

A Sweet Spot, a Safe Space

Adrienne Jankens

I remember everyone flowing out of the City Museum in St. Louis. In the crowd, I found my new friends from Wayne State, some I had known in grad school, some I was only just beginning to connect with. We formed a group and started walking through town, looking for a place to land for drinks. It was the first time I felt part of something outside of my family in years.

Being part of a discipline, a program, a cohort, a class, a writing team, can do that—can make a home outside of home. It's nice to know other people who obsess over scheduling lesson plans, or get excited about coding, or can share a look with you across the table at a meeting. It's nice to know the five people who have actually read the same book you are geeked about. You talk about your home lives during a six- or eight-hour break from home. It's something many of us are missing right now, even if we get to be in a safe home. My people saw me through three pregnancies, my dissertation, the death of my mother, divorce, a tenure-track job interview process. My co-workers and I are learning parenting together: potty training, elementary school, this terrible long wading into being responsible for teenagers. Eventually, we will let our children go, or teach each other's children in our comp classes—there is a good chance tuition discounts will lead to that.

For my colleague and friend Nicole and me, Cs in Milwaukee was going to be both a planned vacation and an inspirational work session. It was going to be pause, reflection, play, thinking, connecting, eating, sleeping. We would have arrived Tuesday evening, checked into our hotel, and I don't know what Nic planned to eat, but I was going to get a huge hamburger. We'd have wine. We'd celebrate our time away from classes, and, even though we would be antsy to get back to them the whole time, we'd celebrate time to just be us, away from children.

I realized, as I took notes during the week that we didn't go to Milwaukee, that the conference had become part of an annual restorative

pause for me, sometimes in the midst of deep personal pain. The work of conference preparation aside, the experience itself was a retreat into safe being.

There's a picture of me in the plaza in Kansas City (Figure 1.1). It was the first time I had truly smiled in months, I think. The sun was out and we took off our hoodies to soak it up. My friend Conor and I had planned to try to eat barbecue at every meal (he succeeded, I didn't). We watched *Hot Tub Time Machine* in the hotel room and slept a lot. I had a magical moment in the hallway of the convention center where I saw Gwen, my dissertation director, in passing; we hugged, hoped to see each other soon, and parted. These were moments of light when, at home, I had just moved my four children into my parents' house, away from the home that had been in turmoil for months, years, and that had finally, at the point of my announcing I would file for divorce, manifested in total breakdown. I wasn't sleeping or eating much. Somehow I was still working. The smile in the picture—caught during a surprise laugh—is maybe disbelief, partly, that I could be happy again, in the right place, with people who loved me.

I drove to Indianapolis for the 2014 conference the day after my dissertation defense. At home, my mom had recently been diagnosed with cancer (again) and my cat had just died. The defense itself was both joyful and anticlimactic, as they often seem to be. Someone I had hoped would be there didn't show, and never said why. That was just one more small, sad thing on top of what late winter had already given me. When Whitney and I got to the convention center, I ran into Gwen and told her I didn't know what I was going to go see yet. She looked at me, knowingly, and said, "Maybe you shouldn't do anything." I took her advice, left by way of the escalator, went outside, and walked across the bridge behind the convention center, to the zoo. I talked to bears for a moment. I went to the botanical garden, walked paths away from people, found a spot in the back of the just-awakening garden, and cried (Figure 1.2).

It's not always traumatic. In Portland, in 2017, I got a room by myself and enjoyed dinner at the hotel restaurant alone, listening to an older couple plan their drive north to Washington. I found some moments to walk in the city with friends. Several of my co-workers shared a room and got sick while I was healthy and well-rested. We did an awesome presentation on mentoring. I made a lasting professional connection. I came home energized.



Figure 1.1. The author smiling in Barney Allis Plaza, outside of the Kansas City Convention Center.



Figure 1.2. A shaded courtyard in the DeHaan Tiergarten in White River Gardens in the Indianapolis Zoo.

I thought Milwaukee would feel that way. Nic and Sarah and I were going to present on a learning community-focused project we are intensely excited about. Conor and Michael and I were going to talk about critical pedagogy in our panel presentation. It was going to be a collegial love fest. It was going to be restful. There would be long walks and food and watching graduate students present their work and plenty of smiling and maybe one or two new connections.

~ ~ ~

In the week we didn't go to Milwaukee, I wrote daily in my Documentarian notes about a new anxiety: telling my ex I didn't think the children should visit him during the stay-at-home order. He has roommates who share parts of the house. Were they still going out to work? Was the roommate's daughter still visiting her dad? There seemed to be too many unknowns in a time where our direction was to, simply, stay home to keep all families safe. I finally mentioned it to him and he said we could do what I thought was best. I was relieved for a day. The next week, he came to play outside and threatened to "invoke" the parenting time order we agreed to in mediation but had not followed since: the kids staying with me most of the time while he worked six- or seven-day weeks—their school lives calm, our home life relaxed, everyone fed and sleeping well. Then the verbal threats disappeared again, emerged again, disappeared again, re-emerged. It was, for weeks, the same eggshell-walking I had to leave after so many years, but now, I was, at least, in my own home. I could, eventually, shut the front door, and be safe inside.

Setting aside a maybe self-indulgent walk through the strange, sad, and intriguing way that mid-March always seems to line up with some need for me to be away, to be safe, either alone, or in the comforting presence of good friends, writing during the week we didn't go to Milwaukee helped me think about how composition is, I think, for many, including students, a safe space in a loud, busy world.

Sometimes, maybe that space is surprising. Maybe it comes out in a reflection where someone writes, "I actually got into writing this essay," or "I liked it because I actually got to choose what I was writing about," and the thing being written is not work, actually, it is a chance to be oneself in the writing, or to try to be a version of oneself one is experimenting with. Maybe sometimes it's a space to say something you haven't said before but there it is, your teacher is asking you to

make an argument—to spend six weeks writing an argument—and so why not use now to make a point about something you never thought someone would listen to you write about so seriously?

When we couldn't leave home, I found my writing time (for the Documentarian work, for my research, for my remote class planning) to be moments where everything else went away:

I wrote a poem this morning, shortly after getting moving. I had half a cup of coffee in me and had done some email work and there it was, so I got it into my notes app and then re-read it twenty times today. I posted it to Instagram, where I sometimes share innocuous poems, labeling it, “not a quarantine poem” (Figure 1.3). It's for a friend of mine whom I love and miss dearly, who is going through something I don't know a lot about. It's hopeful and realistic, maybe.

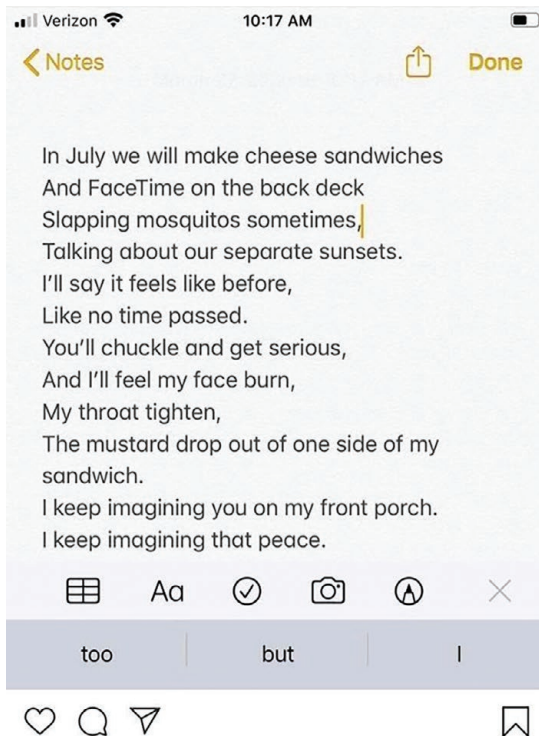


Figure 1.3. A screenshot of the author's poem, composed in the Notes app on her phone.

On the Wednesday of the week we did not go to Milwaukee, when I had planned to be with Nicole, eating lunch and getting hyped for our presentation, I wrote,

This morning was a shitshow. I am a writing teacher. My seven-year-old spent seventy minutes complaining that he could not write his three sentences for his morning journal for school. He could not write one sentence. He would not write, “I don’t know what to write.” He would not write, “I see a blue jay outside.” He would not write, “I ate a muffin.” He tried writing in the kitchen, and then at the desk in the playroom, and then back in the kitchen. He tried one pencil, then another. None of the erasers were good enough. He erased the one sentence he did draft (“I will play with my sister.”) so much that he could not write in that spot anymore. He wailed. He flopped. I gave in and let him move to the next thing. “No! I have to write my journal!” You’re not writing your journal, though. So move on.

I wrote about how, in intentionally moving my office to my room to make a workspace for myself at the beginning of the stay-at-home order, I gifted myself with a restful space of my own, so that even hard work was peaceful. My desk in my bedroom is up against my window, facing the backyard. The blinds are mostly closed, with just a bit open. This is more for modesty when I am getting ready for bed than it is to limit distraction—it would be far more distracting to look at the rest of my bedroom and see laundry. Instead, through the bit of the blinds that are open, I can see the roof, mainly—some grass and leaves (Figure 1.4). When I am writing, I don’t want distraction. I am not a procrastinator. Writing is happy work for me. During the week we didn’t go to Milwaukee, I reclaimed writing in the morning, something I had not been able to do for years, when my home life was in turmoil. Writing in the morning over those four days helped me process my anxiety about the possible conflict with my children’s father about visitation during quarantine. It gave me language for how to approach that conversation with him. Writing at the end of the day helped me put work to rest so I could spend time with my children.

Mental turmoil crept in maybe more that week than any other during the whole time at home. I have tried to work through it in prayer and laundry and checking emails every five minutes. I know people are joking that we will all come out of this situation either really

fit or with drinking problems. I am finding some disciplined balance between taking lots of walks and recognizing that one drink feels nice, but more than one has me up with indigestion in the middle of the night, so I better work through my stresses some other way. The mid-night thinking becomes desperate. I'd rather be dreaming. I dreamed, that first night, that we were at Cs, and I was trying to find Gwen in the conference center. My subconscious was in Milwaukee, anyway.



Figure 1.4. The author's desk, with laptop, lamp, papers, pens, and the frame of her bedroom window.

Thursday morning of the week we didn't go to Milwaukee, I wrote, about the evening before,

Hearing about the death toll rising was confirmation that we are doing the right thing by staying in, but it also made me think, as I washed dishes, that someone in my family will likely get sick or die from this, that the upper respiratory thing I have had for a week might be COVID-19 (though I am getting better), that the statistics don't keep anyone safe. It might be then that I decided to make a drink.

I have spent a lot of the last two months feeling like my home, once a safe space, and now cut through with my university life—a different kind of safe space—is, actually, no longer a retreat. It's constant movement, noise, wailing and gnashing of teeth. In the good moments, we recognize we are healthy and blessed with a nice home and good food to eat and at least one screen per person. In the not-good moments, I am an evil troll mom who forces her kids to remember they have homework and to actually do that homework, while I juggle lit torches, cackling and crying at the same time.

~ ~ ~

An octagonal package arrived for me in early May with a punching bag inside. Not the bag I wanted to buy for the last two years—I wanted one I could hang from a beam in my basement—but something less permanent, moveable, with a base to fill with so much water (Figure 1.5). It's living in my garage, so I can be outside with the kids this summer; they can play cars and soccer in the front yard, and I can punch and kick in the shade of the garage. I tried it out that first evening for a few minutes. The sound it made when I hit it was so much louder than it was in the gym. Or maybe it was the absence of any other bags being hit that caused the dissonant wave in my pocket of the neighborhood. “Hiiiiii!!!!” the little girl across the street called at me while I was one-two-hook-reverse-ing. I think her mother shushed her. “Hiiiiiii!!!!” I called back.

Two months before I finally left my old house, with my children, I asked my sister to try kickboxing with me. We like trying things we are a little scared to do. Sometimes she picks them up with enthusiasm (paddle boarding), and sometimes I do (kickboxing), but we like trying. It was a rush to learn to do new things with my muscles. I kept going back to the gym. For a year, for two years. I signed up for individual training sessions.

I would not call the gym a safe space, necessarily. One time, a classmate kicked me so hard through a kick shield I could barely move for two days. My rib was bruised, and I was glad it wasn't worse. Most often, the threat is just having to pair up for drills when I don't feel like being social, though. Sometimes, if I have stayed up too late the night before, or had drinks with friends, I am my own worst enemy, swearing through jumping jacks. But there is something very sweet about the routine of going, about climbing the stairs and saying hello to my teacher, about singing quietly while I put my wraps on, about the repetitive practice of the warm-up exercise. There is something very sweet about just being me—not mom me, not teacher me—a woman who is being reminded what sustained practice in something hard can do for her.



Figure 1.5. The author's Century-brand, blue standing punching bag, in her garage.

For a few weeks last summer, I imagined myself doing a spinning crescent kick. In my mind, I was in some interpersonal conflict with someone I was about to surprise with my martial arts skills. The conflict climaxed when the someone said something that implied I am a small, weak person. Fully composed, I spun and the top of my foot connected with the side of his face. I asked my teacher to show me how to do one. And then, I did it. Not perfectly—not close—but I did it.

In my one-on-one training sessions, we practice this combination where I throw a right, do a roundhouse, do a spinning hook kick, do a front kick, throw a left, do a roundhouse on the other side, do another spinning hook kick, and do a front kick again. I am a ballerina with gloves on. I travel so far across those twelve feet—I soar in a small space—and I can stop in an instant when I notice something is off—stop, in control, go back to my starting point.

Sometimes, in the midst of a training session, my teacher and I shift briefly to therapy. He makes a self-effacing joke. I reply with a serious solution to the cloaked problem. He acknowledges my contribution toward a solution. I respond by sharing how my solution comes from a related experience. We joke about how we are now playing therapists. I go back to practicing my combinations.

Nine weeks into the stay-at-home order, my teacher posts instructional videos that remind me of what I am supposed to be practicing. He shows us how to be invisible—how to not be where our opponent expects us to be, how to always be one step ahead. In the driveway, I teach my seven-year-old how to throw a one-two without being wild. I remind him to guard his head. We are not learning invisibility yet in these late May sessions. Our expectations are lower. I am learning how to successfully teach a jab. I am far more patient than when we are working on writing journals. We are all seeing different parts of ourselves emerge.

~ ~ ~

The swings between hope and anxiety that I wrote about during the week we didn't go to Milwaukee seem to have abated. I know that around 10 a.m. I will get stressed about my son's complaints about homework because I will struggle to imagine how I will get through my to-do list before dinner time, but I also know that every day, I have managed to get through it, and we have mostly happy evenings.

In two weeks, we will be left to flounder through the summer on

our own. I have research to continue, but all of the deadlines are my own to create and to manage. I will not be flying to Portland for another conference. I will not be driving to Detroit for meetings. I will not be going to the gym for Saturday morning classes at 10:30. I will not be telling the kids, "It's 9:30! School is starting!" and popping my head in their rooms to make sure they're actually doing homework. My son and I will not be fighting about writing journals. We will not go to Vacation Bible School, we will not go to church on Sunday morning, we will not go to Thursday swim classes. We may choose to punch the bag in the garage. I may spend all day writing while everyone plays video games. I might make a fancy lunch. I might Zoom with Nicole and talk about all of the things we didn't get to talk about in Milwaukee. We have loads of possibilities; we have no demands. Somewhere in the middle of absolute summer and nowhere to go, we will find our sweet spot, our safe space.