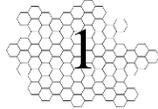


And Free They Shall Be

“I have hated words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right.”

-Liesel Meminger from The Book Thief



Inside my heart is a nest that holds words. Words lathered in sweet honey, surrounded by bees. I reach into my heart and pull those words out, knowing that I could be stung. But they deserve to be free, and free they shall be.

It begins with a pencil, a thin but sturdy substance that serves as a catalyst for the never-ending race of time. It ends with the *tap, tap, tap* of flat white letters carved onto a sea of black. The pads of my fingers pressed against a keyboard, waiting for lightning to strike before sending words spiraling down a page blanketed with white.

When I was in 8th grade, a car ran over my leg. One of its tires swallowed my foot whole, twisting it until it laid flat on blood sketched gravel. All this, yet I still stood, dragging my body to the sidewalk. The swollen mass of skin called my leg skidding across cement. One foot in front of the other.

That is writing. It is the drive to push past the blood and the tears and the thought that I will never walk again, that I will never write again—

I will. I did.

I've done it before, and I will do it again. I will always write, even when I do not think I can. My heart will continue to bleed. Instead of patching the hole inside my chest to stop it from leaking, I will let it pour. I will let it splatter on a screen and mark my journey with the pain that follows it.



I approach the nest that hangs below a tree.

A bee, swarming around the hive, faces me. I can see it stare into my eyes, its hard gaze watching my every movement. I reach past the bee and into the nest, plucking a word from the honeycombs.

Action.

Remember, one foot in front of the other. That in and of itself is action.

It is what propels the tides forward as they curve into the sun before reentering the sea. It is what summons the moon and the stars to their positions, pulling them into orbit. It is movement.

It is everywhere.

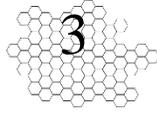
It is in the words I write. Each letter is etched into a thread that weaves together a basket of thought. I do not think I would have survived this long without the strength of action lifting me to my feet. Without it, I would not have written words at all. And what is life but the sum of words brought into broad daylight for the world to see? Where else could I reveal the depth of the jungle that swallows my mind, if not from a page?

I have to act. It is not recommended. It is necessary. Every time I write, I am acting. I lose myself in the start of each passage, but upon undergoing the journey, I always end up finding

my heart. The nest of words. The nest of bees. And then I lose myself once more. That is the process. Such is the journey.

I don't know why I act, why it is so important for me. To extend my fingers, to hover them over my keyboard, to dive head-first into a block of cement, to write. It all seems strange, until I think about how babies suffocate from the hands of life until they finally suck in a roaring breath and suddenly—they are alive.

Then it begins to make sense, and I begin to act all over again.



They say that the world is separated by two groups of people: Dreamers and Do-ers. But I beg to differ. If that were the case, where do I lie? What path am I set out to take?

In the jungle of my mind, I find myself staring down a line, its straight edges trailing from the start of my thoughts to the end of my thoughts. On my left is freedom, an expanse that settles into a path of brushes. On my right is clarity, the edge of the jungle and the beginning of reality.

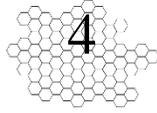
Dreamers and Do-ers. I am torn between the two. I know not how to discern between the excitement that races through my heart when I dream and the rush of adrenaline that enters my body after I make the first move. My dreams are the place from which I am born, but my writing is where I live.

I write. You read. Together, we create this story. There must be a beginning and an end to this ethereal yet maddening process. If I take any one part out, I would be incomplete, a puzzle with half of its pieces scattered on the ground. I refuse to be incomplete.

That is my choice. I will not surrender what pushes me to write, nor will I put my dreams to rest.

I understand now that the line is misleading. I do not only have two paths to choose from. No, I have three. The third path is the line itself, the road that others do not see. To them, there must be a hard stop from *dreaming* and a firm start to *doing*. But I allow the two to melt into one another to form the path of my journey.

I begin my march, walking the tightrope between dreaming and doing, between experiencing and writing, between you and me, and I reach the nest filled with bees once more.



The jungle surrounds me. The must rising in the air as insects crawl into their caverns. The humidity hitting my body.

It makes sense that my mind chose this place to be my haven. It never lacks the scattering of ants that tramp into holes dug into the ground, the snakes that bind themselves against the branches of the highest trees.

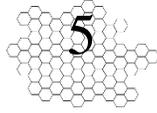
My stay is not the most comfortable, but it is enough. Enough for me to continue on. Dignity rests upon my skin like another layer that has yet to sink in. This skin, rough and callous, is what allows for my survival in this jungle.

Without this second skin covering my body, I would not have dared to walk this far into the recesses of my mind. Death is a guard that lingers in each corner of the jungle, and to reach the bees, I had to pass it. But I fear not the end, so long as my words join me in my departure.

Dignity. Another word drenched in honey. To be treated of value. This need throbs within my chest with a *thump, thump, thump*—embedded in a heartbeat. That is why I must write. That is why I continue to explore this jungle that breeds fatality.

I am not something to be pushed aside and withered away into a bed of forgotten embers. I carry words, words that wield the power to form life in the face of destruction. Words that can transfer emotion from one heart to another. Words that can bring mankind to its knees.

I hold my dignity to my chest, the rough edges of the word digging into my skin. But I do not care. To be given an obligation so great warrants the suffering of a willing soul. A soul that rests within me.



I near the beehive for the last time. When I reach it, a bee is already there, waiting for me. It circles around my body, one, two, three times, and I follow with eyes that reflect its golden fur.

The jungle bows for me now. I feel it breathe, extending its body and all that is inside it towards me. A budding cacao flower stretches in the direction of the sun. A butterfly—dotted with hues of blue—expands its wings and, with a flap, takes flight.

A year ago, the scenery in my mind was different. A year ago, the jungle ceased to be. Instead, I stood in the middle of a forest riddled with dying leaves and thought to myself, “What am I going to do?”

What am I going to do when the flames are put out, when my bloody feet just can’t move another inch, when I stop writing?

Today, I ask the same question.

Because the one thing writing can’t prevent me from feeling is depression. I’ve fought against *dreaming*, against *doing*, against the *jungle*, against my own *words*. But the moment depression swings over the ring and enters the match, I come crashing down every time.

I try to think ahead. I attempt to plan accordingly for the next move it will make, but it leaves me no room to fight. I am already on the ground. I feel blood pour from my wounds. I feel letters tumble down the side of my face. These are my words leaving me.

I try to stand.

I try to get out of my bed, and I try to brush my teeth, and I try to write, and—

I am in the forest once more. The foliage on the ground surrounds my vision, coated with defeat. But, despite this, my eyes make out Life in the form of a leaf.

I watch as it fights against the wind that pierces the air. It is still attached to a quivering branch, careening over a pile of leaves that could not survive the fight. It sways and it bucks, and never once does it break away from the tree. The willingness to go on, to remain above the fallen leaves.

With curled fingers, I rise. I strap my boxing gloves on, and in I go, back into the ring.

I am the leaf that refused to be laid to rest. No matter how many times I am struck, I will always stand back up and fight. I will live on, if not for myself, then for my words. The taste of failure will sit in my mouth, bitter like blood, sweet like honey. Though it will not stay long.

For I will live on, less both of my arms are removed from my body, less I breathe my final breath. And even then, I will use up the last of the words crashing in my lungs until each one has fulfilled their duty, and they will leave the way they came—a bellowing cry in the air.