

## **In Conversation with Julia Konow**

***MJ: One of the elements of your story that really struck me was how your piece balances poetic language and imagery and painfully real. How do you approach balancing beauty with brutality with your story?***

JK: This was my first real attempt to delve into the genre of creative nonfiction, something that I have been itching to explore yet hesitant to commit to. That being said, I started by jotting down the elements of my experience in the in-patient eating disorder facility as well as my eating disorder in general that are the most prominent in my mind.

There are aspects of this “journey” so to speak that have a surprising level of beauty as I navigated and continue to navigate my day-to-day life. I have learned to appreciate people, emotions, and components of the world more from these struggles as well as been exposed to much darker sides of things as well. I approach the balance by being completely transparent with both myself and the readers. I did not attempt to skew the story towards brutality versus beauty, and in the process of being honest about my experiences, I found that both the writing itself and my own story has truly exhibited an interestingly well-balanced mix of beauty and brutality.

***MJ: Your story questions the traditional idea of "success" throughout your piece. What does success mean to you now, and how has that definition evolved through your experiences?***

JK: I definitely believe that the definition of “success” is something that has evolved throughout my life. As a high schooler, “success” revolved around career, college, scholarship, and academic achievements whereas now I see “success” as much more correlated to personal happiness if that makes sense? As in, I used to gauge my level of “success” based on how I thought others ranked me or perceived my accomplishments.

Now, I base “success” on if I can wake up happy and go to sleep feeling like I did my best each day. Seeing my beloved family, friends, pets, and loved ones happy and embrace the life that they most hope to have, that is truly what “success” means to me. I think that it has taken hitting a level of rock bottom with my eating disorder as well as the unshakeable support of my

family to realize that just being able to go outside and take that five second pause to stare at the stars to provide some appreciation for the world itself is more important than if my scholarship is significant enough or if I get an extra

***MJ: I greatly appreciate you showing such a personal and sensitive story with me and the audience. It had me thinking, just in your own practice of writing, how do you navigate the line between catharsis and re-triggering when writing about trauma or personal struggle?***

JK: That is really interesting that you ask this in particular because it has been a struggle that I have toggled with quite a bit in this process! For a while now, my twin sister has adamantly said that I should write more like I used to as an outlet, especially regarding some of my eating disorder related experiences, but I always hesitated.

One major roadblock in the writing process was and continues to be insecurity surrounding my ability within the craft itself interwoven with the future readers' perception of me, my experiences, and such.

The other concern is re-triggering a lot of the emotions that I continuously struggle with. First and foremost, my main rule in the writing process is to be honest. I jotted down a bunch of choppy notes for what stood out to me regarding this experience, and everything is entirely factual from real events. I tried to forget the possible audience assessments, resigning myself to the idea that this would never even be considered for publication, and clinging to the idea that I can set my story in stone through words without reliving it. I never re-read my draft out of fear of re-triggering myself, but used the craft as catharsis by spewing off whatever came to mind so that I could move forward as best as I could.

Truly, the catalyst that propelled me to start writing was that I noticed an upcoming anniversary and subsequent re-showing of the film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. My favorite line of the book has always been, "But I tried, didn't I...at least I did that". Yes, I also fully acknowledge the irony in that this book, centered around mental health, is the one that catapulted me towards writing about my mental health treatment.

***MJ: What do you think the younger version of yourself: the one who won that “ever-prestigious yearbook superlative,” would think of this piece if they read it?***

JK: The younger me shared a lot of different and similar attributes as the present-day me. I would like to think that the younger version of myself would hear that social rankings such as superlatives do not ultimately matter and that happiness, as well as peace and health, should come first above all. I think that a part of her/me always knew and knows that, but there will always be that shadow self. Whether it be about body image or academic success, or something else, there will always be this sense of not being good enough.

No matter the accolades, no matter the awards or successes or failures – there is always better. I hope she will be proud of me. If I am honest, I think if she read this, she would feel really scared. She had a very strong plan and image for her future that definitely did not include an eating disorder inpatient facility. I think she would be nervous and proactively attempt to veer the course of tomorrow towards what her blueprints were, but deep down I think it would resonate with her because she knows what it feels like deep down.

The piece would make her relieved that writing was still a part of her life, especially since senior year of high school orbited much around college degree decisions for interest versus practicality, but these upcoming life events would make her anxious for sure.

***MJ: If Paige [a figure in “Journey to Graceland”], or a reader like her, were to read this piece, what would you want them to hear between the lines of your writing?***

JK: Between the lines of my writing in this piece, I would want them to know that the little things have the biggest impact.

I am not going to hop onto a slippery soapbox and tell them to love themselves, their bodies, etc - while I wholeheartedly hope that Paige and any reader feels completely secure, confident, and joyful, I am realistic enough to not enforce these rose-tinted sentiments.

That being said, above all else, I tried to capture the mundane and the minute details that make all of our stories. It is the little things that stick with us when we are scrolling mindlessly through our phones or flicking on our frog nightlights in the middle of the night, you know? Paige's airplane necklace and her kindness sticks with me the same way that seeing a spirograph or decaffeinated coffee bag triggers memories for me.

I would want readers to understand that looking for the little crumbs in our path can allow us to make the most profound connections and reflections. As for Paige, I hope she is a flight attendant on a plane to some exotic and thrilling land with a smile on her face. I hope she is so fulfilled, so happy, because her every act of kindness to me as I was terrified and attempting to heal allowed these words to be written.

***MJ: How has writing about mental health changed the way you see your own journey? Has it become a form of resistance, reflection, or something else entirely?***

JK: I have never been one to journal or blog, so this was absolutely a new experience for me to write about mental health. At first, I thought that the writing would be a reflection of my journey, but as I wrote about the experiences, I realized that the writing process was less about regurgitating events. My trepidation was always that I would mis-represent the events that transpired or confused readers. But as I started writing, I realized above all that the journey is mine.

There are incredibly important people and elements to the story, but there is no right or wrong way to present something that I lived. I guess what I am trying to say is that I realized that this story might not be what I expected it to sound like to readers, but there is a level of resistance in writing to push against writing for everyone else, like eating or talking or dressing or working for societal expectations.

The writing allowed me to realize that I did not need to perform, currently or when justifying my past, for anyone else. The writing allowed me to realize that my journey has had moments of shame, for sure, but there was more beauty than I expected, so this writing became an ode to the mosaic and dichotomy that existed and continues to persist in my life.

***MJ: What are you currently reading?***

JK: I love this question! I am reading *I Died for Beauty* by Amanda Flowers, a brand new addition to the Emily Dickson centric murder mystery that my dad surprised me with from a local independent bookstore. Every summer, my twin sister, mom, and I take our pilgrimage to the Emily Dickinson Homestead in Amherst, MA and return with the latest publication of this author. I love mysteries and psychological thrillers especially, though my feel good reading materials to decompress includes any animal fun fact book.

***MJ: What are you currently working on, creatively or professionally? Are there any upcoming writing projects or themes you're excited to explore? Where can readers find more of your recent or upcoming work?***

JK: As previously referenced, I never expected this piece to be even momentarily considered by any publication. The mere concept that this work is something that anyone would be interested in reading truly is mind boggling to me. It also fills me with excitement for the possibility of it all - should I keep writing? Should I continue to wade in my past or explore creative narratives that embrace fiction instead?

I definitely would hope that this publication process ignites the writer in me that has been dormant for far too long, the writer who put public perceptions and responsible careers with paychecks and superlatives above passion. At the end of it all, I just want to keep writing because I enjoy it – not because I think that I “should” or “should not” do it. Whatever genre feels right and whatever project speaks to me will come next, but suffice to say, my fingers are itching to start the next chapter in my story of tomorrow (whatever that may be!).