

# On how there's a lot going on and it's important to write it down



Writer Joseph Grantham on leaving New York City, how fucking up your own life can actually be a good thing, and why being young doesn't mean your problems aren't real.

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As told to Bud Smith, 3383 words.

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**You've been all over the USA the last few years, living place to place, writing stories and poems about those places and your place within them. What's it like down south right now?**

I live in Woodland, North Carolina. It has a population of about 800 people. You can drive through the town holding your breath and you'll make it through without suffocating. I have a porch and I have the internet which means I have access to most things that people want or need. I can buy good books and good coffee and rent movies. I miss walking around in a city though. I don't walk around as much here and walking is important to me. But things happen here, people say things that you'd never hear anywhere else. The other day someone told me something along the lines of: "Think about how many suicides have happened just because the person had a toothache. Graveyards are probably full of these people."

**What's the pharmacy like?**

It was the only job I could get. I don't want to be a pharmacist. I want to make it clear that I am not a pharmacist. I'd have to go to school for that and I don't want to do that. I assist the pharmacist. I bag the medicines and put them in alphabetical order and I answer the phone and work the cash register. A lot of times I stand around and get paid to think all day.

I've moved around the country a lot. I have trouble staying in one place. I'm surprised that I've stayed here as long as I have. But rent is cheap here, and I get paid more here than I did in New York. And there is something here that I can't get anywhere else—some quiet and a lot of space to think. Hardly any distractions.

**It was pharmacy or prison guard..**

It really was. No one would hire me. Not the gas station down the street. Not the grocery store. It's a tight-knit community around here and there aren't a lot of jobs. Having a college education didn't matter, it didn't help me. One man told me that I might do better if I put a plug of chewing tobacco under my lip. He was kidding, but he had a point.

I owe a lot to my girlfriend's mom. She's good to me. I was only able to get the job at the pharmacy because she worked there. And when they hired me, they moved her across the street to work full-time at the restaurant that

is owned by the man who owns the pharmacy. So I accidentally stole her job at the pharmacy. There's a lot of small-town drama.

**You're the most American person I know. You're not scared of this country. You'd live in any state if they gave you a job where you could live and write.**

Here are some of the places I've lived in the last few years: Seattle, WA; Bennington, VT; Queens, New York; Jersey City, New Jersey; Beckley, West Virginia; Dublin, CA; San Francisco, CA; Woodland, NC.

**Seeing you move all over, reminds me of Beat Generation writers, people putting the miles on to learn something. Maybe too many writers nowadays stay put too long and their work doesn't grow like it could. How do you approach making your art, wherever you are?**

I don't have a goal. Or the goal is just to make stuff that I think is good. I am terrified of boredom. That's why I bring a book with me almost everywhere I go. Just in case.

I am usually bored and stuck somewhere, and making some kind of art makes being stuck less boring. It doesn't matter where I am. At the pharmacy, I write on the prescription sheets. This doesn't make me special or interesting, what it does is make me less bored. Sometimes I try to read books at the pharmacy when business is slow and I feel like I'm sneaking lines of cocaine. People look at you weird when you're reading a book at work. But you can stare at your computer all day and read about a meteorologist who committed suicide and no one thinks anything of it.

**Your process is interesting to me. A lot of your poems started out written on bookmarks while you were working at McNally Jackson? What happened next?**

Yes, when I worked at the bookstore I wrote on the bookmarks. The bookmarks at McNally Jackson have lines on them and they say "For Those Who Don't Write In Books" on them. The lines and the small size of the bookmark make a nice constraint for a poem. It was like a game I'd play. Can I fill up this little bookmark with a poem that isn't trash?

Also, if you're angry while you're at work (and sometimes working retail can make you angry), it feels good to do something creative for yourself. It feels like you're maybe stealing from "The Man." And then what happened was that all of these bookmarks started to add up. I started typing them up on a typewriter, editing them that way. I'd bring those typewritten pages to readings in NYC and read off of those pages because I never had a printer and I don't like reading off of my phone. And then when Civil Coping Mechanisms asked me if I had a manuscript for them, I handed you that stack of typewritten poems and asked you to help me figure out the order of the poems. And you did. And now it's a book. It's a real piece of me. And it's a time capsule.

It's like if I vomited into a plastic bag and then someone reproduced hundreds of bags of my vomit so people could buy my vomit and examine it around the world. But the vomit has been refined and worked on, it's good vomit.

**When I was at your house, there was a desk upstairs with a Lettera 22 typewriter. I thought about how a lot of writers I know feel stifled by always being "connected." Writing early drafts of things is a great way to avoid that... And working that way always reminds me that, yes, writing is labor. If a person doesn't feel like they are "working" they should sit down at a typewriter, because it changes things. Is this how you feel?**

I'm working on a novel now and in some ways it feels like I'm shooting a movie. So I go up there to that room, and it's like a film set, and I'll shoot a scene and a lot of the scenes aren't chronological, so then later I have to piece them together. It's a puzzle, and it can get complicated, so it's important to have a space where you can do this kind of thing. Where you can figure things out. A space that's different than the one at work, at my day job, where I'm behind a counter and I'm pretending to be a different person, a person who works at a pharmacy and does nothing else. It's important to have a space where you can fully immerse yourself in whatever

it is you're working on, where you can juggle the different parts of your brain.

**Is that how your art gets its balance? Where your life gets its balance?**

It's where things get done. There aren't a lot of fun things to do around here on weekends, and I'm usually too tired on weeknights to work on my writing, so on Saturday and Sunday that room upstairs becomes a playground. I read and write and think and do push-ups up there.

**Do you think isolation is good for art? Or is that a myth?**

Everything is good and bad for art. Being isolated can be the best thing, waking up early and going outside and hearing the birds in the yard and the church bells and almost nothing else. That's nice. And no one cares about what I do. I mean, my coworkers are nice and supportive, but they don't give a damn that I write books. Which is refreshing. There's no literature scene here. The literature scene is in my house. I only have a couple of neighbors. The other morning, before I went to work, I took out the trash. And my neighbor across the street was pacing around in his yard, calmly speaking into a telephone. And I waved to him and he waved back, and we said good morning to each other. And then I noticed that he had a rifle slung across his back. And I don't think he was going hunting. I don't know what he was doing. So there's that. You don't get that in a big city or a suburb.

But isolation can also be the worst thing. I miss my friends. And if all you have to do in your free time is work on your writing or read, then you find many ways to not do that. And so much of my "success" has come from listening to my peers and my elders and being in their presence and reading what they recommend. The kinds of conversations that can't happen on a phone or a computer or in a letter.

**Do you get stuck? Writer's block, or whatever? What are some ways you combat that?**

I don't let myself get stuck. There's no rush. If I can't move forward in whatever I'm writing, I'll read a book or watch a movie, or go for a short walk, or go out to dinner with my girlfriend and her mom. And while I'm eating tortilla chips and salsa, something will click.

**There's a poem in your collection, *Angry New York Poem*, that goes like this:**

"if you're from new york  
then you don't know what it's like to live  
in new york"

**Where did you live when you were in New York city? What was a normal day like there?**

I lived in Ridgewood, Queens. I'd wake up in my room that didn't have a door. It had a curtain. And I'd usually hear my good friend Nick waking up in the "room" next to mine. And I'd usually yell something at him. And maybe he'd pretend not to hear me so that he could feel like he had his own room. And then my friend Sam, in the other "room" next to mine, would yell something. And then we'd all get up and walk to get a coffee just to have something to do. And we'd sit in the coffee shop and do some "work," which in my case would just be reading a book or maybe working on a story. And then we'd go back to our apartment and watch TV.

I didn't have much money in New York. But if we stayed in our apartment, then we couldn't spend money. Unless we bought something on the internet. But then we'd go out to a bar later that night and spend way too much money and feel guilty and hungover the next day. And all three of us were heartbroken and lovesick and so the apartment was kind of a toxic place. But there was a lot of camaraderie there, too. Sad camaraderie. I think we're all a lot healthier now that we don't live in that apartment. I still miss New York and I think there's a lot of good stuff there and a lot of good people. And maybe it's the best city in the world. But I don't live there anymore.

***Tom Sawyer*, your first collection of poems, is named after the famous Mark Twain novel, or course. What do you think of Mark Twain?**

I don't think too much about him. I grew up with his books in my house because my dad is a big fan. I was fascinated with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* for a bit, when I was a kid. I saw some film adaptations and I think I had a crush on the girl who played Becky. I think I'd love reading Twain's books but I just haven't. I don't know. Was Mark Twain racist? He was either racist or he wasn't racist or he was a little bit racist but overall a good guy. I'm not sure. I've always wondered about his mustache. If you look at pictures of him, you'll see that his mustache is so big and it goes into his mouth. I wonder if that ever bothered him. Especially when he was eating or drinking.

**I love the two epigraphs:**

**"It being strictly the history of a boy, it must stop here, the story could go no further without becoming the history of a man" -Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer***

**And**

**"You're so old, you must be 23" -Galaxie 500, "Crazy"**

I was 23 when I wrote this book. I'm 25 now. I got so used to hearing from older friends that my problems were a young man's problems, or a young person's problems. And yes, I agree with these people. They're not wrong. I had young-people problems and I probably still do. But these were still problems and they felt like life-or-death problems at the time. My heart was broken by someone who I trusted and it had been broken before and it seemed like it would keep getting broken forever, on and on. And I could hardly make my rent each month and it didn't seem like I'd ever get a job that would pay me enough to live somewhere where I'd want to live. And I realized that young-people problems are also problems that anyone from any background, at any age, can face. And that maybe I should stop trivializing whatever pain I had. Maybe I should just accept that it was real pain and it was just as real as anyone else's pain.

**It was real pain.**

And also, as I'm sure you know, when you're young, people love to tell you that you're young. It's like they're putting the palm of their hand on the top of your head and pushing down as hard as they can. Well, that can be frustrating. Because some young people feel ancient. And some old people feel like newborn babies.

**Did writing your first book solve any of your problems?**

I'm happier now than I was when I was writing the poems in *Tom Sawyer*. I'm in love with someone. Did the book do that for me? Probably not. No, it didn't. But writing the book helped me realize that I didn't need to live in New York City. There are other places to live. You can live in Jersey City and you can live in West Virginia and you can live in Dublin, California and you can live in North Carolina. And it's hard as hell, but you can live in San Francisco, too. The book helped me grow out of myself.

**What did you learn writing your column at *The Nervous Breakdown*, and what is currently happening with that writing? Are you continuing the thread away from the public eye?**

I learned that if you are unemployed and you create fake deadlines for yourself, then you can get a lot done. And it can be good. You can write quickly and if you're a good editor, then it can be really good. That column ended up being about 60 solid pages in a word document, written in five weeks.

I was unemployed when I wrote those 60 pages, so I didn't have an excuse not to write. But it taught me that it can be done. Writing isn't scary. You just make things happen. And you can do this with your life, too.

I really fucked my life up. I mean this in a positive way. I consciously, and physically, steered myself in the direction of things, and places, that I didn't understand, and that were foreign to me, and it has made my experiences more unique and compelling. I didn't move to rural North Carolina because I wanted to write about it.

I moved here because I didn't know what else to do and probably, if I'm being honest with myself, because I kind of fell in love while talking on the phone with a woman I met on the internet. But when I started writing about my life for that column, and took a step back from it, I realized it was a good story. It's a great story. And the more I kept fucking with my life, and taking chances, the stranger the story has become.

And so I've moved away from writing poetry for a while, because I want to tell this story. The story of a depressed young man who leaves his job working at City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco because he receives a postcard from a woman in North Carolina and he asks her if he can come live with and she says yes and so he moves to rural North Carolina and he is unemployed for months and his grandmother dies and he can't find a job and he's in love with this woman he lives with and then, finally, he gets a job working at a pharmacy, and it turns out he sort of stole this job from his lover's mother, and there are all of these armed robberies happening in the county he lives in because it's like the Wild West where he lives and the only police officer in his town resigned, and he starts writing letters to one of his favorite writers, and the 83-year-old man starts writing back to him, and so on and so on. There's a lot going on and it's important to write it down.

**What are some of your influences right now?**

The customers who come into the pharmacy where I work and the people I work with. And the drugs I sell. I like to say the names of those drugs. They get stuck in my head. I find myself saying them a lot when I get home from work. Dulaglutide. Trulicity. Amlodipine. Tradjenta. Humara. Hydrochlorothiazide. Omeprazole. Trazodone. Eliquis. Pravastatin. Simvastatin.

And all of the people with whom I disagree.

And a picture of grandma who recently died of lung cancer.

**Joseph Grantham Recommends:**

The writing of Stephen Dixon. Stephen Dixon has published more than 30 books since the '70s and everything I've read of his has been worth my time. Every sentence is an experiment. His range is exciting, his earlier books are a lot funnier and zanier than his later books, which are more controlled and melancholy. His sense of humor is important to me, and the way he stares straight into the eye of how horrible life can be, and how beautiful it can be, and how much of a joke it all is, too. Start with *Gould* or *Quite Contrary*.

Chilly Scenes of Winter by Ann Beattie. Nothing happens in this novel. People are sad about things. People are happy about things. People make meals and eat meals and drink and put on records and drive around and sit around and talk.

*Tracer* by Frederick Barthelme. I don't realize the significance of what Frederick Barthelme is doing until I'm done with one of his books, or stories, and I'm making dinner, or coffee, and then it clicks. I think this book is perfect.

The George Miles Cycle by Dennis Cooper. I like how Cooper uses his writing to figure out his obsessions and fantasies. These books are the author's attempt to understand himself and to work through something. And the structure of this series of books is inspiring.

*Collected Poems* by Ron Padgett. I like poems about eating breakfast and growing old and I like that Padgett writes a lot about his friends. Which reminds me. Go live with your friends. Sleep in their guest bedrooms or on their couches. Talk to them. Learn from them.

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Vocation

Writer

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