

# Eulogy for Ethan

## PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

**Alyssa Wu**, Grade 12, Amador Valley High School, Pleasanton, CA. Educator unavailable; California College of the Arts, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **New York Life Award**

On the 3rd of January, my eyes didn't lift from my feet until I reached the front row of Ethan's funeral. As speaker after speaker stepped to the dais, I could only crumple the paper in my hands—the paper that was supposed to hold my heartfelt eulogy. My childhood friend had taken his life, and I promised myself to honor everything that he was, but I could only scratch down half-truths and fragmented memories that felt so inadequate as I re-read them. When my mom gestured that it was my turn to speak, I realized that I couldn't.

For the first time in my life, words failed me.

For almost my whole life, I've called myself a writer. I've won a slew of awards for my poetry, prose, and research. My desk drawer is stuffed full of notes I jot down on whatever sonnets, ghazals, and cool imagery that catches my fancy. I spend my summers at creative writing camps and penning works for journals. In my school's journalism program, I write opinion pieces and hard news; working my way up to editor for the newspaper and yearbook editor-in-chief convinced me that I'm a first-class wordsmith.

And yet, my failure at Ethan's funeral.

As I sat there speechless, it felt like I'd wasted half my life stringing words into exaggerated metaphors and contrived rhymes, forcing meaning from meaningless things. Can I really call myself a writer if I'm committing fraud through every word? My thoughts leapt to my AP Psychology class and the words of Vygotsky: if I could not find the words to express myself, perhaps I did not know myself at all.

The next day, I went to the park where Ethan and I had spent so many afternoons laughing as we read each other our pretentious poetry and oh-so-clever wordplay. As I sat alone on our favorite bench, I resolved to use the rest of my junior year as a proving ground to reconcile with my writing. One interview and article at a time, I learned to let go of my fixation on words themselves and

instead embrace that the root of real writing is human connection.

By summer, I finally felt ready to confront the leviathan and try my hand at writing again. Draft after draft, I tried and failed to write about my family, about school, about my immigrant story. Every attempt felt inadequate, Ethan's eulogy still haunting me until I understood that I couldn't move on without addressing the heart of the problem: the only way to heal my writing was to find closure in my failure at the funeral.

So, on the 18th of September, I set my hands on my laptop and wrote.

Sentence after sentence, I accepted the responsibility that comes with knowing that our writing builds us up—that we are our words. I know now that truly good writing is not filled with convoluted vocabulary or esoteric references. Good writing is real. Every edit I've made in this essay has brought me its own moment of growth, making my relationship with writing more raw and real than ever.

I am no longer afraid to make myself vulnerable on paper. My life will bring so many pages to fill; one sentence is going to lead to thousands more. Writing will stay with me as more than the core for academics and the career I dream about each night as ink sinks into paper. I've learned that writing is my greatest tool for strengthening my relationship with myself and the people I care about.

It's taken hundreds of hours of reflection—and two dozen drafts of this essay—to reach this point. I can finally say what I should have that day: Ethan, although you put down your pen, I'll never let go of mine. ■