

To Walk a mile in my shoes

by Aida ■■■

It was an early April day. Outside, the sun hung light over the trees. All this I could only just see through the school's double doors. Inside, it was black and stuffy. The air heavy with a waiting silence, a hundred faces staring out of the dark. At me. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and then focused. The first words hung suspended for a moment, strange. *"There is so much lost in this world..."*

It was the annual school-wide poetry competition. Standing in front of all those faces, few knew of how long and arduous the journey had been to reach that little stage.

"Yes, that's normal. It might take her a few weeks before she gets used to everyone and stops hiding under the table." This is my mom, speaking to one of the teachers of a preschool co-op. There I was, head tucked under the heavy wood, staring at everyone's shoes. Terrified. Little by little though, I came out of my shell. Though I talked little, I listened.

Four years later, when I became part of a writing group along with three other families, I was overjoyed. Because I loved to write—anything from essays to stories to free-verse poetry. But I was also afraid. Because each one of us would have to stand up there in front of the whole group and present whatever we had written. The first day, I tried to stand up in front of everyone, but I couldn't do it. I ran from the room, a sob in my throat. My mom had to stand up there for me and read my story. The next time though, I read it—from another room. A few times after that I was able to stand shaking in front of everyone—with my back turned. Finally, I stood up and faced the audience of ten or so people, and recited, my eyes focused on a tiny speck above their heads. I practiced and practiced, and finally was able to make eye contact with members in the audience, which grew, from my little writing co-op to the entire seventh to eleventh grades of my school. That April day, I stood there, said that poem with every ounce I had in me, and came home with the prize. But oh, what a mountain that had been.

Fear. Not just "stage fright". I am often anxious. About my future, school, sports, health, whether I said the right thing when I spoke to that teacher or friend—whether I am really worth anything at all... The first few minutes of a cross country meet, when you're chilled to the bone and your shoes wet with dew, gazing at the distance you have to go and all those others you're up against—I get so anxious I sometimes feel ill and under-perform.

But when you are so often anxious, moments of peace are all the more powerful. Sometimes, after a hard day at school, I'll leave home and wander for hours in the woods, breathing in the fresh scent of the pines and the leaves under my feet. I'll watch a tanager feeding, or sometimes, in awe, observe a great-horned owl gliding on great gray wings into the forest. Often, on trail runs, I stumble upon one or two spotted fawns, feeding in grassy glades. They look at me, with wide eyes, and laugh at my worries. I find peace in the woods.

I love to draw. It helps me process my thoughts, slow down—for a moment. You might find me stretched full length, sketching a young maidenhair fern I found among the forest leaves. Or huddled over my desk, painting the brilliant throat of an Anna's hummingbird. Most days, during lunch at school, I go up to the art "cottage" and "Art", the verb, as some of my friends say. I'll give pictures as gifts or thank-you cards, and sometimes I'll do a few commissions. I love music. Piano. I love to run my fingers across the keys. Especially, I enjoy playing alone, and the songs and style of playing depend on the emotions I felt that day.

As I said, My near future (that is, college) is very uncertain. I want to go but I have no idea where or what I will study when I get there. With all this uncertainty is one certainty, a vision that calms me whenever I feel unsure.

I want to be a farmer one day. Why? Because I want to dig deep into fertile soil, and plant seeds, and watch them grow. I want to wake up before light and smell the fresh scent of hay and feel the warm bulk of a cow beside me. I want to hold a newborn, shuddering lamb, in my arms. I want to feel the clean handle of an ax in my hands, watch it split cleanly into the wood, watch the wood burn down to glowing coals and ashes. I want to feel the sweat dripping off me while I rake and bale acres and acres of hay. I know I will also see the animals die, sometimes by my own hand. I will go out into the fields and see the corn grown over with fungus and the squashes rotting in the fields. But with death, there will also be life. I will see the sun rise pale pink over the dewy world, and set, golden and heavy across the fields another day done.

Another thing I am certain of: I truly *believe* the world is a glorious, divinely crafted place. Every blade of grass. Every bird. Every mosquito. All of it is beautiful. Whatever I do with my life, I want to remember and teach this truth.