THE GREATEST WRITER ALIVE

DALLAS CLAYTON
FOREWORD

I started writing as a teenager. Handmade zines with lots of energy and not much worthwhile to say. They were pretty terrible. When I first moved to Los Angeles I would sell them to strangers on the street. This kept me from having a job and allowed me to meet all sorts of people and find all sorts of adventures.

As the writing I did evolved and times changed I started putting things online, which eventually spawned my life as a children's book author. To say that this career path was unforeseen is a vast understatement.

Writing for kids is a magical gift and I wouldn't trade it for the world but as the child-friendly portion of what I do has grown I've simultaneously tried to keep producing work that isn't totally kid-centric - poems, short stories, outpourings of ideas, attempts at understanding how it's all supposed to be. The pieces in this book represent a small sampling of just that: the past few years worth of collected whatnot. A continuation of the spirit of approaching strangers on the street and trying to share a thought or two.

I hope that you enjoy these pieces and that they might make you laugh, or cry, or think, or inspire you in some small way to go out and make foolish decisions of your own that will someday lead you down unforeseen paths toward new friendships and amazing sights.

That would make me truly happy.

Thanks for everything!
A SMALL MOMENT IN MY DAY

At the counter
inside the gas station
sits a bowl of apples
with a hand-written sign
which reads:
APPLES.

Beside the apples:
a bunch of bananas.

They have no sign.

“Did people have trouble
identifying the apples by sight?”
I ask as the woman counts my change.

She stops
then looks over the fruit
perplexed
as if I have just asked the most important
question she has heard in
six months time.

She stares blankly for a long moment
then says,

“I don’t know.

I usually work on the weekends.”
COLLEGE

If the days have come and gone
when your mattress was on the floor
and no frame
(it was hung over the window)

and you’ve moved beyond a place
where people draw
on the microwave with markers

good luck on your journey
toward purchasing a horse
and riding it across the island
of your choosing.

If those days have not yet arrived,
take caution.
They move quickly
more so than you can predict
and should be savored while at hand

for soon you will be
pursuing said horse
and charting a map for said island
and those items cost.

Cost big.
TORRENT

I'm sorry that I stole your album.
It was raining.
And I was tired.

I don't know if you care.
You've been dead for so long now
and those songs were written
far before computers even worked this way.

I'm not sure where the money goes
now that you're not here to collect it.
To your children?
Or your family?
Or a record label, mid-dash for the lifeboats?
Or maybe to someone you never even met.

Whoever it is
I decided
I'd rather not give it to them.
For they didn't pen the words
that drove me to this crime
all alone
tucked into bed
bleary-eyed
unable to sleep.

And I am sure
they all have more than they need
of what you left behind.

Not that this makes it okay
to take what I did
when no one was looking.

It doesn't.
It is still stealing
out and out.
Which we all know is a sin.

But you never struck me as the type
who cared much about sinning.

Not the way you sang,
not the way you carried on
up there in front of everyone
letting them all know what really mattered
even down to your ending.
SIMPLE

When talking to a young child about death take comfort in the fact that to him much of what it means to die involves laying down with your eyes closed and waiting for someone magical to come along and kiss you.
DON’T WORRY

We can plant food
in the earth
and it will grow.

It is not a secret.
It is easier to make
than clothes or movies.

We don’t even need to yell at it.
You don’t even need to freak out
or stress,
or whatever you call it
when your jaw gets all tight
like I saw it get that one time
you were mad about your coworker
who cheated you out of that sales commission.

Yeah, you were so mad then.
Couldn’t stop talking about it.
Coming up with weird revenge plans
like a TV caper crook.

Can’t even remember that job now.
Can’t even remember what it felt like
to call someone a coworker.
But you remember the food we ate.

Juicy watermelons.
Came up out of the ground
took no effort at all
just time,
like a baby
or anything else that is truly important.
EPIC BALLAD

A powerful song
is one
that makes me remember
something
that never actually happened to me.
MAKING IT

In Hollywood
there is a zoo
that only celebrities get to go to
and take their children to
with magic animals
you can't find anywhere else.
The children can ride the animals there.
And all the animals can talk.
One of the talking animals is a friendly griffin.
It is named Dulcimer.
It can juggle.
Sometimes it juggles knives.

Once Michael Jordan came
to the celebrity zoo
and he played Dulcimer the Griffin
in a game of one-on-one.

Dulcimer won of course.
Because he can fly.
And Michael Jordan is 45 years old.
But it was a real close game.

If you move away from your loving family
and come to Hollywood
and get a job playing a
popular dead outlaw
who killed innocent people
in the old west
the Chamber of Commerce
might just tell you where this zoo is.
And you can meet a
real-life werewolf.
And take a picture with it.
And send that picture
to all the people
in your life
who ever called you fat.
THORNs

At the freeway off-ramp
a man offers me roses for five dollars.
Clipped to his collar
he has a chili pepper pin
which lights up and plays music.
It is three dollars.

It seems we’ve invented
a better, cheaper rose.
TECHNIQUE

A friend told me
that a powerful exercise
is counting the steps as you walk
(on a long journey)
and inhaling every twelve steps
then exhaling every twelve steps.

You are supposed to repeat this
cycle twenty-four times
and then (he says)
things will become very clear.

I have tried this two days in a row
but have lost count each time
and started thinking about things like
"where can I get a good sandwich"
and "how come that guy is pounding
on the side of that bus."
LATELY

More important
than breakfast
is waking up next to someone
and having them gently touch your face
without you even asking.
POINTS

Did you win the Superbowl yesterday?
If so
congratulations!
If not
let’s work on that.
You’ve got an entire year.
Unless of course
you are not eligible
because of your age,
size,
determination,
or the fact that you don’t play or like football.
If that’s the case,
let’s find you something else to win.
There are plenty of things:
Games
Awards
Lotteries
Hearts
Life

Just pick something,
whatever it is,
and hurry up and give it a go.

So this time next year
the rest of us can cheer you on
and possibly dump beverages on you
because we are so happy
that we can’t control ourselves
and this is the only thing that makes sense to do
to celebrate.
ARCHITECT

Unfortunately
for most
who don't regularly practice religion
the feeling of visiting a church
is closely related
to seeing friends marry
and seeing friends dead.

Thus, to the spectator,
the place becomes
a selective devourer
teetering back and forth
from innocuous
cobblestone building
to gobbling wonderhouse.

A corner shop
whose insides forever change you
from what you were when you entered
to something completely different when you left.

Like going to the mall
in the middle of winter
to watch a baby delivered in the coin fountain
then five years later
back to the mall
to see it drowned.
EXPLORATIONS

There's a girl in the woods
(she lives there).
She plays banjo.
She learned it from her dad.
He was in the army, and has a criminal past.
He tells stories about killing people because he had to.
You'll never get to meet him but she has pictures.
You don't even have to ask. She'll just show you.
She'll offer you a seat and make you a glass of tea
in flavors you never knew about with twigs and clovers
mixed up in the kettle.
You'll think about how comfortable her sofa is
(moss cushions and the grass stuffing).
You'll watch her face
to see if there's anything wrong with it
and you'll find there isn't
and that will make you wonder if you can trust her.
You'll start to ask,
but she'll keep talking
like you aren't even there.
She talks like she's putting on a show
for the animals and the trees.
This makes you happy.
Because she truly believes they are
more important than you
(and they probably are).
Yes, you could watch
that girl go on all night
and you'd still be happy.
You'd do it if
you could only find her
so far out in the woods.
AIM HIGHER

Isn't it odd
how many times
you have thought
“I should go to Paris”
and how few times you have thought
“I should go to the moon.”
ENDLESS

You should learn to skateboard.
It is cheap and fun.
It is something you can do when you are alone
or with friends.
Once you learn, you can hang out late
at night in parking lots
for hours and hours
(and you don't even have to be high).
Also you can talk to others about skateboarding
and it will make them think you are cool
and they will give you things
like free stickers, or invitations to parties
with lots of guys at them.

If you get good
you can jump over all sorts of things
like cars, and European streets, and statues,
and off small buildings.
And people will take pictures of you
which is nice (for later, to show your kids).

If you get really good,
maybe someone will pay you
to take pictures, and make videos of you
jumping off all sorts of crap
and they will put you on billboards
and benches where homeless people sleep
and your name will be on thousands of pairs of shoes.
Maybe you will have a video game with you in it
or a TV show where you shoot your friends with weapons.

Or maybe not.

Maybe you will just keep doing it
and no one will really care how good you are
and you will just use your skateboard to ride
down the street to buy some beer
when your "old lady" takes off with the car.

It's up to you I guess.
Like anything else.

But you should definitely learn.
It will be worth it
in the long run.

I promise.
PATERNAL

Did you know
that sometimes
late at night
your father lays on the floor
in the kitchen
in his robe
and tries to remember
which corner of the house
has held the greatest number of happy memories?

Once he has figured it out,
he goes to the other corners
one at a time
stands there
and thinks of you.
SERVICE

You should leave your house today
with an empty garbage bag
and some walking shoes
and start off toward nowhere at all.

On the way you should pick up
every piece of trash you find
that hasn’t already been claimed
by a smaller animal
and stuff it into your bag.

You should see how far you make it
before your bag is full,
and once it is
you should turn around and walk back.

On the way back
you should think about your neighbors
and how they aren’t bad people
and don’t consider themselves filthy,
but how they managed to waste so much
and leave it all out here
for you to carry home.

When you get home
you should put the bag on your kitchen counter
and draw a face on it with a magic marker
and give it a name
and take a picture of it
and make it some tea.

While you drink the tea
you should talk to it,
and tell it a secret that you’ve never told anyone before.
After you’re done you should stuff it into a trash can
and gently close the lid
and put it out on the curb for collection.

After that, you should go lay down
and close your eyes
and think about yourself
and how you aren’t a bad person
and don’t consider yourself filthy
and how nice it is to go for a walk
and clear your head
on a beautiful day like today.
ADDITION/SUBTRACTION

There are some emotions
that don't have words.
And others that don't even have sounds.

Like when the mother of a murderer
and the mother of the person murdered
sit across from each other
in a crowded courtroom
and wonder how.
AN AUDIENCE

There was a tiny guitar
hung in the storefront window
of an equally tiny pawn shop.
It wrote so many songs
without help from you
or your dexterous fingers.

It sang the songs
in warbling belts
to all the chotchkies
and sun-crisped copies of Life Magazine.

It was once a gift
from someone who loved
to someone who needed not.

But that was long ago.

It had come here by way of pick-up truck.
And had been set on display
by a clumsy man
who undervalued its worth.

As the months passed
into years
the guitar grew certain
not wholly, but as close as one might come
that it would be here forever.

And so it wrote.
And so it sang.

Alone.
JOY

Do you ever think
of how few people there are
in your life
that excite you enough
to want to erect a giant cross
in honor of them
on the side of a strange hilltop
for long distance truck drivers to look at
as they travel along the freeway?
THE GREATEST WRITER ALIVE

Enough with this “greatest.”
Enough with this “best.”
Enough with this “ranked number one” in an event that is not a competition.

Enough with making everyone feel like they should be trying to defeat all comers, piling up the bodies of poets and thinkers, beating the hell out of beauty, trouncing new and inspiring ideas, setting them all up and knocking them all down at a game with no goal that we are not even actually playing.
BUNNY

If you ever get to visit the Playboy mansion
for a private party with high expectations
and you throw your lucky gold dollar
in the wishing well
on the sunken lawn
you might watch it drop to the bottom
and mingle
with the rest of the change
and debate
for just a second
in your head
about whether or not
to wish for the health and happiness of all your friends
and family
or for a wild orgy
in the grotto
after hours
with six or seven girls you don’t know.

Later that night
as you leave the mansion
wet from swimming in the grotto by yourself
and alone from the orgy that never happened
you will be happy (in spirit at least)
that you chose the wishing high road
and you will sleep better knowing
that your friends and family owe you one.
GROWN

It's a dismal day
that day
when your parents decide
because of books they've read
and teacher's they've talked to
that you are too old
to keep taking baths with your friends.

No more bubbles
splashing
playing pretend submarines.
Only washing yourself clean.

It's a hopeful day
the day that follows
as you set out looking
to make new friends
the kind who will not care
what their parents think
and many years later
will wander with you
arm in arm
in search of larger bathtubs
and neverending bubbles.
REVISED YOUR “TO DO” LIST

Be a famous musician.
Be a famous actor.
Be a famous writer.
Be a famous basketball player.
Be famous.
ON LIVING IN LOS ANGELES

To spend your days well
choose your city
based on its industry
- Steel
- Coal
- Tobacco
- Oil
- Make Believe
GOOD / BAD

How a bad idea starts:
“That looks easy...I could do that.”

How a good idea starts:
“That looks fun...I should do that.”
FOOTSTEPS

Though you don’t want to believe it
your father probably has pictures of himself
having sex with your mother
when they were your age.

And even though he is grown
and no one has come snooping
in many years
he still keeps them hidden
on a shelf
in a box
that no one would ever think to look inside.
PUBLIC

The most attractive girl
on the city bus
is special
because she gives hope
to all the others
packed tightly in the back
whose lives have gone south
while gripping the leather hand-straeps.

They stare at her
like an exhibit,
like some beauty queen
from a small town
where the roads have not yet been paved.
“Well, you’ve gone and done it, bought up the last of the oceans. How does it feel?”

“Not as good as I thought. I really enjoyed the part leading up to it.”

“The chase?”

“Yes, that part was nice, but now that I have them all... ehh... A man can only sail so many boats.”

“Surely. So, what are you going to name it?”

“Megadynamics Industries Ocean West.”

“Not bad.”
SPACES

If your house
got into a fight
with all the other houses on the block
would it win?

Does it have the character?
Does it have the heart?

When we are all asleep
and the buildings get together
and share stories
about us living inside them,
does your house use a funny voice
to mimic the way you talk to your dog?

Does your house ever worry
that you are going to leave it
for some bigger better place
closer to the ocean
with a kitchen you can eat in
and floors that look old but aren't?
Would you tell it you were going
or just up and disappear one day?

Pay some men
to gut it
and stuff its innards in a truck
leave its closets full of dry cleaning hangers
and pennies you couldn't vacuum out of the
carpet corners.
SPIRIT ANIMALS

There's a very unique feeling that happens in your stomach when you clean out your car and decide to throw away a dreamcatcher.
**IMPACT**

Sometimes people love music so much they burn churches buy guns and shoot down strangers.

Other times people love music so much they sing.
OWNER'S MANUAL

At the bottom of the pile, buried, and missing a cover there is a book. It isn't a popular book and the author's name you'd never know. But it is truly a work of art written just for you.

Inside, somewhere near the middle pages, there is a sentence that best describes your life and answers all the questions you've ever had.

Pure poetry.

It's remarkable.

You'd agree.

Sadly, you'll never read it because it is getting late and you have work in the morning and you are already thinking about how to beat traffic.
BEST

Just before bed
I kiss my son
and ask him what he thinks he will dream about.
He responds:
“About a forest, with a big pond, and rainbow,
and there are unicorns there under the rainbow
and they are playing tag with me,
and my dad is there too.”

I consider this a victory for the forces of good.
**HOW TO MEET THE GIRL OF YOUR DREAMS (FOOLPROOF)**

Buy a falconer's glove.
Approach the girl you like wearing the falconer's glove.
Ask her, "Excuse me, have you seen a falcon fly by here?"
Look up to the sky, hopeful/sad.
If she says, "No," look distraught and ask her
if she wouldn't mind helping you look for your falcon.

No human being would ever turn down an opportunity like this.

Use the time you spend together searching for the falcon to get to know her.
At the end of your search (10 minutes)
you will probably need consoling re: the loss of your one true friend.
By this point her interest in you based on the fact
that you were able to put so much love
and time into the raising of a falcon
will more than ensure a second date,
and from there it's just a hop, skip, and a jump to marriage.

Good luck!

*NOTE:* If by chance a falcon does appear out of nowhere,
simply say,
"(falcon's name) I've missed you so much!
Don't ever scare me like that again!"
Then offer to take the girl to dinner
for helping you find your lost falcon.

Bonus: You just got a free falcon!
HEADSHOT

Every evening
he buys his smokes
and looks up at the wall
behind the counter
hoping it’s gone.

Every evening
it stares back at him,
the ghost of his faded attempt
8 x 10
black and white
bleached and curled by time
dead center
bookended by a sad comedian with a pony tail
and a professional weight lifter
who signs his autograph with a smiley face.
BIGGER

The next time you get to standing on your chair
at the head of the room
face changing shades
voice giving out
all ready to punch
and be punched

think about all the rotten hairstyles you've had
all the favorite shirts you've kept in rotation
well past their prime
all the relationships you wish you'd never
even attempted
and try to remind yourself
how nice it feels
to have your mind changed
from time to time.

It's a real first-class luxury
being human
making mistakes
realizing it isn't always about you
and your convictions.

What a perk
to be able to admit you were wrong
when you really were
to have someone say,
"That's okay, we're all wrong sometimes,"
and to climb down from your chair
gather yourself
and keep on dancing.
CHANCE

Two people
man and woman
walking down the street
looking like birds in the face
crazy birds, beak noses
and pointed triangle heads,
loud colored kinks of wire bird hair
with long skinny arms
that hang almost to the knees.
They hold hands
and talk low, sharing a secret
that makes the woman smile, little peg teeth.
And so the man smiles too, little peg teeth.
Both bright red cheeks.

And like that, I am happy
these or any two
can ever find each other
in this titanic haystack.
ADVICE

To those involved in the music industry:

No matter how perfect or popular your song is, more people will still prefer drinking beer to listening to your band.

So if it is your goal to sell something to all the people in the entire world to make them happy and make your parents love you, it might be wise to start a company that makes beer.

Then you can just “jam” on the weekends.
THE VISION

At one time
before the both of us arrived
and started thinking we knew so much about
where we would end up
and how we would manage to get there
two men stood next to each other
both tall and strong
at the edge of a mountain
and one pointed out over it all
deciding where the roads
would go
and how long they would be.

The other nodded
and quietly drew the plans
to give to the men
who came in teams
to carve the routes
on which people such as ourselves
would travel away from each other
for years and years to come.
THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

I think it used to mean making enough every day to provide for the people you love, and loving enough so that those people would also provide for you.

It seems like now it means making more than you could ever need or use and keeping as much of it as possible because you don’t have time every day to love anyone enough for them to want to share.
NOTES

The next time someone
parks their car
in a way
that annoys you so much
that you feel the need to leave them a note
telling them about it,
you should instead
just write them a note that says:
"Dear Jeff, now I know where to find you.
Don't think I forgot about
what you did to my little girl.
I'll be watching you..."
Then draw a picture of a knife at the bottom.

This way, if they are not named Jeff
they will certainly reconsider parking
in or around this area
so as not to be mistaken for Jeff.
And if they are named Jeff... well,
victory is yours.
Clearly

They give the wrong baby
to the wrong parents sometimes
just like they give the wrong diagnosis.
And the doctor doesn't know
and the nurses don't know
and the baby doesn't even know
and maybe lives his whole life
thinking he's a Smith
when really he's a Jones.
If something so precious and easily contained
as a newborn baby
can get handed off and fed down the wrong path
unraveling an entire life
and the lives of all of those involved
how can you expect
to not misstep
from time to time
on your way to achieving something so grand
and so hard to identify
as "success."
A PATH

A.
If you do not accomplish the goals
you had when you were sixteen
you will be troubled the rest of your life
and will inevitably replace them with new goals
that are less fun and involve
a fear of failure.

B.
The best conversations
you will ever have
will happen
on a front porch
just before dawn.

You will be wearing your socks
cut off shorts
and wondering if you should
hold out for breakfast.

C.
The two best ways to die
are laughing
and in battle.
WHAT’S WRONG

Stuck in traffic
the radio is on
the newscaster
in a helicopter high above
reports of a mattress
blocking two lanes of the highway.

Cars and trucks for a quarter mile.
So many people
honking
listening to the broadcast
complaining to friends
blaming the fool who caused this
damning him
waiting for a solution.

So few people
stopping to move the mattress.
REPEAT

Some kid lessons
are the same as adult lessons
and hard as ever to learn
like "Don't try to hurt someone on purpose
just because they hurt you on accident."
I hope all my stolen bicycles
got ridden fast
and passed around often
had their best parts swapped out
and traded for drugs
that were used to write good songs
and have good young fun
like stealing bigger things
and crashing them into walls
and getting arrested on accident
and getting ratted out by a guy
who only days earlier
let you burn him with a cigarette lighter
because he said you were brothers for life.

I hope they found new homes
in abandoned warehouses
and darkened alleys
and were taken in by older men
who could no longer hold a license
were running from something
weren’t supposed to be here at all.

I hope those men took off on them
as far as they could get
before their old knees and old hearts gave in
and stranded them
some place they’d never been
and never thought they’d be
and they met someone there
at a store
on a dark road
who reminded them of a daughter
they hadn’t spoken to in some time
and they tried to call her
but the line was dead.

I hope the remains
were salvaged for scrap
by industrious someones
good with their hands
who saw promise in those old beasts
and roped them to a roof
and drove them through the rain
and into a converted garage
where they were stripped with gasoline
and fit with different pieces
from orphaned others
and made strangely better
spray painted a young child’s favorite color
and given as a gifts
from one person to another
the first gift they would ever get
that would teach them the value
of falling down
and getting back up again.
YOUNG TROUBLE

We don’t pay much attention to the elderly. Even though they probably know more than us about what it all truly means.

Even when they’ve done something stellar like helped win a war fifteen presidents ago or built the first car or outlived their entire families with no special diet or exercise routine to speak of.

Even then we don’t give them much of our time or try keep them around close enough so we can listen.

Maybe it’s because they talk so slow and move so slow and we’re busy living so fast scrambling about and trying to fit it all in burning our youth at both ends so by the time we get to their age we’ll have all kinds of fantastic answers to all kinds of amazing questions. Fantastic answers to amazing questions… that no one will pay much attention to at all.
A MISSION

I wrapped a long red string
around a pole
in your front yard.
It's the pole for your cable television
I think. Or maybe your phone.
The one on the left
when you first walk out the door.

The string is a reminder
that something important must be done.
What that something is, I cannot tell you.
Nor can I say how.
All I know for sure is that it must happen,
which is why I put the string there last night
so you won't forget.

Consider the string
each morning when you leave
and evening when you return.

You will soon know what to do.

Once you have done it
you can take the string down
with scissors
or a knife
then tie it back up
around a new pole
in a new yard
in the middle of the night.

With it
you can leave this note
just as it was left for me.

After that
things should begin to sort themselves
at a nice steady clip
from here
straight on till the end.
Dallas Clayton is the author and illustrator of the "Awesome Book" series. He spends his time traveling the world and reading to kids. He currently lives in Los Angeles and is by no means the greatest writer alive.