

DON'T STOP 'TIL YOU GET ENOUGH SWAG: SPRING BREAK 2018 AT THE AWP

**This piece was originally published in Fiction Southeast, which closed in 2023.*

The Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) annual conference is the largest writers conference in North America, attended by thousands of teachers, students and editors interested in networking, attending lectures, and wandering the floors of the massive book fair. A former academic historian recently turned novelist, I approached this year's conference—my first—with trepidation, wondering if I would feel like an outsider, a fragile wallflower pressed between the thousands of MFAs descending on Tampa, in most cases, to mingle with familiar colleagues and former grad school friends. Much to my surprise, I had a good time, maybe too good a time. I even found myself at the official AWP dance.

Here, I can't help but note my use of a rhetorical distancing technique, as if I, a sane (if not entirely sober) adult, simply stumbled upon (“found”) a stranger who happens to share my name acting like an ass in public. Acting entirely on my own initiative, I walked up a winding staircase to the second floor of the Marriott. I slipped into the dance hall and indulged in far too many free drinks available to name-tagged conference attendees. I acted as if I were still a Ph.D. student, when penury had engendered a grasping nature and heightened my awareness of the word “free.” In grad school, if a bow-tied caterer had offered me a free turd on a plate at a distinguished scholar's talk, I would have gladly accepted it. In fact, I would have swiped a second turd from the buffet to wrap in a napkin and take home in my frayed backpack. At the AWP dance, bow-tied caterers were offering glasses of wine.

I rationalized my unseemly behavior by telling myself that, in the semi-scholastic environment of AWP, countless other degree-bearing adults had similarly lapsed into grad-school hoarding patterns. What publishing professional didn't ogle the promotional chocolate

bars on Red Hen Press's table? (A graphic designer friend of mine took four, defending her gluttonous behavior with reference to the chocolate bars' adorable wrappers, each bearing the image of a different Red Hen Press cover.) How many Press 53 pens did that Ivy League professor really need? Was the journal editor who snagged eleven *Hayden's Ferry Review* bookmarks really reading eleven novels at once? Even non-smokers in the crowd were hoarding *Fairy Tale Review* matchbooks as if they were original Jackie Robinson baseball cards. I was just siphoning liquid swag from wine bottles, I told myself.

I wasn't siphoning alone. I arrived at the dance with two brand-new friends, a recent divorcee and a woman who had drifted into the Marriott's jam-packed lobby in search of a clean bathroom—an alternative to the suffocating Port-a-lets available at the waterside tiki-style bar behind the hotel. We'd been drinking for two hours when we decided to go upstairs. It was, for all of us, our first AWP rodeo, and we wanted to confirm scarcely believable rumors of free drinks at the dance. After waiting in a sizable line at the bar, we planted ourselves at one of twenty skirted tables to survey the scene.

As small groups of grad students and editors wandered into the dance hall, my friends and I compared notes on panels, talked about our writing, scanned the sparsely populated dance floor and gulped wine. I felt somewhat uncomfortable standing at our table, not because of my insensible shoes (tread-bare and badly stretched Croc sandals). I worried I was dipping too deeply into the proverbial trough just because I could, acting like a compulsive grad student driven to excess by haunting fears of scarcity. Grasping and guilt aside, I started to feel exposed, as though I didn't belong. I felt ungainly and out of shape, and even considered running (flip-flopping) from the room to escape the imagined stares of strangers. I was standing stiffly, I realized, gripping the edge of the table and staring out at the dance floor with that blend of

awkwardness and forced bravado that characterizes the attitudes of most overweight kids at Homecoming events. Simply, I was suffering the social anxiety natural to many nerds and drinking to allay my dread that someone might say “let’s dance.”

This shouldn’t have been surprising. I hadn’t been to a dance since a humiliating appearance at a junior high sock hop, where I spilled Hi-C on my acne-ridden crush. Attending a conservative Catholic high school filled with cocaine-addled, gay-bashing jocks and their anorexic cheerleading girlfriends, I had an excellent excuse for being socially maladjusted, I mean, anti-social. I wasn’t a geek. I was a rebel, an anti-authoritarian who refused to have my moves dictated by some dipshit DJ playing Whitesnake to preps reeking of Polo. On prom night, I hung out with my friends outside the local Qwik Mark, smoked Winston Lights and talked about the Sex Pistols and “getting the hell out.” In college, my social proclivities remained largely unchanged but assumed a different outward guise. Clubbing wasn’t exactly a thing in Madison, Wisconsin, the ice cream and kegger capital of the Midwest, and I didn’t make a point of spring breaking out of the Dairy State. Desperate to escape my provincial Chicagoland past, I was studious to a fault. I spent spring breaks fretting over Philosophy exams and Comp Lit papers while college students from all over the country crowded discos and befouled sidewalks in Ft. Lauderdale. Simply, I never learned how to dance.

As quickly as I considered leaving the dance, my sweat-inducing flashbacks gave me a legitimate, even lofty, reason for drinking. I wasn’t just guzzling swag. I was doing what writers are supposed to do; I was preparing to side-step out of my comfort zone and embrace aspects of humanity (the humanities?) hitherto alien to my experience. The well of experiential knowledge from which every author draws had suffered a drought in my misspent youth, but by god, *I was finally going to have my Spring Break.*

As this thought crossed my mind, the DJ put on Michael Jackson's, "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough." It was a sign from the speakers above. Everyone lurking at the edge of the dance floor spilled toward the center of the room. For the next hour, my two friends and I danced to Bruno Mars, Rihanna and Prince. We were drunk enough not to care what we looked like...until the DJ played Beyoncé's Partition. Prince is a patron saint of the freaky and weird. Beyoncé is something else. Wondering if we had the groove and "cake by the pound" to pull off Partition, we paused to check in with one other and scratched our chins, mired in indecision and pondering our next move like the hair-splitting, self-doubting academic types we were.

Then we saw her—the woman wearing heavy clogs, holding a glass of red wine, and grinding away on an imaginary partner, presumably someone with an unbridled book fetish, for she was dancing with her complimentary canvas AWP bag slung over her right shoulder. The bag must have weighed forty pounds, and going by its boxy shape, it contained nothing but books and journals. Bent at a forty-five-degree angle at her hips, the woman turned in circles and awkwardly dipped, carried by the force of gravity and the *Gettysburg Review*. She seemed completely indifferent to her surroundings. She was wearing a sleeveless dress without pockets, and we wondered if she'd left her wallet on some table, chock full of credit cards and cash, while she "sneezed on the beat and the beat got sicker." She seemed transcendent, or at least seemed to have transcended the trauma weighing upon us all. If she had once sat alone on the edges of a darkened gym at her high-school prom, she was out on the AWP dance floor, equally attuned to Beyoncé and her copy of the *Beloit Fiction Journal*. She was our heroine, the platonic writing geek gone wild. We instantly loved her.

In awe, we sidled up to her, following her movements in the same way that high-school girls often imitate celebrities' fashions. We lifted our left shoulders, bent to the right, and mimed

sliding one book after another into imaginary AWP bags at our hips. As Beyoncé sang about footprints on limousine windows, we shifted to the left. At that point, the woman's five friends noticed us. It felt like we had encountered a rival girl gang ready to throw down in a high school cafeteria. They glared. They shook their heads. They sneered at my Crocs. They introduced sexually suggestive moves to their mix, adding impossibly complicated flourishes with the tips of their hipster cowgirl boots. Nearly outdone, we played to our only strengths. We mimed turning pages and typing, while crouched as low as possible to the floor in an admittedly weird sexual-intellectual display. Only then did the members of the rival gang realize we were paying homage rather than taking the piss. Our heroine lifted her glass and threw her AWP bag on the floor, and for the next few minutes, we danced around it in a circle, genuflecting to journals and signed novels. We were all in the same groove. We were cool. We were on Spring Break.