

Dearest Editor,

When I won second place for the Harbinger Prize for Reportage Photography, my first emotion was not one of joy, but of *relief*. Relief that I had finally won something, finally had something to show for all my years of writing. I quickly became disgusted with myself. When had writing become this all-consuming search for external validation?

The first story I ever wrote was about a little pig who fell into a new planet and couldn't find the pizza that it was craving. My following works were similarly weird and wacky, and I would spend hours crafting stories, exploring the limits of my imagination, expressing my emotions. In writing I made for myself a personal sanctuary, somewhere I could experiment without being forced into a box.

Yet as I grew up my relationship with writing changed. It lost its joy. I was the little pig, dropped into a new world of competitions and college resumes, unable to find the pizza that had once been so easily accessible. My focus changed to striving for success and external validation. I became preoccupied with meeting the expectations of judges and conforming to the guidelines and criteria set forth by competitions.

As I continued to fail to win any competitions whatsoever, the pressure to produce exceptional work became a constant companion. I found myself second-guessing my creative choices and censoring my ideas, afraid that they might not align with what judges were looking for. The joy and freedom I once associated with writing were gradually overshadowed by self-doubt and anxiety. The sanctuary had become a prison. In this pursuit of success I had sacrificed the authenticity and spontaneity that had made my writing enjoyable in the first place. I became fixated on crafting the perfect narrative, polishing every sentence until it gleamed, and conforming to rigid guidelines, stifling my creativity.

The Harbinger Prize served as a harsh awakening for me. Five subject lines.  
*Pick one.* All the guidelines screamed. For once, I stood my ground.  
*No.* I replied

I combined two subject lines. Found a loophole from which to write it through. Wrote the story from the perspective of a house instead of a person.

With each set of rules I broke, I reclaimed the joy that had disappeared. I could experiment again, take risks, write stories that made no sense.

The Harbinger Prize was a moment to celebrate, surely. But not for the fact that I won. For the fact that I finally rediscovered the joy of the journey, rather than the destination, the courage to write from the heart, to explore topics that resonate deeply with one's own experiences and beliefs, rather than attempting to fit into predetermined molds.

Success is often fleeting and subjective. When we force ourselves to emulate the style or ideas that we believe will gain more recognition, we diminish the very essence that makes our writing special and distinguishable. It is your unique voice that sets you apart, the perspective that only you can offer.

Moreover, it shouldn't define the worth of anything you do. Don't let the pursuit of external validation outweigh the joy and authenticity that lays at the heart of what you love. Write what moves *you*, write what *you* want to say, write what *you* think needs to be said. Open the door for inner fulfillment.

It is our job to rediscover joy by breaking the rules. When people try to force you into a rigid set of guidelines, saying 'live in this box', it's your job to say: 'No. I think I'll use it to cook my pizza instead.'

Yours sincerely,  
Justin