

Daniel Whitlow
California State University, Los Angeles
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“Lexie’s Books”

There was not a single moment, or an exact instant, when I fell in love with literature. It began with a gentle, affectionate easing, and my natural reaction to experiencing the consuming, swirling depths of a written word’s immense power. Innumerable times in my life, Literature’s might has mesmerized me, ensorcelled me, and I am forever indebted to the two people who shaped my appreciation and fondness for writing and creative expression.

As a child, my mother read to me. She spent night after night feeding my growing appetite for words. I would close my eyes and listen, living in the lungs of the characters, breathing their air, immersing myself in the ocean of their thoughts and vision. Like grand motion pictures, whole, kaleidoscopic worlds would explode in brilliant sensual reality, pouring from my mother’s mouth into my ear—a waterfall of vibrant imagery. I discovered life within the pages. I fought alongside the hero, exalting his victories and shedding tears for his losses, as if they were my own. Each night, my mom and I embarked on epic adventures together. Her dedication to story time and natural talent as a storyteller instilled in me an eternal thirst for the beauty of literature.

As I got older and began reading on my own, I devoted much of my time to poetry. E. E. Cummings tied my contemplations into knotted, puzzling questions. Edgar Allen Poe haunted me from darkened corners and twilight shadows. Emily Dickenson brought tears to my amazed eyes with the loveliness of her honesty. Swept away by the strength and grace of their words, all at once comforting and intimidating, grounded and limitless, I was smitten; I didn’t realize how deeply my affection had grown until someone opened my wide eyes even further.

Diagnosed with leukemia at eleven, and confined to a wheelchair, Lexie was an avid reader. We became close friends in the third grade, and spent much of our time together, before her diagnosis and after, discussing poetry, and what inspired us to take our next step. Her favorite poet was Edna St. Vincent-Millay and she would read and reread her works to me, never losing her connection with eternal wonder and sublime joy, even after her diseased reality laid its profane mark on her delicate body—the type of bliss reserved for the truly alive. In those moments, inundated by waters of infinite inspiration, she was immortal; she was invincible and could not be beaten. In those moments, she was more alive than I was.

After a few years of terrifying struggle, at the tender age of fourteen, she succumbed to her sickness. In her will, she graciously blessed me with her poetry collection, an exhaustive, ten-book anthology of American authors I had not seen before. Lexie’s father asked me to stop by their home a few days after her funeral. When her father handed me the cardboard box of books, he also gave me a note, with writing I immediately recognized as hers. It said, “Daniel, never stop reading and never stop writing. Love, Lexie.” A stinging, flash flood of emotion surged through me. The loss I had not begun to learn to live with returned with crippling intensity. I thanked her father—a subdued, thoughtful man, lost in his maze of grief—and my dull, hollow footfalls carried me home with silent tears on my cheeks.

Each book of the anthology was filled with Lexie’s notes, observations and feelings she openly shared with the pages. She underlined passages she loved, asked questions of those she didn’t understand, edited the occasional stanza to be more effective. I wept at the sight of her thoughts, as if she was speaking to me from the grave. Even in death, she found a way to reach out and inspire me. A ponderous mass of sorrow crushed me and I ran from it like a coward, unable to bear its weight. I invented excuses to avoid confronting the absence I felt in my heart and life. I came up with ways to evade immersing myself in the consecrating wells of her most intimate interpretations, because if I did, she would truly be gone and nothing frightened me more. I would say things like, “I’m too busy” and “the books will be there tomorrow”—they were, but I never was. For many years, I could not understand why the hurt did not go away. It took my grandpa almost breaking his neck to show me why.

One fine Sunday morning, my mother proudly declared, “Today, we’re cleaning out the attic.” I cringed. I looked at my grandpa, sitting next to me on the couch, for some sort of escape plan, some avenue of departure, only to find him gazing back at me, the urge to flee plainly scribbled across his desperate face. “We’re a little tired

today, honey, and there's a ballgame on in about twenty minutes so"—grandpa's protest was cut short by the shooing hands of my mother as she failed to hide her amusement. Deftly, she corralled us all into the hallway below the attic door. She equipped us with gloves, masks, kissed our foreheads, and patted our bottoms encouragingly as we ascended into the gaping, dusty maw of our reluctant, musty doom. "Have fun, boys." She watched the football game for us. How nice of her.

The attic smelled awful. Wet, rotting, squirming unpleasantness seeped out of every flimsy-looking floorboard and ominous inch of pink panther insulation. You know when you smell something so terrible, so putrid you can taste it? As if the reek climbs inside your nostrils, rancid claws digging in, slowly heading towards your unsuspecting throat? "Oh geez", my papa said, "That's *not* a good smell." He began making his way forward pinching his nostrils closed, colorfully elaborating on how "not good" the smell was when his foot caught the corner of a box, and he tripped, falling like a redwood. "Aw, *crap!*" Fortunately, before he crashed, he was able to realign himself and fall onto a pile of old blankets, billowing dust clouds exploding in response. *Unfortunately*, the old blankets were home to the stench, now blanketing us with spore-like foulness.

After I finished laughing—and coughing—and made sure he was okay, I set upon the cardboard culprit. As I opened the box flaps, my breath caught in my chest, sweat prickling across my brow; the sight of familiar spines staring back at me with reproach, brushed with a layer of time and neglect, caused my stomach to feel light and loose in my guts. It had only been a few years since Lexie died but my avoidance was constant. Guilt, and shame, climbed up my throat, constricting and shutting off any more of my reasons to avoid Lexie's books, and her passing. The books called to me, and revived my desire to be inspired.

I spent the next few months rediscovering and reminiscing. My fondness for expression reinvigorated by the strength of Walt Whitman, the wind-through-the-trees imagery of Robert Frost. It was as if I had never grown and she had never faded, as if we were both still sitting on her bed, taken away from our mutual ills and individual laments by the feathered brightness of wisdom and emotion, creativity and mystery. I'd lost hope in ever finding my inspiration again and high school's lackluster obligations didn't foster any desire to try.

I performed academically, dutifully, completing what was expected and required to satisfy my family and move on to the next set of lifeless classes. The lack of meaningful engagement was obvious and frustrating. How can a monotone, lifeless automaton teach a room of thirty teenagers anything? Countless heads propped up, lazily watching, disinterest consuming, barely listening to the drone of some faceless, soulless instructor lecture on about the pointlessness of pointlessness; There was no personal connection, no enthusiasm. It seems contradictory for an uncaring, detached cardboard cutout to lecture about passion in a sterile, colorless void.

My outlook on college was not much different. I often imagined an oval auditorium, filled to the overflowing brim with hundreds of wide-eyed, ravenous students, craning each neck to breaking, to take in as much as they could, as many meager morsels of mental mealworms as they could fit into dry, hungry mouths—not an inviting image. However, it's not completely high school's passionless fault. I chose to neglect my education. I developed and maintained lazy study habits. I had given up, but all the wasted time caught up with me as I devoured Lexie's books. I transformed into something living, something I had forgotten, and something she had always been: a bright, beautiful beacon of Creation's flame.

It is the essence of transformation, the protean nature of our imagination and expressions that compel us to write, to rant and rave and strive to be heard. We seek audience with each other and ourselves because as we catalog our humanity, we learn how to be human. I've made egregious mistakes and destroyed lives in the process. No amount of contrition can replace what I have taken from people, but the act of writing, coming to terms with my actions, has helped me understand the harm I've caused. With every word I write, I seek growth. I seek to keep my mind active, to move forward, and make amends, endeavoring to achieve that ever-elusive redemption. In this abyss, we are not encouraged to grow. We must push against a system designed to extract currency from our flesh and hope from our heart. I do what I can to avoid intellectual stasis, to prevent the fogged madness from taking root, in defiance of muteness and stagnation because that is what Lexie taught me, more than anything else: *There are no limits to our voices unless we stay silent.*

A few weeks before she passed, her health declined dramatically and she was bed-ridden. Her closest friends gathered to spend an afternoon with her, to talk, to laugh, to share, to cry, and say goodbye. She was so weak, barely able to move. We watched as she waned, we suffered as one, each of us willing to carry her burden and take her place, if only for a second, but her courage never wavered, her strength never collapsed. As evening

approached and we prepared to leave, she read her (and my) favorite poem by E. E. Cummings, to all of us:

Now all the fingers of this tree (darling) have
Hands, and all the hands have people; and
More each particular person is (my love)
Alive than every world can understand

And now you are and I am now and we're
A mystery which will never happen again
A miracle which has never happened before –
And shining this our now must come to then

Our then shall be some darkness during which
fingers are without hands; and I have no
you: and all trees are (any more than each
leafless) its silent in forevering snow

-But never fear (my own, my beautiful
My blossoming) for also then's until

She told me she loved me. With tears in my eyes, liquid crystal quivering, teetering teardrops trickled down my face. Never, *never* had someone used poetry as powerfully as she did that day. She shattered me, rebuilt me, revived me and restored me. She made me feel so alive in the shadow of her looming death.

A few friends and I were able to call her in the hospital the day before she passed. She was very weak, very tired, but insisted on talking to each of us one last time. She could barely speak—a rasp being all she could manage. She made jokes, trying to get us to laugh, but we only cried and accused the Fates of treason. We questioned the fairness of life, and castigated death for being so cruel. She listened to our ranting until we finally settled down into a peaceful, communal hush. After a few heartbeats of silence, Lexie spoke, a delicate wheeze conveying a cascade of emotion, and said, “I’m not afraid, so you can’t be. I’m not sad or angry, so you can’t be—only joy for you because it’s all I feel.” With a handful of words, she cradled us, soothed us, and helped us to accept she was leaving us. For someone on the brink of demise, life surged through her. We bawled like infants but understood.

Lexie, lovely beyond compare, continues to inspire me, because of who she *is*, not who she was. She lives on inside of me, eternal and inexhaustible. Her presence in my life opened an infinite door...I step through it every day. As I write, I transform into something better, someone improved, a man inspired. Bathed in warm light, the internal aching chill of clanging metal doors and grating wind chimes of sharpened keys fades away; I breathe, deeply, eternally, and feel alive again, remembering this light has touched my face before. Just my mom sitting next to me, reading and smiling as I struggle to stay awake; Just Lexie and I, laying on her pink bedspread, astonished at how lovely life is—how good it is to be alive.

Daniel Whitlow (2016)