



Vertical Japanese text on the left side of the collage.

Vertical Japanese text on the right side of the collage, including the phrase 'ライターを担当したのが、現在、宇'.

I am a writer.

by Jennifer Lee

art by Kara Kosaka

Gives best writing features

I am a writer.

It took me 17 years to be able to say that, to write it in black and white. Writing has always been a part of me, buried as deep within my instincts as eating, dreaming, crying. But there is something socially inevitable about sentences that begin with "I am," as if, somehow, whatever follows will be permanently etched on your face and become something that people will latch on to and colour with their own conceptions. "Oh, I know Jen. She's the writer."

The first time someone called me a writer, my grade five teacher was plucking a handful of students out of her class for an intensive language arts group. She pointed at me and said, "Yes, Jennifer is one of my special writers." Special? I thought, a writer? Cool.

Somewhere along the way, between 10 and 27, being a writer gradually came to mean something not quite as special as before. As people began to ask me what I was going to do with my life, saying I wanted to be a professional writer was like saying I wanted to be a magical woodland nymph—very sweet, but certainly not a real career. Writing is what your neighbour's wealthy spinster aunt does in the drawing room when she's not painting watercolours. Writing is not what young, smart, daughters of hardworking immigrants do at all. Wouldn't it be safer to be a pharmacist?

It would, but safety was never my top priority.

My Mother, Social Barometer

My mother still has no idea what I do for a living.

Write?" she said. "But what do you write?"

Now, my Cantonese skills aren't even good enough to watch the news on the Chinese channel, so my attempts in trying to explain freelance and poetry and fiction were met with utter confusion, and she came away from the conversation thinking that people pay me to write just about anything. Greeting cards, letters to the government, menus. I let her believe what she wants to believe because, ultimately, it's just easier that way. Besides, she wanted to talk about something else: her pushy neighbour who ignored her at the casino the week before.

And then there's that other bit of subtext running through people's minds: doesn't everyone know how to write? I took creative writing in university; it can't be that hard.

My theory is that my mother chooses not to understand. Knowing that I'm a writer brings to light my many, many failures. I'm a writer, which means, logically, that I'm not a concert pianist, a rich housewife, or, at the very least, a former Miss Chinese Vancouver. This reflects on her, and would compel her to count off her failures as a mother as well, which in her mind was letting me do whatever I wanted instead of keeping me closer to home where I could practice scales all day under her hawkish eye.

The way my mother thinks is widespread, and I don't mean just among Chinese ladies in their 60s. Since my friends and I have grown older, we've learned to pare down our dreams, toss aside the colourful aspirations of our pasts in favour of earthier, more secure careers. Fashion designer becomes human resources specialist. Musician goes to law school (and hates it). Chef decides that nursing is where the demand is. It all comes down to being useful, to having a tangibly productive role in society, to be doing something less frivolous and more real.

Writing isn't useful.

People let their puppies pee on magazines and newspapers.

We learn to prize practicality not just from our parents, but from our consumer education teachers, from those endless television commercials for at-home legal secretary training, from the general perception that poets are drunks and artists are mad. Writing is a luxury of the rich, a symptom of the slightly unhinged.

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I'm a Writer, Really I Am

It was all these things that kept me from declaring my true and fundamental identity. My mother, school, society in general—I can blame so many factors, but ultimately, the fault was mine. There was a part of me that believed that being a writer was unworthy too, that felt a little guilty whenever I let my mother pick up the lunch tab because I can never manage to save money. I had to let all that go, and I did, but not before I held a series of unfulfilling jobs; everyday at work reminded me that this was not who I am, so I stopped pretending.

The day I began telling people that I'm a writer, I also began accepting their perceptions, their puzzled looks, the questions that showed that I was the very first person they had ever met who admitted to being a writer. It's okay if someone thinks I'm a dilettante, or if someone asks me to help him edit his 500-page novel because, really, it's not me all these people are seeing, it's the Mythical Writer. The drunk. The madman. Whatever they want. I'm not him, so it doesn't matter if we get confused sometimes; we'll just have a glass of gin and laugh it off.

I can say now, with a fair amount of confidence, that I'm a working writer, really no different from your garden-variety office manager or chiropractor. I work for a living, writing articles like these. Once in a while, I even get paid for fiction or poetry.

Besides, when you think about it, everybody has an inner artist, musician or actor, protected inside their minds and bodies since childhood, rarely exposed and never indulged. I'm lucky; I get to expose myself everyday. And now everyone can know about it.