

The Silence Between the Pages

Yi Zhang¹

Writing across the University of Alberta, 2025²
Volume 6, pp. 1-4
Published December 2025
DOI: 10.29173/writingacrossuofa79

Introduction

“Silence between the Pages” is a paper that was written in a WRS course in response to a prompt, which asked students to share a story about writing. Students had the option of writing fiction or non-fiction. Yi Zhang, in this particular paper, outlines struggles that individuals sometimes go through with mental health issues, and how writing might play a role in their journey with surprising—and not always positive—results.

Keywords: mental health, writing as salvation and risk, peer review



This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

¹ Yi Zhang is a second-year Nutrition and Food Science student at the University of Alberta.

² *Writing across the University of Alberta* (WAUA) publishes undergraduate student writing from writing studies courses and courses focused on writing studies practices and scholarship at the University of Alberta. You can find WAUA online at <https://writingacrossuofa.ca/>.

“The first time I met Ningning, she was sitting quietly, surrounded by books as if they were a shield between her and the world.”

Ningning, a 13-year-old girl, had been suffering from severe depression. She had been admitted to our ward eight times in one year. I met her during her eighth hospital stay while I was volunteering. When I first walked into her room, I was surprised by the number of books she had, especially since her doctor told me that she had dropped out of school a long time ago.

Life in the psychiatric ward was structured and routine. Ningning followed the same routine as everyone else. However, during free time, while other teenagers gathered to chat or play games, Ningning always stayed alone. Previous treatments hadn’t been successful, and she seemed to shut everyone out, making it difficult for therapy to help her. Her mother once told me that Ningning used to be very close to her sister, but one year ago, her sister died in an accident, and since then Ningning has closed herself off from the world.

One afternoon, I tried to start a conversation with her while she was reading. “I love Haruki Murakami’s books,” I said. I noticed that she had a few novels next to her bed, including one by Murakami. “Especially when I’m frustrated, reading something written by others feels like having a conversation across time and space.” When I said this, I noticed a small spark in Ningning’s eyes. I asked if she had ever thought about writing—not as a professional, but just to put down her thoughts.

Ningning was silent for a moment, and I worried that I had pushed too far. But after a long pause, she finally whispered, “I feel like I can’t do anything well.” I paused, swallowing hard. I took a deep breath and said softly, “That’s okay. Writing isn’t for others; it’s for yourself.”

That was our first conversation.

The next day, I saw Ningning standing outside the doctor’s office, holding something in her hand. I approached her and asked, “How are you today? Do you have something interesting to share with me?”

“I wrote something about life in the ward,” she replied quietly.

“Can I read it?” I asked.

She hesitated for a second, then handed me the paper. “Okay, but it’s not very good.” Her fingers trembled slightly as she handed me the paper, as if each word on the page weighed heavily on her.

I smiled. “That’s fine. Thank you for sharing it with me.” Ningning smiled slightly at this.

As I read her writing, I realized that her words were detailed and sensitive. Her emotions were clear, and I could tell she had poured a part of herself into it. At first, I thought she was indifferent to the people around her, but through her writing I saw how deeply she observed others.

In her story, she wrote about a young girl named Chuyan who had also been living in the ward because of a mood disorder. She wrote, “Chuyan and her parents argue about everything—from lunch to future plans. It seems like every little thing becomes a reason to fight, which makes Chuyan very upset.” Ningning described how Chuyan’s struggles were visible, not just in her frustration but also in the scars on her arms. “Chuyan carries the weight of arguments not only in her mind but also carved into her skin, like silent cries for understanding. Each scar tells a story that words could not express. They are reminders that love, even at its most painful, is still love.”

It was clear that Ningning felt sympathy for Chuyan’s pain. Ningning also wrote, “Home is truly strange; love is mixed with a dull ache, just enough to cause you lifelong pain. Maybe that’s why people keep going back, seeking comfort in a place that has hurt them. For Chuyan, home meant endless arguments, but deep down it was still where she wanted to belong. I guess we all carry this contradiction—a home need, even though it’s often the source of our deepest pain.”

After finishing her writing, I told Ningning, “This is wonderful. But have you thought about how maybe Chuyan’s overprotective parents argue with her because she struggles with independence, and they are trying to help? Maybe they just don’t know how to help her correctly.”

Ningning paused for a moment. “I never thought about it like that,” she admitted. “I only saw her depression, not things behind it.”

At this point, I introduced her to the concept of peer review. “When we share our writing with others, we invite feedback. It’s not about judgment or grades. It’s about seeing things from different perspectives and using that feedback to improve. Peer review can help with writing, but it also helps us grow personally by opening our minds to other points of view.”

Ningning seemed curious. She had always kept her thoughts to herself, so I thought that peer review could be a way for her to connect—not just through writing, but emotionally, too.

“When you share your writing,” I told her, “you’re inviting someone into your world. And when they give feedback, they’re sharing their world with you. It’s not just words—it’s an exchange of thoughts and feelings.”

Her eyes lit up. “Yes,” she said softly. “When I write, I feel like I can express myself better. I like that.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Peer review gives you a safe space to express yourself without fear. It’s not a competition. It’s about sharing and helping each other grow. When we write, we only see things from our own angle. Others can show us things we might not have noticed.”

Ningning thought for a while, and then asked, “But what if people don’t like my writing?” I understood her concern, especially given her fragile emotional state.

“That’s a good question,” I said. “But peer review includes helpful feedback and hurtful comments. Over time, I help you learn to focus on the comments that help and ignore the ones that harm.”

Ningning nodded. “It sounds like it could help. It’s hard to share my thoughts, but maybe I can try.”

Over time, I saw Ningning become more confident. Peer review became not only just a way for her to improve her writing, but also it became a way for her to reconnect with the world around her.

After a few months, her condition improved, and she was discharged. On the day she left, she gave me a small bottle filled with tiny slips of paper. “These are all the things I wanted to say to you,” she told me. “And all the memories I’ve made here in the hospital.”

I smiled and told her, “I’ll cherish this.” Then, half-jokingly, I added, “I wish I could keep the sick Ningning here in the hospital, with me, forever.”

But a few months later, I received devastating news: Ningning had jumped off a building.

Her classmates had mocked her as a “nerd” and cruelly humiliated her writing. Their harsh words shattered her. I believed that writing and peer review would help her find her voice and connect with others. I thought it would not only be an opportunity for her to share her work but also a platform for sharing ideas, supporting one another, and growing together. But reality proved me wrong.

One evening, when the loneliness became too heavy, I opened the bottle she gave me. Inside, on tiny slips of paper, were fragments of a world she could no longer share. ‘Thank you for listening.’ ‘I want to be brave.’ ‘Do you think people can change?’ I read them all, over and over. But no matter how many times I rearranged them, they could never form the story I wished I could have given her—a story where she stayed.