

The House of Words

Written by Camilla Sterne

I used to sit amidst the oaken bookshelves at Lighthouse Writers Workshop and ponder the ideas generated within this shrine to the written word. I felt stories and poems flitting through the air, nestling into my lungs and infusing my utterances. I had grown fond of the non-profit literary center during my time as the summer intern. Summer waned, and I left the brick Victorian house at 1515 Race St. in Denver to return to college. I found myself missing the ease of afternoons spent grasping for winged inspirations between papered walls thick with the history of my darling city. But the angle of the afternoon sun grew acute, and winter brought a drought of words so harsh that my hands curled idly until spring.

If you're a writer, you know the drought that I speak of. It comes on unexpectedly, with or without cause. It leaves you lonely for words. Discomfort seeps beneath fingernails and eyes sink with the shame of non-doing. This is the reality of writing and equally, the reality of humanity.

Lighthouse, however, is a product of doing. Michael Henry met Andrea Dupree in college. They knew that they wanted to write, teach and publish. So they did just that. Together they created Lighthouse, a professed "Beacon for Literary Types."

Lighthouse has lived up to its name and become a radiant hub of the Denver writing community. This literary center offers an easy solace away from the at times bleak solitude of the writer's life, and fosters creativity in a way that seclusion might not. Writer and Colorado native Tessa Cheek has observed the generative nature of this environment in her short but immersive time at Lighthouse.

"[Lighthouse] is actually unique in a way that I'm not sure people quite realize," said the 24-year-old creative writer and journalist at The Colorado Independent. I met Cheek at Thin Man, where we sat in the weakening light and swapped stories about inspiration, comfort and our love of sad lady jams.

"There's so much generosity and goodwill and abundance at the Lighthouse that it can occasionally bear up some serious competition amongst folks, and I think that's actually really really good, really generative," she said. "It's just enough to kind of get you going."

Cheek was recently awarded the yearlong Alice Maxine Bowie Fellowship for her involvement with Lighthouse. The fellowship sponsors one writer for a year of workshops and community engagement at Lighthouse, in an effort to make workshops accessible and foster the long-term success of a particular storyteller. Cheek applied for the fellowship when she realized she was spending all of her money on workshops at Lighthouse.

"I love the idea of a fellowship," she said. "It's like you're getting in a boat that other people built for you and...it calls on you to suddenly start steering...and it's amazing and empowering to be given this boat to ride around in, but it's also challenging and demanding because you have a boat now. Where are you gonna go? What's your plan with this? Don't wreck it. Don't sink it."

But before the abundance she experienced from her involvement with Lighthouse, Cheek suffered from the unease of writer's block. She was living in Beijing, working on a series of lyric essays for a photography book depicting Chinese farmhouses located along the Great Wall.

"I remember walking around Beijing," she said. "It was gray; it was February; it was cold. I was chain smoking, and I had this thought. I was like, no one gives a shit about the sad musings of your average white girl. I don't have anything to say about myself anymore." Cheek had long been writing from introspection but found it couldn't carry her long-term. It wasn't until a workshop at Lighthouse with former Denver Poet Laureate Chris Ransick that Cheek was able to emerge from paralyzing self-doubt. "When you can't write from introspection anymore you have to write from observation," she said, conveying Ransick's antidote to writer's block. She was living alone and suffering from the recurring thought that it was indulgent to write. At Ransick's recommendation, every night at bedtime Cheek wrote down three things for which she was grateful.

"I found that gratitude was interesting," she said. "So that whole space started to open up for me as I opened it up for myself. I got a lot more room in my fiction to write characters who... had a capacity for forgiveness, and they became much more interesting people to write about."

After renovating a house in RiNo with her roommates, Cheek has created a routine she struggles to uphold on days when she feels particularly human.

"I like to wake up when the house is quiet and when it's dark," she said. "I have this little window that overlooks a bunch of warehouses and the Rockies. So on a good day, I write in the day. And if I do that everything is so much better. The day is better, I'm a better person, my work is better. But it's really amazing how hard it is to make myself do that." Cheek recognizes that the routines she fashioned to foster her writing also deepened her relationships and encouraged her authenticity.

"If you don't live bravely with the people in your life that you care about, if you don't trust in your relationships then, at least for me, until I started doing that and thinking about it, I wasn't writing good scenes," she said. "I wasn't writing interactions between people that seemed like they belonged in something as short as a short story."

She hugged her knee to her chest, and I found myself aware that this is one of those brave conversations.

I walk west on 17th Avenue, away from Thin Man and south on Race Street on my way home. As I pass Lighthouse, I feel the certainty of inspiration and think of Cheek's words. "The Lighthouse was about finding home for me," she said.

As the evening settles, crispness hints at the coming season. I am grateful in the shortening days to glean warmth and creativity from the ideas arising out of a community and merrily traversing the airways of our city.