



Michael Cao

Whenever I find myself in a creative rut, my idiosyncrasies are always a reliable muse—like the time I wrote about my strange fascination

with pre-GPS era roadmaps, or that other time decided to write about my unhealthy obsession with Taylor Swift for a creative writing final assignment (that one had bravado, even by my standards).

So when it came time to settle on a topic for a personal essay in Writing 101: *Solitude and Solidarity*, I was more than ready to probe my neuroses for something Nobel-worthy. I remember my first draft was something about my fondness for instant coffee mixed with bottled water. This treatise, of course, was quickly scrapped. But I did save the exposition, and I'm lucky I did, because it would provide the basis for my essay as it is today.

The reason I developed a tolerance for instant coffee in the first place was because in high school I would stay awake very late. Was I an insomniac? I didn't think so. I actually loved to sleep (even more than pop music, cartography, or caffeine). Consequently, I was confident figuring out what kept me awake during those hellish school nights would be the main investigation of *Starting Somewhere*. But soon enough, my writing had devolved into a metacommentary about procrastination, and I could sense the piece was losing its luster. It was missing the element of poignant absurdism that made my previous pieces successful.

And so I decided to get psychological. Then philosophical. What was it about a Spanish assignment that seemed so daunting? Why was starting new things so hard for me? How did all of this relate to the nature of time? Looking back at it now, *Starting Somewhere* might begin as an investigation, but it really ends as a meditation into my own clockwork, and I hope the piece makes you embrace of your own idiosyncrasies.

I'd like to thank Professor Kevin Spencer for his scholarship and tutelage. I was consistently amazed by his intellect, and I benefited greatly from his writing feedback. The design of *Solitude and Solidarity* taught me to value introspection, which is a fundamental component of this essay and should be for future pieces.

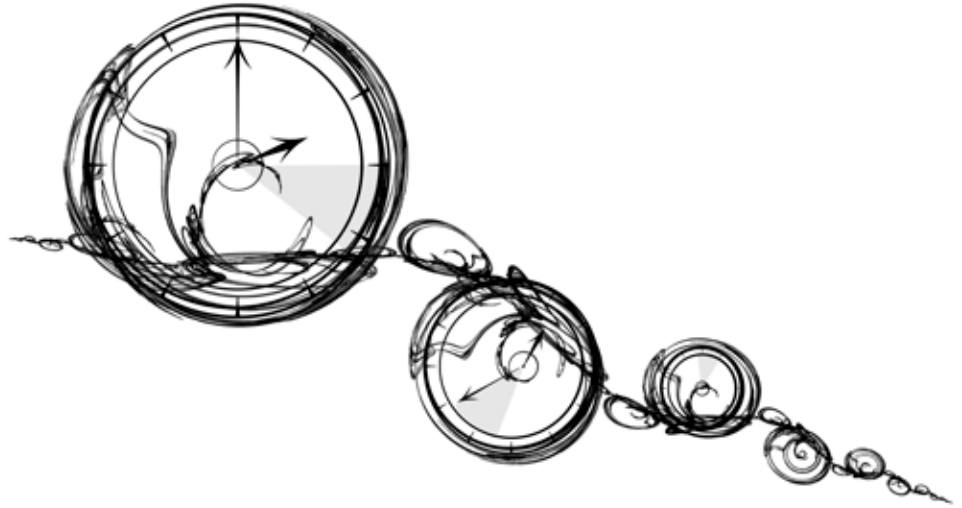
I'd also like to thank the Deliberations editorial staff and members of the Thompson Writing Program for their feedback. They helped sculpt this essay as much as me. Finally, I'd like to recognize and thank Sheryl for her syntactical expertise and encouragement to take ownership of my prose.

Starting Somewhere

Michael Cao

Writing 101: *Solitude and Solidarity*

Instructor: Kevin Spencer



IT stares back at me.

It stares back at me dispassionately, but with a persistence that makes me shift uncomfortably in my seat. My eyes are starting to strain. My faculties are diminishing. A faint delirium patrols my mind. My gaze, however, is transfixed on the creature before me. We have been doing this for hours, stalking each other like two emaciated vultures. Pacified by the dead of night, we are both exhausted, yet impervious to surrender. But after another standstill, starved for mercy, we agree to a ceasefire.

Finally, the clock I have been staring at strikes two. Looking away, I know my relief will not last long.

It is with the renewal of another hour that I allow my suppressed optimism to filter back into my body. The beginning of a fresh hour suggests infinite possibilities for initiative. Maybe the empty college-ruled notebook beneath my palm will finally be christened with ink, mathematical formulae, and concrete solutions to calculus problems. Maybe the list of Spanish vocabulary waiting nearby will finally earn a read. And maybe, just maybe, the blank word document flickering on my computer screen will finally be decorated by Times New Roman font, double-spaced margins, and a literary analysis of *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway.

As the clock begins to tick again, I flirt with the fanciful, fantasizing about how perfect my math solutions will be, how fluent my Spanish will sound, and how beautiful my essay will read. The time I spend in contemplation, however, is soon lost to idleness. I fiddle with my thumbs. I check the news for the fifth time. I meander about my kitchen before confronting my work yet again. I steal another glance at the clock. It has suddenly approached three. Where did the past hour go? I am incredulous, wondering how all this time has passed as another hour, the same as the last, marches by.

For me, this a nightly enigma: of being locked in time without the verve to begin my work or accomplish my responsibilities. It is a paralysis of motivation from which I always recover too late, saved by a primal impulse only activated when times are truly dire. Indeed, not a lot of conscious piloting is required when my calculus homework is due twenty minutes before class. But for most of the time, when I can control my inhibitions, I lapse into a familiar state of unproductivity. Whereas I am quick to sprint after the sound of a starter's pistol, and even quicker to cross a busy street (even though the meter says I have a generous thirty seconds to do so), I am deterred by mental activities that are neither instantaneous nor instinctive.

Perhaps my mind is too patient with itself. Perhaps my inability to begin things is a symptom of chronic laziness. I do not think this is true, for even though my mind fails to translate its thoughts about *The Sun Also Rises* into words, it still contemplates its themes in the same way it scans my math textbook and decodes the problems. My mind loves schematics. It just refuses to share them with the rest of my peripheries, namely the hands that obediently rest on a keyboard or clutch a pen. No, my mind is not lazy; I think it is scared. Why else do I tremor uncontrollably before speaking or presenting a paper? Why else do I cling to my most important beliefs in secret? My mind is scared to communicate its musings with the world, deciding the paragraphs I must write or the problems I have yet to solve are better off disguised, uninspected by everyone except me. The inevitable hesitation I experience before embarking on anything of substance is a frightened warning. Whatever I will produce, my mind tells me, will be critiqued, probed, and judged. And often, this paranoid reminder is enough for me to languish indefinitely.

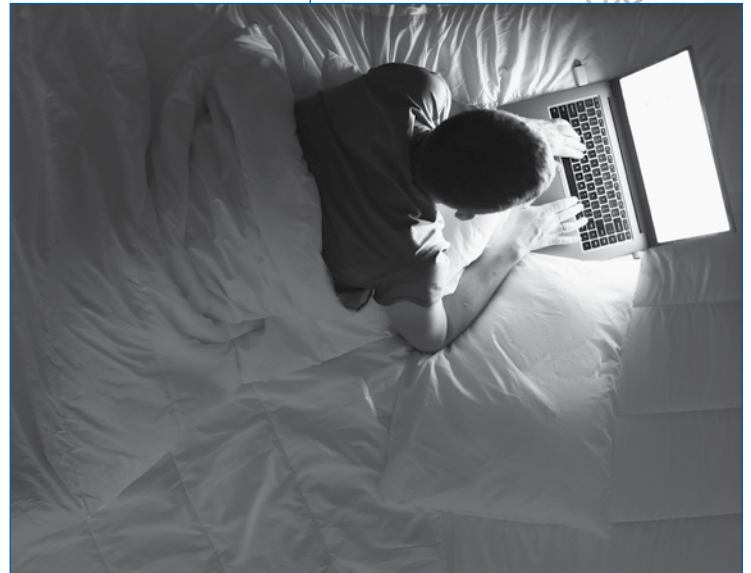
I suppose, in some ways, my inability to start things is useful. In pursuits like fine art, architecture, or authorship, careful deliberation is instrumental. Every *Mona Lisa*, La Sagrada Familia, or *Ulysses* from human history started off as a figment of creativity incubated in someone's mind. Indeed, there is little value in approaching projects without a meticulous plan. Although I am no Da Vinci, Gaudí, or James Joyce, taking the time to deliberate over my work can encourage greater skill. And when it comes time to share my work with an audience, my apprehension of starting things (and my fear of disapproval) can motivate me to create a more thoughtful, polished product.

Crude and cobbled math solutions are not very compelling, however, nor is rehearsal Spanish. My English teacher, in addition, probably will not acclaim my eloquence after reading twenty other papers. I forget some tasks are unglamorous as they are rote, and that their completion is often enough alone. Not everything is meant to be a masterpiece.

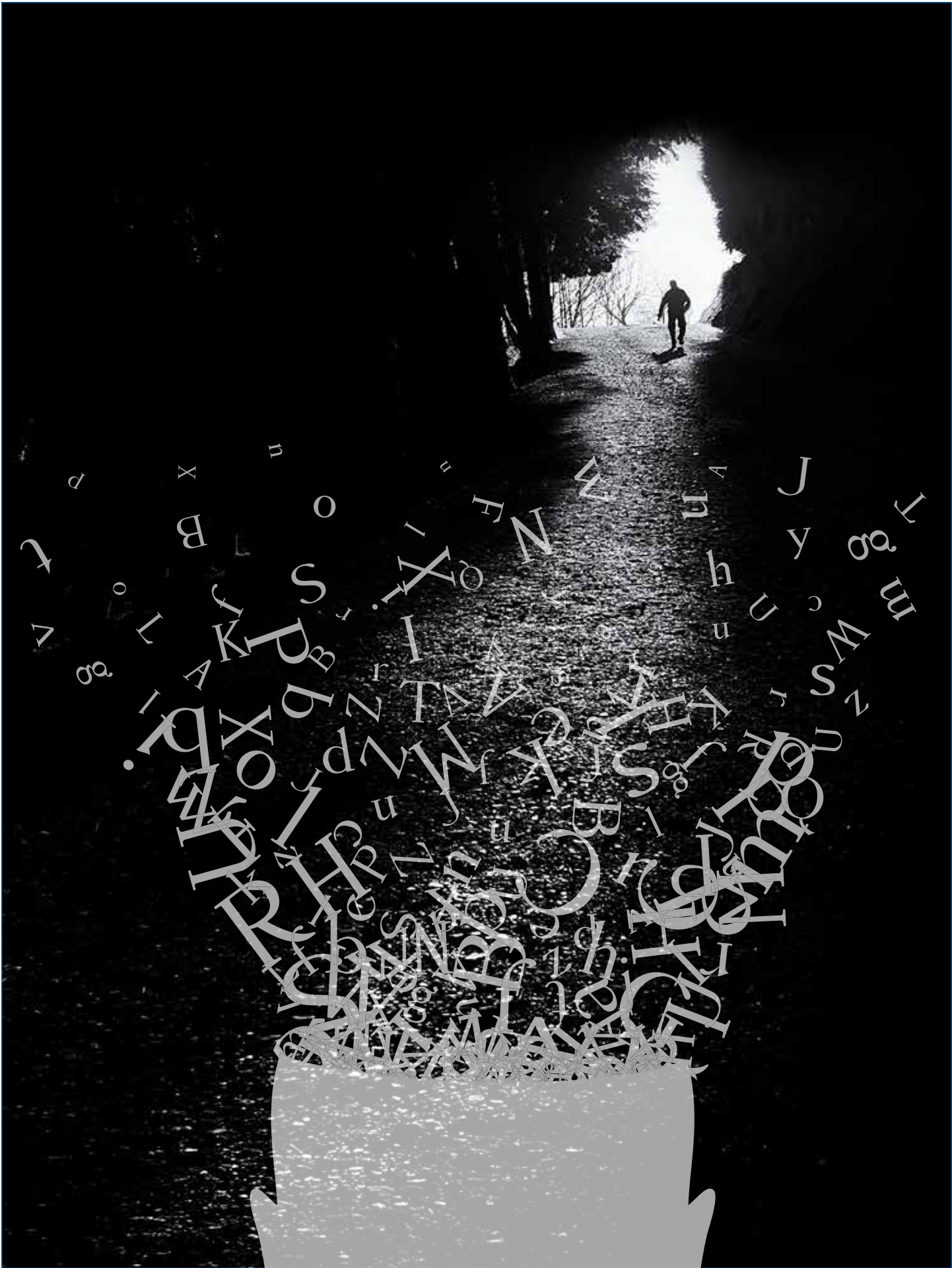
But everything can be! My inner-artisan chides, blissfully unaware of the ticking time bombs strapped to reality. I ignore him. I know I cannot delay my responsibilities, whatever they may be, if I am to maximize my energy or creative sanity. Start somewhere, the platitude holds, regardless of how many calculations, keystrokes, or repetitions it takes. Start somewhere.

Staring at the clock again, I find myself slipping into a spell of unproductivity. A "brainstorming session" appears imminent, so does a mental reprieve. Stuck at a juncture in time, I imagine myself as The Traveler in Robert Frost's famous poem, *Stopping by Woods on Snowy Evening*. Journeying the countryside, The Traveler, who is far from home, pauses near a patch of woods. The woods are "lovely, dark,

$$\begin{aligned} & (xy)^3 \\ & y^2)^2 \quad \frac{1}{5}\sqrt{20} \quad \frac{x^2}{x^5} \\ & dT = \int dx \\ & \frac{\sqrt{2x}}{4} \rightarrow \frac{(d-4)(d-5)}{(d-4)(d+4)} \quad (\\ & \frac{1^2}{\sin^2 x} \rightarrow \frac{d-5}{d+4} \quad y=2 \\ & \sin^2 x \quad 7(x^3y^3)^2 = (xx) \\ & B \quad 6x^2 + zy^6 - y^3 + (y^3)^2 \\ & 5+x \quad -3a^4 - a^6 \\ & 7+4(2+4) \quad \frac{2(a^2)^3}{2(a^2)^3} \\ & 105a^{21} \quad dy = \frac{\pi}{4}abc^2 \quad 1/\sqrt{4} \\ & = \frac{72a^6}{36a^2} = 2a^4 \quad R=4 \\ & > 4x-4 \quad B \\ & +2x-1 > 0 \pi \end{aligned}$$



$$\begin{aligned} & x+c=0 \\ & \frac{\sqrt{8}}{2} \sqrt{x} = \frac{-b+\sqrt{b}}{2a} \quad S = \frac{1}{2} \\ & x+c=0 \\ & x+c=8 \quad (5a^2b)^3 = 125a \\ & x+c=8 \quad x^2 > x+4 \end{aligned}$$



and deep” (Frost 13), inviting The Traveler to linger. Though the temptation is great, The Traveler balks, and ultimately immortalizes the words that to me make Frost’s poem a timeless panegyric for all those who harbor, unabashed, the resolve to start something and keep going. “I have promises to keep”, The Traveler says, “And miles to go before I sleep / And miles to go before I sleep” (Frost 14-16).

When my willpower is scarce and my work immense, I may also find the lull of the woods, and of hesitation, to be irresistible. But instead of abandoning my obligations for work, for purpose, and for action, I, like The Traveler, realize the moment before starting something is only a temporary perch, a singularity in space when everything stops. But only briefly, for time always unsuspends itself, and so must I.

As I sneak another glance at the kitchen clock, The Traveler and I marvel one last time. He, upon a snowy evening, and I, upon a silent school night. He, upon the journey ahead, and I, upon the unwritten and unread.

One last stop for the both of us, before we go our separate ways.



Works Cited

Frost, Robert. “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, [www. poetryfoundation.org/](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/)

[poems/42891/stopping-by-woods-on-a-snowy-evening.](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42891/stopping-by-woods-on-a-snowy-evening)