

# On dealing with dread



Writer and artist Aiden Arata discusses the magic of relatability, refuting the tortured artist trope, and not writing every day.

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As told to Diana Ruzova, 2044 words.

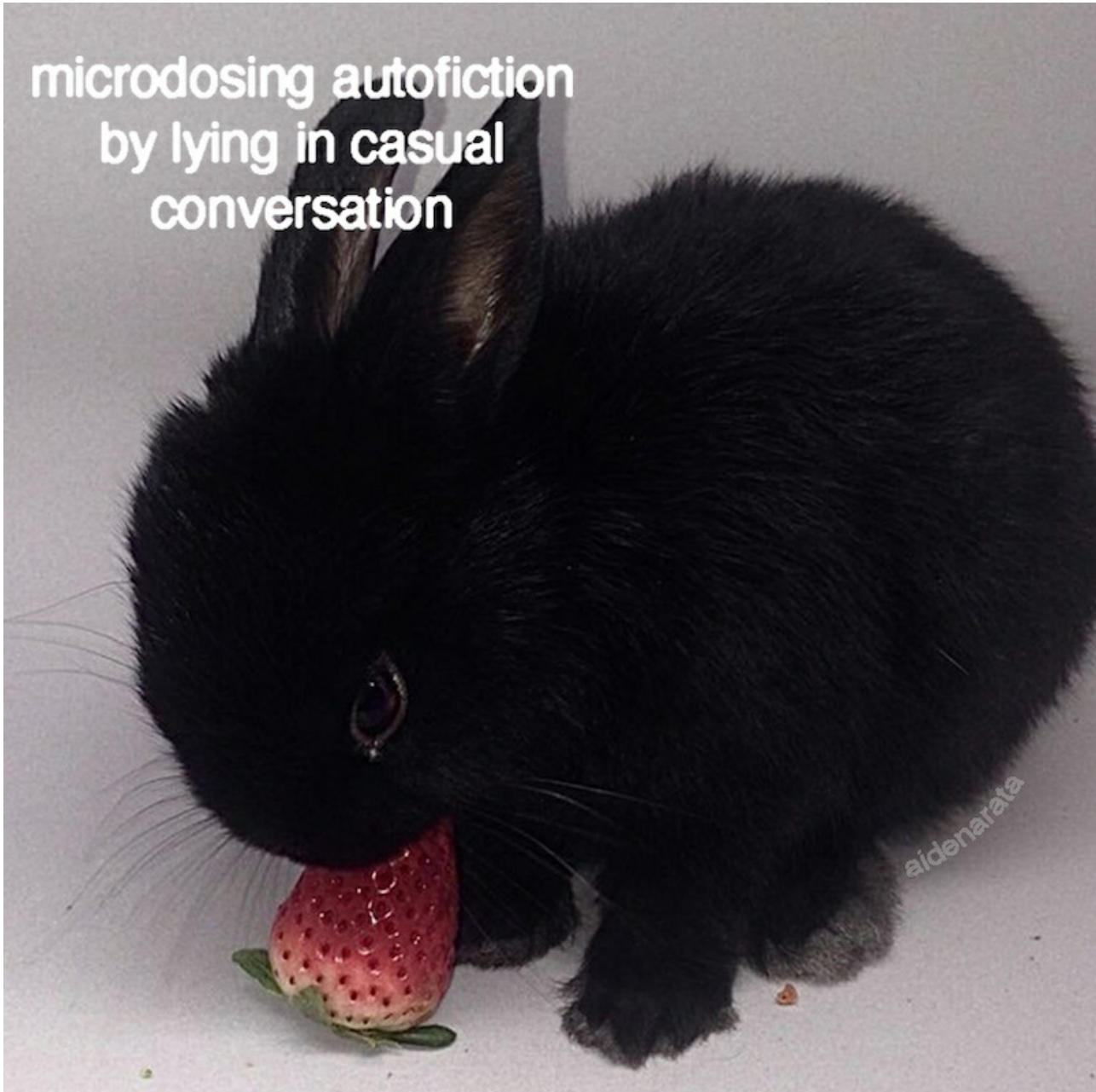
Tags: [Writing](#), [Art](#), [Day jobs](#), [Beginnings](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Anxiety](#), [Process](#), [Focus](#).

## **Did you always want to be a writer?**

I think I definitely always wanted to be a writer in some capacity, but I don't think that I quite understood what was possible. I remember being a really little kid at the doctor's office with my mom, and there were wildlife photos in the office, and she was like, "Oh, the doctor's son took those. He's a photographer." And she was also like, "You know, he takes [these photos], but he also has another job." It's such a funny little thing that stuck with me. You cannot *just* be an artist. You have to have another job. I internalized that.

I interned at magazines. I've done a bunch of marketing work. There's no shame in that. I do think you come back around; it is just a balance. I don't think that it's impossible to be a very fulfilled, great artist *and* have a day job. We all need to make money. That's really valid. But it took a lot longer for me to actually write a book. The internet was the gateway for that, because the internet had no rules. I think I wanted to be a writer, but I don't think that I gave myself permission to be a writer until many, many years later. And I was really unhappy and self destructive, because I was subverting what I really wanted to do.

# microdosing autofiction by lying in casual conversation



In one of your newsletters you listed all the things you did instead of write when you were on deadline, which is deeply relatable. What is it about writing that breeds procrastination? Is procrastination just part of it? Why is writing so hard?!

I don't want to fully buy into the tortured artist trope, because you can be happy. I want to believe in that for us. But I kind of don't trust anyone who says that it's easy. The dread... I do think that maybe it's just part of the process. I feel like I've practiced a lot, and every time I have to write something, I will do anything to avoid it. I just feel such a deep pit in my stomach, thinking, "This is gonna be the thing that is bad." I don't even know if I can fully untangle what that feeling of anxiety is.

But nothing feels better than having written. Nothing feels better than having made something, even if it's not great. Just having put words down, I can breathe out a little bit. You know? It's like exercising. My brain is like one of those herding dogs that needs a job to do. And if you don't take it out and give it a job, it's just gonna chew up all the furniture. You need to do it, and also [you need] free fucking time. I guess it's part of

the process. And I'm trying to be kinder about that, and accept that everything is just gonna take three times as long as I think it will. Procrastination is actually an ideation process. I just started transcendental meditation, so I'm trying to get into quieting that part, assimilating that part-being like, okay, dread is there. It's part of it. That means the process is working.

I don't believe in laziness anymore. I just don't think it's a thing. You're tired, or you're feeling avoidant, or you have a very good reason for not wanting to do something, or you're just weighed down by how sad the world is.



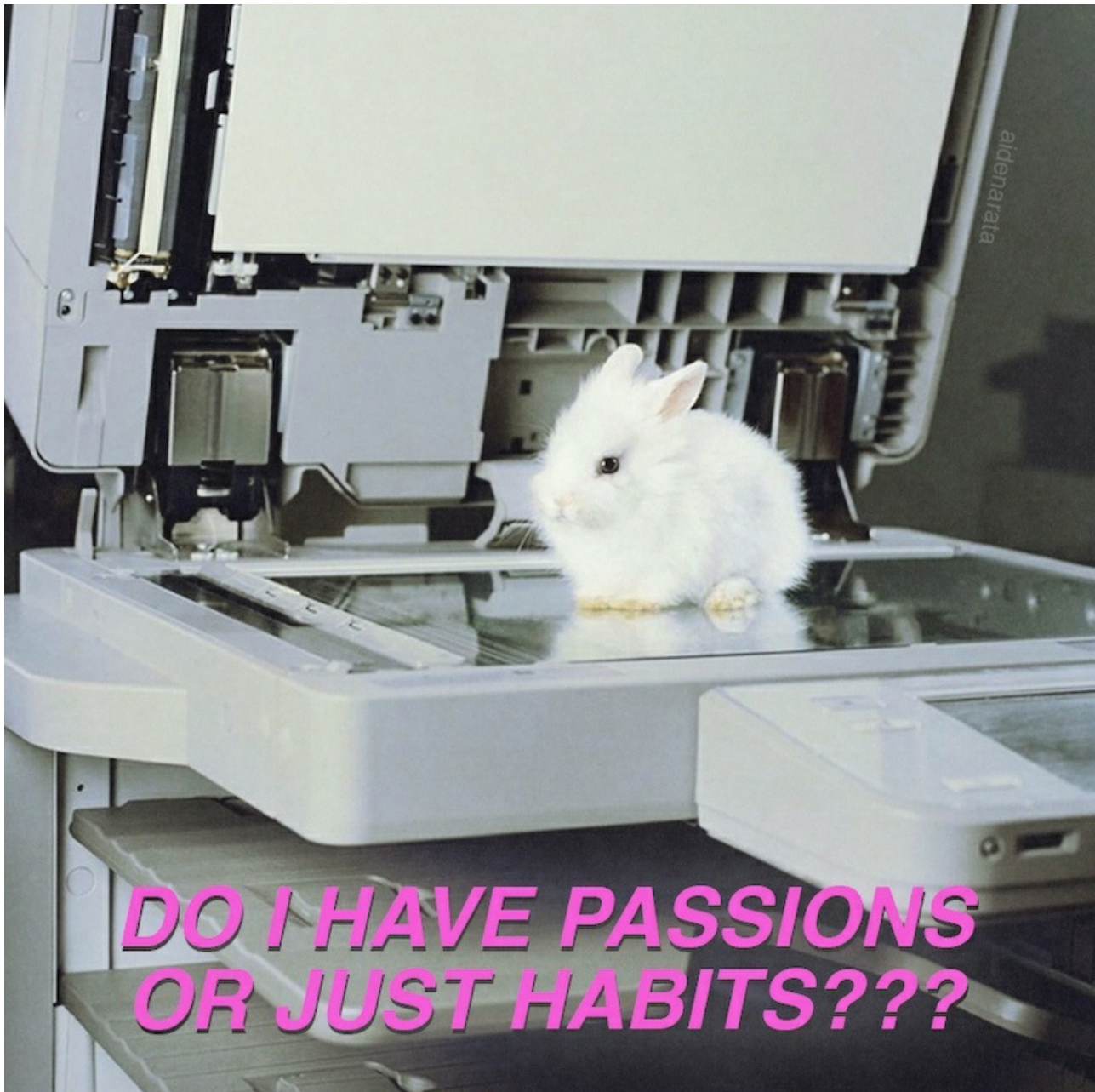
**Yes! We're allowed to be lazy. We're allowed to take time to rest and figure it out... I read somewhere that to write well you have to be in a lucid state. Does that resonate with you?**

I think so? I write emotionally and edit rationally. I tend to write twice as much, if not more, than I actually publish. It's always a really nice compliment when someone is like, "Oh, your writing is so restrained—a light

touch." And I'm like, "Yes, that's because I deleted half of it." It never starts that way. I feel really lucky, working with a book editor for the first time who's very hands on... She gave me this huge gift where she just deleted every time I started to sound like I was explaining myself, or apologizing for something.

**What drew you to memes as an art form?**

I started making memes when I was working as a TV assistant. It was a very large bummer, a thankless job. Your time doesn't matter. Your body doesn't matter. Your agency doesn't matter. Especially in that environment, when you have low self esteem, the idea of ever creating anything that other people are going to see feels galactically out of reach. I have this impulse to say that I just fell into it. No, actually—I really, really, really wanted people to like it. I really wanted people to think that I was funny. I had a deep desperation to be seen and liked. And I think acknowledging that is important. People always talk about attention seeking as shameful. I'm human. Is it attention seeking, or is it maybe connection seeking?



### **What makes a good meme?**

The meme itself is this weird folk art subversion of popular culture. It's like, wait, does anyone else have this kind of strange, ugly response to this? Does anyone have the same fear or hope or anxiety? That's the crazy magic of relatability. The meme is a balance between relatability and abstraction, because you have to be able to disseminate it... I don't even think it has to have a very strong visual component or a very strong literary component, as long as those two things are in balance.

### **Is the meme an essay?**

I think that it's much closer to poetry than it is an essay, because it's very much about playing with the signifier and the signified, and how those things are connected, and how they're dissident. That little gap is where the humor is. I love that. I think that's what makes it good.

I've actually been thinking a lot more about long-form writing. I think that what I make on the internet is kind of like a meta commentary on making things. My writing gets to the heart of it. That's the work. And then [content] is this work that's about the work. I need to see it that way. Because—and I don't know if I'm supposed to say this—I feel like people who are very into growth, and engagement for engagement's sake, are deeply mentally ill. Like, how can you not feel like a fraud? I've been in a tailspin the last two weeks. I don't know if you saw this, but the official White House account posted this ASMR video of someone getting deported. It is so horrible. And as someone who specifically creates wellness content, I'm just like, how do you do this anymore? What are we doing here? That's not a reason not to, I guess. But I need to take a beat, because this is evil.



**You write about your struggles with mental health and how social media often exacerbates these issues. How do you stay off your phone and off "the narcissism app" (Instagram)?**

Read a book. Get an analog alarm clock. Have your phone in another room. I like to keep my phone on Do Not Disturb all day. I'm always really upfront with people. As soon as I exchange numbers with someone, I'm like, "I will not text you back." If it's a logistics thing, for sure. But if someone texts, "How are you?" I'm never texting you back. I don't have the bandwidth. We can talk about it in person, or not. I actually love the Instagram Story, because it's just a really quick way to let everyone know how you're doing. I love to check in with other people and see them at the state fair or somewhere like that...

**I really appreciated that you wanted to meet in person. I wasn't expecting that. I normally don't do these in person. It does change the dynamic... In your book, *You Have a New Memory*, you write that we live in a world of a million conveniences. Do you think that this type of ease breeds bad art?**

I think it's incredibly important for people to make art. Typing shit into ChatGPT or whatever is not inherently "bad," but it can be destructive. We live in a very sick society in that way, where anything that isn't commodifiable is not viable. It brings us back to the conversation of laziness.



**Is using ChatGPT lazy?**

Laziness is a prism. There are so many ways to look at it. A million conveniences doesn't necessarily mean that we're going to be making bad art. It just means that we're going to be making art in different ways, or reacting to different things.

**I know you lost your childhood home in the devastating Los Angeles fires. How are you doing?**

It still feels very unreal to me. It feels a little bit like I haven't visited my parents' house in a long time. I

haven't been back, but there's nothing there. It's very much a traumatic event. I lost all my childhood stuffed animals. Sentimentality is what makes us human.

**I'm so sorry. What makes you wake up each morning and keep writing? Keep making art?**

I'm one of those people who has never woken up refreshed. So sorry to answer that literally, but mornings are crazy. I went to a hypnotherapist to try and become a morning person, and it just didn't take.

We're swirling around in an ontological vertex. Is there meaning in this app? Is there meaning in being part of the internet? Is there meaning in writing? There's commodified content and conservative propaganda everywhere. It's fucked up and it's depressing. Why keep doing things? I think violence is dehumanizing. Art is humanizing. So when you are making things in a real and authentic way, that's humanizing. When you insist on community—that's the difference. I think you can say something with honesty in a million different ways. I think you can say it very honestly in fiction. I think we can also say it with a silly little image of an animal.



**What's your take on the concept of creative process?**

I don't have a creative process or a schedule. When people talk about their process, they're always sort of like, "Well, I rise at dawn every day and I write for two hours." There's so much discipline. And I do think that's important. But I also think a discipline is anything we can do that requires personal accountability.

I feel like the people that create more sporadically never talk about it because it's seen as shameful. It feels very important for me to say that I do *not* adhere to any schedule. Sometimes I wake up and write in bed on my laptop, and sometimes I won't write until 5 PM, and some days I don't write at all. I don't believe you have to write every day to be a writer. Sometimes I make things while I'm watching *The Bachelor*, and I'm sitting on my laptop Photoshopping. Sometimes I'll work for 16 hours straight, whispering to myself, because I'm editing a video that I'm really into. There's no rhyme or reason to it. I used to feel like a failure because I couldn't adhere to a strict schedule of creation. But at some point it's like, why are you fighting yourself?

**Aiden Arata recommends:**

Labne

Calling the restaurant to place an order

Vintage Wedgwood trinket boxes

Do Not Disturb

"My First Ticonderoga" #2 pencils (the thick baby ones)



Name

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Vocation

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