

An excerpt from

# CLOSING THE BOOK

Travels in Life, Loss, and Literature



by  
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AN EXCERPT FROM THE  
ESSAY “LETTERS TO RAY  
BRADBURY”

*from*

CLOSING  
THE BOOK

TRAVELS IN LIFE, LOSS,  
AND LITERATURE

JOELLE RENSTROM



April 2, 2007

Dear Ray Bradbury:

I read *Zen in the Art of Writing* on a bus to Copenhagen. It was a used copy—the pages were slightly worn and the corners were a little greasy. They had creases like wrinkles on a face.

Two thirds of the way through the preface, my heart broke. I cried as though a dam had burst behind my eyes. I didn't care who saw me; I was on a bus ten thousand miles away from anyone or anything I knew. I cried for all it was worth.

I should probably explain.

It wasn't just that I was reading your book—it was that I was reading it at that precise moment, under those exact circumstances. My fairy godmother might've put that book into my hands.

The exact circumstances were these: my dad was dead.

We were supposed to go to Sweden together—we'd talked about the trip for ages. Now, I had in my bag a glass jar filled with his ashes. The last day of my trip I would spread them over Hedemora, where my grandfather's grandparents had lived. I got up every morning and had to figure out how I would say goodbye that day. Each footfall was a goodbye. Every blink, every yawn, every drop of rain.

I travelled alone. He was the only person who belonged with me on that trip. Most days I was socked by the one-two-three of awe, sadness, and anger. I'd see something beautiful and seconds later the awe transformed to sadness that he couldn't see it. Then I'd get mad, because he should've been there.

I got caught in the hamster wheel, spinning around and around the fact that It Wasn't Fair. No matter how many times I ran around it, no matter how many angles from which I examined it, that fact never changed. At least when I travelled, I was actually going somewhere instead of pacing around my apartment. Working that fact through my body instead of around it, getting it out of my system.

I tried to be Martian about it. As long as there was awe, I would be okay. I was halfway around the world;

I could give up the habit of compartmentalizing. I could let myself feel all three emotions at once, distinctly, despite the discomfort. And maybe then I could grok things more fully.

Exposition is never easy, is it?

April 6, 2007

Dear Ray Bradbury:

Your book is a guide to writing, but on the bus to Copenhagen, it became a guide to living.

I missed my dad all the time, completely and loudly. When I was submerged in grief, I felt more like myself than I had since he died. Being his daughter was the most stable identity I had. Yet I kept thinking to myself, how can this person who's got her father's ashes in her bag possibly be me?

During those moments I didn't know myself as anything other than a girl who had lost her dad and was desperately trying to find him again. No other parts of me existed.

After a while, though, other parts of me peeked out. We're still here, they'd say. Underneath all this. You'll see us soon.

*Zen in the Art of Writing* made the writer part of me, who had been hiding for over a year, emerge, albeit shakily. I was thrilled to see her and gave her permission to appreciate the surges of emotion, the wash of tears during my rides on public transportation, the poignancy of me visiting the fatherland alone. The writer part of me filled notebooks. This is important, she said. This means something. I should write about this.

The daughter part of me answered, this is sacred. If you're going to write about it, write about it. Don't say you're going to write about it and then mope around the house instead.

The writer part of me got sheepish. I know, I know, it said. I won't do that. The writer in me remembered one of the last things my dad ever said to me. I told him that I would dedicate my first book to him and he said, "Thank you. But you have to finish it first."

It was during these talks between my daughter self and my writer self that I read the preface of your book.

Is it gauche to quote you to yourself? Do you think, I know all this already? Or do you think, damn, *I* wrote that. Good for me. It goes without saying that I hope for the latter.

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