in danger of prostituting my art in some other way?

In terms of literal prostitution—no chance. If there is some weird market out there where writers trade sonnets for sexual favors, that market can count me out.

As for selling out for cash, that’s simply not possible for me. It’s true that I’ve made a little money off of my writing—but not much. And likely, I’ll never make enough of a profit to even have the option of selling out. This is just not a sin I’m capable of committing.

But here’s the thing: there are plenty of other ways to sell out. We can alter or cheapen our art for any number of goods, nebulous or concrete. We can sacrifice our writing even for things as elemental and abstract as love.

Or happiness.
Years before the Poet for Hire booth, my father and I strolled down the sidewalk on University Parkway near BYU campus. It was November, and the trees around us had grown stringy and ragged, just a few brown leaves sagging from their bare branches. As my father and I walked side by side, I kept my hands deep in the pockets of my peacoat to keep them warm, and told my father about the creative writing class I was taking.

My father paused, then said, “Yeah, but you’re too happy to write poetry now. Right?”

I halted mid step, my foot pausing in the air just long enough for me to lose my balance and stumble.

What? I thought.

“Careful,” my father said as I regained my footing.

We continued walking, and the conversation moved on, but my mind didn’t. My thoughts whirred, stuck on that one fascinating statement: You’re too happy to write poetry now.

Where had that sentence come from? And what did it mean?

Apparently, my father believed that happiness undermines one’s ability to write poetry, that poetry and happiness are not conducive, that they are antitheses. And not only did he believe this, but he also saw it as common knowledge, a fact so universal that he didn’t need to introduce the idea or clarify it afterwards.

And then there’s the last word of that statement: now. You’re too happy to write poetry now.

So what was I before?

A miserable writer? A disturbing Poe-esque poet? The cliché tortured artist? At what stage of my life had my father seen me this
way? His statement was like a funhouse mirror; in his words, I saw myself distorted and monstrous—and grotesquely fascinating.

Now, thinking back on this experience, I can't help but wonder if there's something to his statement, some kernel of truth in his morose perception of poets—or even writers in general. Is there a blood price necessary in order to don the wings of the artist? Must I pay for each word I compose with a tear?

My father is not the only person to believe that true art requires deep suffering. In fact, this belief seems to be a pretty general assumption. For instance, once, in a creative writing workshop class at BYU, a classmate declared: “My parents gave me a happy childhood—and I will never forgive them for that!”

According to this misery theory, the path to great artistry is as follows: You must have a terrible childhood—you must be able to swap abuse or neglect stories with Jeanette Walls or Dave Pelzer. Or, as an alternative, you could develop a debilitating mental illness, like Sylvia Plath, or Virginia Woolf, or even Leo Tolstoy. Regardless, your unique brand of human agony must compel you to do bedlam-esque things, like put your head in an oven or walk into a river with pockets filled with stones or—at the very least—cut off your own ear.

I may be a bit melodramatic here, and I’m sure there are and have been happy writers, like perhaps Ray Bradbury or Ursula K. Le Guin, or maybe Madeleine L’Engle. Still, counting the number of agonized writers is easier than trying to dredge up some smiling ones, to the point that there’s a common theory that the recipe for high-quality writing includes misery. And I can’t help but wonder as a would-be artist myself how true this
theory is, and how much I’m willing to endure.

Is this where I’m selling out? Am I really too happy to write poetry?

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I’ve spent many hours puzzling over my father’s statement. Part of the strangeness of his words lies in the nature of our relationship: we’re not particularly close. Certainly, we care about each other, and whatever interactions we have are generally warm. However, such interactions are intermittent at best. My father lives in Southern California, and I live in Utah, and we almost never talk on the phone. We don’t email. We’re not even friends on Facebook. So our little stroll down University Parkway was not a regular occurrence; it was an oddity.

And, during the entire walk—like most of our relationship—we talked only of surface-level things, safe topics with no room for conflict. We skirted around taboo subjects, subjects that are endless and impossible to quantify but that include the following: my mother and father’s relationship; my mother’s jealousy that my father and I were spending time alone together without her; everything we’d have to do after the brief walk to appease her because of this; any discontentment on his part or mine with family, school, work, or life; any past conflict between us or between either of us and my mother; anything that could remind either of us of said conflict; my social life; finances; food; existential dilemmas; spirituality; personal goals; etc. We eschew these topics and many others and ask no clarifying questions. This is the main rule for keeping the peace.

This means that I have little to no understanding of how my
father sees me as a person. That’s not a safe subject. So his words that day—*You’re too happy to write poetry now*—gave me a peek into his concept of me, and a weird one at that.

Of course, he was right, in a way. Not about the fact that I’d stopped writing poetry—because I hadn’t. But it’s true that I’m much happier now than I was growing up. I was a thoroughly depressed teenager (isn’t that part of being a teenager?) in a home filled with parental fighting and conflict, and I produced hundreds of agonized poems on the subjects of death and grief and pointlessness.

But here’s the tricky part: my father never read any of those poems. In fact, my parents never read anything I wrote. They didn’t show interest in the nine novels, hundreds of poems, and dozens of short stories and plays I completed before graduating high school. They bragged to people at church about the fact that I was a writer—but that was the extent of their interest. So how did my father know about my emo poetry streak?

Then, several months after our walk together, I remembered. Once, during high school, I was recognized as a finalist in a national poetry competition. As such, I received a congratulatory letter and a free softbound copy of the poems of the winners and finalists. My poem was included in the collection.

That day, my parents expressed excitement about the award—but still, I never imagined that they would actually *read* my winning poem. They hadn’t read any of my other poetry after all. And after that day, we never discussed the award again.

It would only be years later that my mother would say to me during a casual conversation, “Oh yeah. I remember that poem. It terrified your father.”

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Have I sold out in the name of happiness? This might seem like an odd question, but the truth is that I have never been as productive a writer as I was during those years of high school and family conflict—when I was abjectly miserable. If I peer back through the years, it’s easy for me to note that the times that I’ve produced the most work—and the deepest work—have always been my times of greatest distress.

Part of me longs for that—for the suffering that yields poetry, for the pain that spurs me to write. In some ways, I reflect fondly on dark moments that led to artistic triumphs. But would I want to go back to home-life-level misery now? Just the thought makes me shudder. Just the thought makes me feel as resistant as a cat being forced into a bucket of water.

And so I wonder: If it came down to a choice, what would it be? Happiness or poetry? Would I sell out to escape from suffering? Would I surrender my pen if doing so could guarantee me a life infused with joy?

Burdened with such a question, I feel like Christine from Phantom of the Opera—like I must choose between the disturbed masked muse with his mesmerizing music of the night and the happy-ending prince with his sunshine and fine horses.

Of course, for the most part, this is a false dilemma. Fantastic writing doesn’t always stem from broken childhoods or shattered minds. And even if it did, even if art depended solely and completely upon suffering, our portion of pain is not always something that we can choose. Staying true to one’s writing does not guarantee someone a greater portion of life’s hardships and therefore a deeper well of inspiration.
But even so, I don’t think that this dilemma—happiness versus poetry—can be dismissed easily. There’s something that rings true in my father’s words: You’re too happy to write poetry now.

Can it truly be a coincidence that so many of our most renowned writers were depressed? Were recluses? Were disturbed? I think of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Emily Dickinson. Mary Shelley. Emily Brontë. Edgar Allen Poe. Surely, without their woes, we could have no Grand Inquisitors, no funerals in the brain, no melancholy monsters, no Mr. Rochesters, and no pessimistic ravens.

There must be something, then, in suffering—some path to artistry, some door into the inner chambers of poetry itself. Perhaps it is not the only door, the only path, but it is there. I sense it in these books I read, in these authors and the suffering that lives and breathes just beneath the letters on the page. I sense it in myself, too. For me, at least, suffering—and the confrontation of suffering—is at the center of conflict, of plot, of essay, of poem.

And while perhaps it is true that we cannot always choose the amount we suffer, we can choose how much we are willing to face our hardships, to what degree we are willing to descend into them, and find hidden paths that lead to places we’ve never been.

The reality of this is demonstrated by writers like Lauren Slater, who in her autobiographical work Prozac Diary outlined her fear that if she treated her depression, she would no longer be motivated to write. In a way, this proved true. After she started taking Prozac, she didn’t write much at all for months, years. She no longer felt driven to write in the same way.

Of course, I’m not saying she shouldn’t have taken her medication—just that there does seem to be an inverse relationship between

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happiness and poetry, and that there also seems to be at least some
element of choice in the matter. That choice may not be as simple
as choosing between a pill and a pen, of course. Nor do I think that
medication is the solution for any and all misery. But there’s something
in this idea—something real, if nebulous, about the choice between
happiness and poetry.

So which do I choose?

Perhaps the decision seems simple, the answer obvious. Happiness,
you might think. Raoul and true love and fine horses. What else is
life for?

But here’s the crux: there’s a reason that this decision is difficult. The
very fact that art is comparable to happiness in this way, that the two
exist on the same plane, that the two are similarly valuable, is telling.
There is a satisfaction that we gain from poetry, a transcendence,
A moment of triumph, of overcoming. There is a way in which art
alters our view on reality, our view on ourselves, on our own lives.
There is a bliss in creation, a catharsis in expression, a godly power
in the binding strength of the word. If this is not quite happiness,
then it is equally potent.

And perhaps that’s why, in our suffering, we naturally turn toward
art—because if we cannot quite reach joy, then we can still reach
this. We can commune with the muse and pluck up our troubles like
flowers and arrange them on the page in a way that is heartbreaking
in its beauty, in its complexity, in its truth.

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In all honesty, I don’t believe that my winning poem was especially dark. However, when I think of it through my father’s perspective, I suppose I can catch a glimpse of his terror.

My father was a man who made boasting about his children a sport, who told anyone who would stand still long enough that his daughter played basketball and volleyball and ran track; that she had a 4.4 GPA; that she did mathletes and academic decathlon; that she wrote novels in her spare time. He painted an image of our family through surface-level details like this—an image of flourishing and happiness.

I used to hate it. It felt hypocritical to me. It felt like a lie, especially when, in private, our home was filled with slamming doors, shattered dishes, and shouting.

But here’s the thing: I think my father believed his lie was true, at least about me. Since the surface-level details were all that we talked about, how could he know any different? How could he understand that all of my supposed accomplishments were simply distractions that concealed who I really was? That they were the two-way mirror I set between myself and the world, which reflected back to people only what they wanted to see? How could he know that, behind that mirror, I sat making faces at him, at everyone, hating them, hating myself?

My winning poem was short. It went like this:

Light eradicates darkness,
Eradicates darkness,
Darkness.
This I tell myself.
Moan myself.

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Scream to myself
As I rock
In the bile-colored lightning.
Dark
Light
Dark,
Thunder and dark.
A howl from heaven;
Just a smile from hell.

It was called “Too Late for Grace,” and after my father read it, I don’t think he ever saw me the same way again.

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Now, thinking about the Poet for Hire booth—about being offered a condom for my poetry—I once and for all consider whether or not I’ve sold out. Have I traded my poetic nature for a little happiness? Given up a universe of thought for a smile? Have I prostituted my writing for a measure of contentment?

I hope not. It’s true that I’m happier now than in my tortured high school days. But I remain willing to confront my suffering—to explore it, to transmute it into artwork. I’m not afraid to use tears as ink, or to laugh in the face of anguish, to mock it on the page even as I revere it. So I guess if there’s a choice between happiness and poetry, I choose poetry.

Once, after that strange conversation with my father on University Parkway, I tried to explain to him what being a poet meant. This time, my father and I weren’t walking. We were in the car, he with
his hands tight on the steering wheel and me in the backseat, peering out the window. I told him then that I didn’t fear hardship—that I’d learned to enjoy it, in a way, through writing about it.

He paused for a long time. “Do you consider yourself an optimist, then?” he asked.

In some ways, this was still a surface-level question—but it was a deeper one than he normally posed. And I felt strange echoes between the words, as though this inquiry was his way of asking all the questions we had no skills to discuss: Are you happy? Do you know what happiness is? Is it truly too late for you? Too late for grace to touch you? Too late for you to know joy?

All the questions of a concerned father seemed wrapped up in that one: “Do you consider yourself an optimist?”

I thought for a long moment—about happiness versus poetry, about the meaning and satisfaction poets wrest out of darkness, about how my pen equips me to handle every experience, to relish what most people fear.

Do I consider myself an optimist?

“Yes, Dad,” I told him. “I do.”