

The Next Step

by Jacob Alvarado

“Have you given yourself permission to think of this as a loss?”

My therapist asked me this question a few months back during one of our first sessions together, and when she did, my first instinct was to think that it was silly, even counterintuitive, to think about graduation as a “loss”. After all, the only reason college had even come up was because I was venting about how much I was suffering from school-induced burnout.



Photo of **Hazel McCallion Campus (Mississauga)**
Sheridan College taken by Lauren Redwood

Yet for all the deadline flurries, chaotic group projects, and COVID-related campus closures that plagued my post-secondary years, describing my college experience to my therapist made me realize that it wasn’t defined by its struggles, but by what made its struggles so worth it. I’d entered Sheridan College’s Creative Writing & Publishing program an anxiety-ridden, deathly shy, lost-in-life 18-year-old and I exited a completely different person.

With a newfound passion for Canadian publishing and the encouragement of my peers and professors, I turned myself into a confident, expressive, and creative emerging professional who graduated with two editorial gigs under their belt and one of the highest GPAs of the graduating class.

I don't mention these achievements to brag, but to illustrate that I had plenty of reasons to be proud of how I used my time at Sheridan—and plenty of reason to believe I hadn't wasted a moment. So why did I get the feeling that my therapist had a point?

Thus far, I'd been blaming the depression, lack of motivation, and general hollowness I was feeling on being depleted from busyness of the last four years. While that was certainly true, being forced to reflect on everything made me realize there was something deeper going on. Was it because I was missing the artistic community that me and my classmates had built? Did I miss being challenged so frequently? The ease-of-access to the publishing industry? My professors? These longings were certainly all symptoms of what was afflicting me, but they weren't the source of why I was feeling so lost in life. For that answer, I'd have to think back to my last semester.

One of the last school assignments I ever completed was to interview a creative person who I looked up to; someone whose career I'd like to model my own after, and who might have some insight into how I could harness my creativity to move forward in my industry. This led me to an old professor and former employer of mine, Tali Voron.

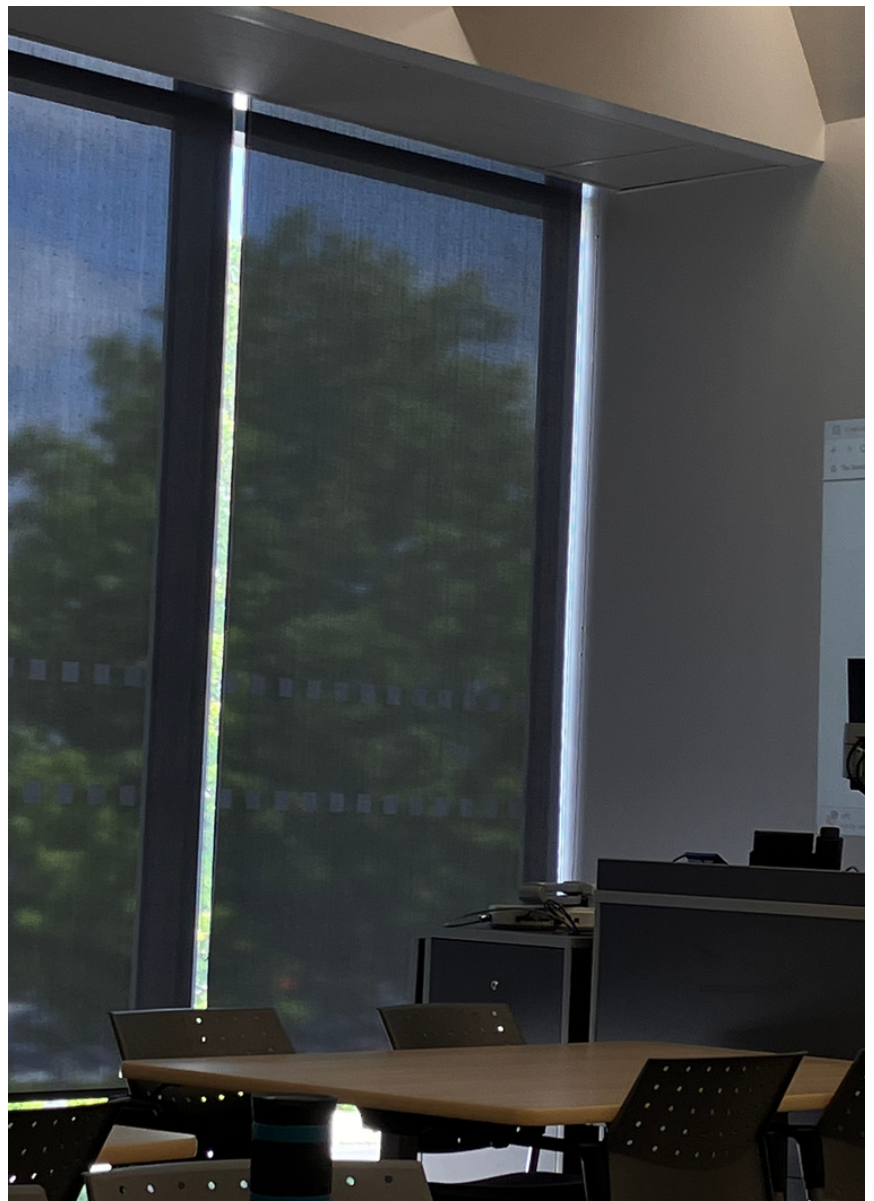


Photo of classroom B222 (HMC Sheridan College) taken by Lauren Redwood



Photo of Hazel McCallion Campus (Mississauga) Sheridan College taken by Lauren Redwood

Despite only being a few years older than me, Tali was already teaching several publishing classes, managing a literary magazine, and running an independent publishing house. I figured her experience, and close proximity to the stage in life I was currently in, would make her the perfect person to speak with.

As expected, I wound up having a wonderful conversation with Tali, asking her several questions about her creative process before asking for some more general advice. What, I wondered, were her thoughts on how to transition from a student career to a professional one? I don't remember her exact words, but the gist of what she said is still clear to me: "just find the next step."

It can be very easy, she explained, to get so caught up in a "before-and-after" mindset that the rest of your life after graduation feels like a giant abyss you need to map out all at once. After all, the end of college usually signals the end of others determining the steps you take towards your purpose. For some, like my classmates who weren't interested in publishing, this was a freeing realization. But for me, graduation meant fewer friendly faces around me to keep me going during hard times, less chances to prove myself, and less opportunities to make the connections and grow the skills necessary to make it in the industry I so desperately wanted to be a part of.

Following that therapy session, I finally decided to change my perspective and allow myself to "mourn the loss". But moving on from my denial was just the first step. What would be my next one?



This is the question I've been asking myself every day since that therapy session, and while life hasn't been perfect, I can confidently say that it hasn't been stagnant. The next step led me to continue a relationship with a publisher who visited one of my classes, a publisher who now mentors me and employs me part-time. It's led me to write a little each day and submit a little each day, to keep reading work that challenges me, to keep applying to jobs, to keep strengthening bonds with friends, and to keep putting myself out there.

I still think about my student days all the time, and the potency of my nostalgia for that point in my history will always tinge those memories with a bit of melancholy. But the farther I get from college, the clearer it becomes to me that that time was only ever a launchpad.

So if you find yourself reading this in the thick of your 'student season,' make sure to savour the time you've been given and the steps you're being presented with. And if you're looking back fondly on that time like I am, just make sure every look backwards is matched by a look at what's in front of you. In either case, it's the next step that keeps you moving.



Jacob Alvarado is a writer, poet, and the Events and Communications Assistant for knife | fork | book. His work can be found in *The Ampersand Review of Writing & Publishing*, *Serendipity NewsMag*, and *Tessellate: An Anthology*. He lives and writes in Orangeville, Ontario.

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