

ESSAY

# The first semester is your shitty first draft



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

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SARAH ANJUM BARI

Like many veterans, I joined a creative writing MFA program because I wanted to evolve as a writer. Without planning to, I'd left feature writing behind, and working as an editor and English lecturer was drowning me in words that weren't my own. It was exhilarating, being able to juggle them, parse them open, spin them into arrangements that pressed forth unexpected observations. But I was also blunting my own voice, which I wanted to temper into a sharper, zanier force. Most of all, I wanted the gift of time.

And then I arrived in Iowa City, late summer of 2023, frothing with motivation. Believing that Dhaka's incessant honking, its sludge of traffic, sooty air and the cacophony of its opinions and expectations prevented me from writing freely. Iowa was an expanse of space and time, where the worst traffic jam might just give you a 15 minute commute. Its quiet, clean air beamed hot in August, and I was met with thudding inner silence. Years of working at this newspaper had conditioned me to write and edit with a target audience in mind, and I struggled to muster up constructive feedback for others' writing in

workshops; worse, I didn't know what stories I wanted to tell. The oil has to be very hot, my friend told me on the phone one morning as I fried the first sunny side up in my kitchen in Iowa, so hot that the edges will crisp and curl into themselves, the white and orange center puffing up to form its own unique map. That is what our workshop essays sought to be. Sizzle around the edges, their own shape and shine. How did one conjure and help better such writing that is still growing into itself, that doesn't yet heed the noise of an audience or destination?

If five months at an MFA program have taught me anything, it is that each person's experience is vastly different from another's.

MFAs are made up of artists—who are both the students and the teachers in the program—and every artist commutes differently through their creative process. One writer might thrive in settings that offer clear, directional feedback, and another might feel closed in by such shepherding of their art. Some of us feel buoyed by extensive comments on our writing; others feel overwhelmed.

Shadowing all of that are the contexts in which such feedback is provided, which shape our responses

to them in complex, often contentious ways. "What we call craft is in fact nothing more or less than a set of expectations", Matthew Salesses rightly argues in *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping* (Catapult Books, 2021). "These expectations...represent the values of the culturally dominant population: in America that means (straight, cis, able, upper-middle-class) white males. When craft is taught unreflexively, within a limited understanding of the canon, it reinforces narrow ideas about whose stories are important and what makes a story beautiful, moving, or good."

It was the University of Iowa's workshop model that offered a template for creative writing education across North America, and it is Iowa's model, too, that Salesses dismantles in his much needed critique of diversity in creative writing discourse. Its necessary politics would come up in our very first class at Ulowa, but over the course of the semester I'd discover an aspect of it that only personal experience could illustrate.

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and minority). Sometimes they aren't misreadings at all, but finer dissonances of perspective factored by personal taste, communal history, religious and cultural legacies, and even one's place in time. How ironic that, for all my yearning to escape, the first essay I'd produce in Iowa's soothing silence would recall the noises of Bangladesh—the rustle of its mottled and discarded materials, the sizzle of its food, the bleating of horns and voices, the way we smooth over discord and learn to harvest silence in our hearts. I was trying to write about Birangonas, about violences against women in my country, and it felt insensitive to place those injustices against the ones I've faced as an educated, privileged woman in contemporary Bangladesh.

Where I saw shallow comparisons in my own writing, a fellow workshopper descended from the political strife of Ireland saw fertile ground for juxtaposition; she saw a necessary collage of change and stasis in a country. Where I believed Partition's ghosts were essential to my stories, another friend from Sri Lanka, who most instinctively understood my stories, felt that the history came too heavy handed, its events already familiar. "Familiar for whom?" I countered, though I soon agreed that the history would be better retold by myself, not by the borrowed voices of quotations and references.

My author's gaze both shifted and stood its ground through those workshop evenings, and they were two of the most useful conversations I've ever had about my writing. From the gaps and bridges in our perspective emerged urgent questions relating to my work as an artist: Who am I writing for, when I write about my home while living far from it? Where in its complicated history do I place myself?

Questions begat more questions, and we developed our own vocabulary for critique. The things our essays were trying to do, and the places in which they catch fire. How one friend's fluid visuals make me feel like I'm underwater, and another's tender infusion of emotions undercuts the need for "pretty sentences". Possibilities that we saw in each other's writing, and my personal need to venture beyond the braided essay mold.

My mind felt like the insides of a washing machine through much of this first semester. Brief flashes of insight tumbled out of sight before I could grasp at them. When ideas did

linger, the writing itself moved with the drags and sudden jolts of Dhaka's nausea-inducing traffic. It is difficult to persist through such turbulent inertia, when you're surrounded by talented writers, poets, playwrights and artists milling around you. When even the Uber drivers you chat with have novels and poetry in progress.

"The first draft is the child's draft", Anne Lamott writes in "Shitty First Drafts", an essay from her craft book, *Bird by Bird* (1994), "where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later." Lamott is talking about her nerve wracking experience of writing food reviews for *California* magazine—a process relatable to perhaps any person who has tried to write anything worthwhile. There is panic induced by a blank page. The first round(s) of dreadful sentences. Introductions and descriptions bleed beyond the page limit of the assignment. You ramble, you cross out, and after the first draft erupts, you return with sharper eyes. You weed out redundancies, chisel the spaces with potential. Sometimes, and for some more often than others, what emerges compensates for all the preceding anxiety.

I read Lamott's essay in the beginning of the Fall semester and saw myself in more and more of it through all the shitty writing I was producing at the time. But shittiness implies futility, an end of the roadness that we associate with failed relationships, toxic arguments, or the kind of person or power dynamic that breeds hurt and harm in others. It is a thing at the end of its ability to create value. First anything—writing and learning projects in particular—are the opposite of that. They're the mounds before the sculpting, the muscle that aches only until the next workout, and there is promise in these feelings of frustration. I could say I had this epiphany while writing this essay (and wouldn't that be great for a climax?), but the truth is, as happens with art, it was brewing in me through all those moments of dissatisfying writing as the Midwestern leaves around us turned from green to gold to cold, white fluff. I was making my oil hot, even as I wrung my hands over a few broken egg shells.

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INTERVIEW

NABILAH KHAN

**The sky is overcast as I make my way to Marrickville library in Sydney to hear Amal Awad discuss her current novel, 'Bitter and Sweet' (Pantera Press, 2023). With eight published works to her credit, a red and white checked keffiyeh artfully gracing her neck, Amal Awad is unflinching in her rhetoric about her writing and her identity. So I sat down for an interview with her.**

As a Palestinian-Australian, you've stressed the importance of telling stories about everyday Palestinians. Why is it important to tell such stories?

It's essential to normalise people who have been misrepresented across all media for decades. Arabs and Muslims generally have suffered insulting, limiting, and racist treatments, in the world of fiction and in the real one. But I don't feel I need to humanise us. We are very human. My job as a writer is not to convince or teach, or tell people how to think. It's simply to get them to think, and to connect and care about characters they may or may not have known.

One thing I never want to do is over-correct the 'bad Arab' with the 'good Arab', or the 'perfect Arab'. We are humans, we have faults and strengths, we are complex beings and are worthy of being characters existing in worlds that are relatable, without apology.

As recent events in Palestine demonstrate, years of damaging misrepresentation has made it much easier to demonise Palestinians. The role of the artists and writers is to express creatively and truthfully. I don't mean to report on a singular truth, only their truth. And the truth for me is that I don't have a problem with Arabs, the western world and beyond often do. My response to that is not to cater to their demands that I show we're just like them. We exist as we are and it is just important to me to write about Palestinians living normal lives, it is essential. This



world, this life, does not belong to one narrative, no matter who dominates.

**Do you feel the burden of cultural representation?**

I think I did more so when I first started out. My first published pieces had nothing to do with my heritage; they were about everyday things like job rejections and bad grammar and celebrities. Eventually, as diversity started to trend, I did have to mine my own experiences under those identity labels. In some ways, it was relieving to do so. I could own my experiences.

But it was disheartening to see that it was also a very limiting

approach. You are not considered valuable or knowledgeable beyond your experience within a minority. I think people wanted writers like me to confirm biases; we are more welcomed when we affirm people's ideas about us, when they can look at us as victims. We're not, but we are knee-capped by existing and long-held power structures.

When con artist Norma Khouri fabricated a life story of oppression and the so-called honour killing of her non-existent best friend, the West snapped her book, *Forbidden Love* (Bantam, 2004) up. She affirmed the western preference that all Arab

women are oppressed, at the mercy of violent men and want to live freely in the West.

**You've stated that Palestinians are forced to adopt a "vener of politeness" to represent a non-threatening image of themselves. Can you please elaborate?**

When I was younger especially, I feel that when someone found out I was Palestinian (something I have always openly shared, and proudly so), they immediately felt they had to share how they see Palestinians, Israelis and the "complicated" conflict. It is uncomfortable for all that is said but



PHOTO: NABILAH KHAN, DESIGN: SYEDA ERUM NOOR

also unsaid. And depending on who I was dealing with, there was often tip-toeing around the situation. It was a bit fake and forced, or overwrought in support. I am Palestinian and how I feel about that matters to me more than how other people see me. But you can't say that. You can't say "thanks for your approval".

Given the current atrocities being inflicted upon Palestinians, especially in Gaza, I have seen that the pretense, the attempt to mute true feelings one way or another, has dissolved. Many prominent, powerful and often wealthy and well-known people have very openly chosen a "side"; the deaths on October 7 immediately and unequivocally mattered more to people who are not truly affected by it than the many years of oppression, and many deaths of Palestinians.

In turn, I, and many others, have become activated to be completely open and authentic. We get it—our lives don't matter, our well-being is of no significance; it is shattering and heartbreaking, but also liberating. For example, how many Australian politicians have extended support and care for the Palestinians in the country they are governing?

**This is an excerpt from the discussion with Amal Awad. To read the full interview, visit the Daily Star Books and The Daily Star's websites.**

Nabilah Khan was born and raised in Bangladesh and currently resides in Sydney, Australia. After more than a decade working in the global banking and financial services industry, she now works in the Australian public service.