



SELF-EXPRESSION

Counting Backwards/Life in Reverse

Objective: To write an autobiographical piece based on one significant event from each year of your life.

Preparation

Watch Patrick Roche recite “21” on YouTube. This assignment is based on Roche’s spoken word piece. A link to the video can be found [here](#).

Pre-writing Exercise:

On a sheet of lined paper, write your age on the top line. Then skip a line. And then write the age you were last year. And so on, down the page and on the back of the page until you reach 0.

It will look like:

16

15

14

13

12

11

10

All the way to 0.

Writing Exercise

Step 1: (10 minutes) Think back through your life. Whenever an important memory comes to mind write it on the line of the year it happened. For example, if you broke your arm playing soccer when you were 8, write that on line 8. If you can't remember exactly how old you were, guess. This exercise works best if you skip around from year to year. Something you remember from this year. Then something you remember from elementary school. Then something you remember from last year. Feel free to time travel through your life.

Step Two: (3 – 5 minutes) Go back and re-read everything you wrote. Now, is there a theme that comes through time and again? For example, is there a theme that you have always excelled at math, or skating? Is there a theme that you and your family have moved many times? Are there multiple mentions of animals you've raised, or that you were often the teacher's pet, or you were accused of things you didn't do?

Step Three: (1 – 2 minutes) Decide on the theme that you are going to write about.

Step Four: (1 - 2 minutes) On a new sheet of lined paper, repeat Step 1. Write your age backwards from your current age down to 0.

Step Five: (5 – 15 minutes) Focusing on your theme, fill in as many lines as you can with events or memories that happened in those specific years. Again, feel free to skip around from year to year. But every line, every memory should focus on that one theme.

Step Six: (in your free time) Go back and reread what you've written and edit, rewrite or add more so that you've said exactly what you wanted to say.

HEADS UP: You might not have one memory for each year. It's possible that you won't remember what happened in the first few years of their lives.

Step Seven: Counting Backwards is meant to be read aloud as a spoken word piece. So, find a friend or someone you trust and read your Life in Reverse piece to them.

21 by Patrick Roche

21. My father is run over by a car.
He is passed out in the road with a blood alcohol content 4 times the legal limit.
I do not cry.

Four months later,
The nurses lose his pulse, and I wonder whose life flashed before his eyes.
Rewinding VHS tapes
Old home videos

20.

19. I haven't brought a friend home in four years.

18. My mother sips the word "divorce".
Her mouth curls at the taste like it burns going down.

17. I start doing homework at Starbucks.
I have more meaningful conversations with the barista
Than with my family

16. I wait for Christmas Eve.
My brother and I usually exchange gifts to one another early
This year, he and my father exchange blows.
My mother doesn't go to mass.

15. I come up with the theory that my father started drinking again
Because maybe he found out I'm gay.
Like if he could make everything else blurry,
Maybe somehow I'd look straight.

15. My mother cleans up his vomit in the middle of the night
And cooks breakfast in the morning like she hasn't lost her appetite.

15. I blame myself.

15. My brother blames everyone else.

15. My mother blames the dog.

15. Super Bowl Sunday
My father bursts through the door like an avalanche
Picking up speed and debris as he falls
Banisters, coffee tables, picture frames
Tumbling, stumbling.
I find his AA chip on the kitchen counter.

14. My father's been sober for 10,
Maybe 11, years?
I just know
We don't even think about it anymore.

13.

12.

11. Mom tells me Daddy's "meetings" are for AA.
She asks if I know what that means.
I don't.
I nod anyway.

10. My parents never drink wine at family gatherings.
All my other aunts and uncles do.
I get distracted by the TV and forget to ask why.

9.

8.

7.

6. I want to be Spider-Man.
Or my dad.
They're kinda the same.

5.

4.

3. I have a nightmare
The recurring one about Ursula from The Little Mermaid
So I get up
I waddle toward Mommy and Daddy's room,
Blankie in hand,
I pause.
Daddy's standing in his underwear
Silhouetted by refrigerator light.
He raises a bottle
To his lips.

2.

1.

0. When my mother was pregnant with me,
I wonder if she hoped,
As so many mothers do,
That her baby boy would grow up to be
Just like
His father.

XVII

by Iona Scott

- XVII: I've thought of inviting my mom to my graduation.
- XVI: I got into an argument with my stepmom; we stopped talking even though we live in the same house.
- XV: Found out my cousin on my mom's side was pregnant at 15. Before I moved back to California, we made a promise to break the chain.
- XIV: My Aunt Laurie, from my dad's side, called in after four years. I didn't speak to her. A few months later she passed away. She fought diabetes since I could remember.
- XIII: The first year since I moved back to California from Rhode Island, and I no longer speak to my mom.
- XII: I got kicked out of my first school since being back in California.
- XI: My dad won the custody case, primarily because my mom didn't show up to court to hear the decision.
- X: I moved back east with my mom. I found out my Uncle Johnny had sold drugs out of his house since before I was born. He just had his third kid.
- IX: We were living out of hotels before we finally moved into an apartment, first time I'd been to California.
- VIII: My grandma, from dad's side, offered to let me live with her. My mom said no because she thought my grandma would keep me from her.
- VII: My Aunt Elsa, from my mom's side, was diagnosed with cancer. The third person in my mom's family.
- VI: My dad made the final decision to move out and leave my mom. They hadn't been on good terms in years.
- V: My grandpa, from Dad's side, offered my parents one of his homes. My dad turned down the offer because my mom said no, for no apparent reason.
- IV: My mom was diagnosed with kidney stones, and years before that cancer. She was the second one to get cancer.
- III: My Aunt Luisa, on my mom's side, was diagnosed with cancer. She was the first.
- II: I lived with my grandparents from dad's side 99% of the time while my parents tried to figure things out.
- I: Dad finally got my mom to stop living with her sister. He helped her move out.
- 0: Mom was told she couldn't have kids. I was born May 20, 1998.

What's Dad? by Rosa Ruiz

17. Almost turning eighteen and still don't know who my father is.
16. Asking myself if my father would accept my sister and me, also if he is alive.
15. Asking my mother for the third time: Who is my father?
14. My sister doesn't want to know anything about our father.
13. It's sad how I see my cousins and friends who have fathers, and I don't.
12. Sad not knowing who my father is.
11. First time asking mother who is my father?
10. Not knowing why my father is not with me.
9. Teachers asking who my father is or where he is. No answer from me.
8. Been bullied for not having a father.
7. Your own family discriminates against you for not having a father.
6. My father is my grandpa; he was there when I was born.
5. Having a stepfather.
4. First day of school, men are arriving with little girls. What's dad?
3. Don't know what the word Father means.
2. Dad didn't watch my first steps.
1. I cry, only Mom comforts me.
0. Little did Mom know she was having twins. Little did Dad know we exist.