

Why I Write

Alexis Lee

Selfish. I've heard it most from my parents, and each time it landed, it stayed. Sank a little deeper than the time before, nailed a little further in. So now, when a friend calls me sweet, or kind, I can barely say thank you. It feels like a lie I'm being handed. I know the other word fits better. Even the way I came to poetry was selfish.

Freshman year I was miserable. I spent it trying to wear a face that wasn't mine, hungry for warmth. Reaching for the person I thought would be loved, I let go of the one I already was, and she slipped off somewhere I couldn't follow. I was lonely in a full room.

And beneath all of it ran an undertow. There was a year the water closed over my head—a hunger that turned on its host, that shrank my whole world to the size of my own body, that pushed me into a room—I locked the door behind me.

I wanted to start the page over. I wanted to thin into paper—thin enough for the ache to go quiet. What I remember is a stillness I mistook for peace, the way frostbite is mistaken for warmth. A calm facade that held until I reached for it, then came away pulp in my hand.

I came up for air. I've stayed up for over a year now, and it was a long swim. One hour I floated effortlessly; the next I was sinking to the bottom. The current still pulls at my ankles some days, and some days I kick free. When the worst of it came back, I cried to a screen, to a page, because the people I love already had too much to carry, and I couldn't bear to be one more thing in their arms.

So I wrote. I wrote because otherwise I'd have drowned in the pool of my own feelings, suffocated in everything I couldn't say out loud. I needed an asylum—a place to pour all of it without hurting anyone, without making myself someone else's weight to carry. The poems were where I set the punishment down.

I didn't write for the world. Not for justice, not out of any duty to speak; only to keep myself afloat when I had no energy left to kick. But lately I try, every day, to send a line past the edge of my own life. To turn and face outward, toward the world's grass and gravel. I'm learning to stand behind others rather than in front. To loosen the word selfish finger by finger, line by line. To prove my parents wrong. And to take the rawness still sitting in my throat and let it, at last, become a voice.