

The Ache in your Heart

By Austen Tucker · 2026

My mentor taught me to write in theme first. "Theme is the engine," he said in his gravelly accent, the sound harmonizing with the hum of his MG on a country Tennessee highway. Around us was nothing but open road, classic rock, and screeching cicadas in every direction.

I drove seven hours to meet a fellow writer. To talk about writing. To be a better writer.

"Everything has to hum along. Every conflict rhyming with the next. All the conflicts point to one thing; one wound; one ache. One burning human truth.

"You have to have that ache, Austen. One singular, gaping ache explained in too many words. Otherwise, the gears catch and the spell breaks."

Sometimes, it's good to throw something away.

Not because it was bad. Not because it failed. But because the cost of trying again is falling so fast that clinging to the first version has become its own kind of trap.

What used to take hours now takes seconds. A terminal theme in a language you don't write. A task management system shaped to the weird geometry of my brain. The interface itself has become disposable. Just another layer I can reshape, discard, and rebuild until it fits.

Given the option, I'm beginning to throw away a lot of things I thought were sacred.

AI slop convinced me that no one gets out of this transformation. Not because it's replacing anything human. The opposite — it lowered the friction between what I wanted and what I could make real. It gave me a way to stop accepting default interfaces and start asking what actually fits.

The question isn't whether this changes your work. It's when you decide to stop waiting and see how far the new tools will take you.

I spend a lot of time at a Kawai NS-15 piano. It's a gorgeous thing, refurbished with love by the folks at Pianoforte Chicago. It has a bright, almost soulful sound that plays just as well in pop rock as it does the cryin' blues.

My wife's playing Persona right now. I used to play a lot of video games, but, well. Losing my vision made that too hard. Now, I make a game of learning all the songs from their sessions by ear.

I know I'm getting better. The notes come easier. The tune flows smoother.

I like staying in the moment. There's something about the present that feels permanent, untouchable. That if I have food in my belly and music in my life, I can be happy.

Even if AI changes everything, I still can find myself here, always here, forever frozen in the present.

We are still carrying a world-model built for expensive attempts. In that world, every draft mattered because every draft cost something: time, money, expertise, access, energy. You accepted the shape things came in because changing them meant friction. You learned to live with software that almost fit. You tolerated systems that made you smaller because rebuilding them felt impossible.

That assumption is breaking.

The realm of the possible is expanding faster than our brains can comfortably comprehend. Not in some abstract sci-fi sense, but because in the deeply human rhythm of everyday life the tiny points of resistance that used to define the edges of what you could do alone are falling away, and for those that take the plunge, they realize their capabilities know far fewer bounds than they did a few years ago.

Thinking is no longer a person problem: it's a compute problem. It's patterns of patterns of thinking, stacked atop of each other like subroutines, meta-problems to be solved.

The future isn't soon. The future already happened. The world shifted. Feel the quickening pace of the dance floor? The mania that hides deep in your bones? The feeling that things are burning up, hotter, faster, stronger, the belly of the best baying for blood? That's the beat, baby, rushing faster, faster, ever faster, like jazz in the fog of a nuclear sunset.

This is no longer a slow, steady march of progress. This is a gold rush, and the steam engine, and twenty thousand digital revolutions all combined into one gigantic "fuck-your-feelings" hockey-stick graph that says The Cost of Idea Execution Just Hit Zero, and Nobody is Ready.

How could I possibly feel joy without the work trophy? Or the next big unlock for your skills? "If I don't have to struggle to do something, what's the point?" The point is abundance, y'all, endless abundance of shitty ideas for as far as the eye can see

When you're disabled, you learn to say yes a lot.

See, I grew up in the bitumen of the social internet: the IRC days of roleplay mucks and writing collectives that fed the early fandom community. I know some fuckin' nuts.

It's 2012 and I'm a young, confident trans girl in my twenties. I'm in the best shape of my life, walking around a hotel full of mascot costumes in Philadelphia. I'm meeting an old friend I wrote with for many years.

I get to the room. "The Cubhouse." I think there must be some mistake. There are baby animal avatars of the guests taped to the door, and sure enough, there's Kit.

Kit's a babyfur. The hotel room had been converted into an adult nursery. Grown men in onesies and animal ears, all watching Care Bears. In the background, a comically large crib had been constructed for intricate scenes.

So I put my bullshit aside, said "yes," and watched Care Bears with a bunch of dudes in onesies. It was awesome. They had a warm, childlike energy. Safe. Kind, in a way that told the tale of the scars on their own backs.

I still think about it a lot. That in that moment, far from my one-stoplight hicktown upbringing, I felt safe and seen for the first time in a long time.

Consider the social internet: Discord chats, Telegram channels, the "group spaces" of the modern internet. I used to spend a lot of time in these, looking for something. Belonging, maybe. Out of a fear that I would belong nowhere else.

I got better, though.

It didn't occur to me until I wasn't in them anymore, but the internet expanded the boundaries of my house in ways that didn't always feel right. I had invited roommates into my space 24/7. They were guests at my dining room table, the first thing I said hello to when I woke up. I went to bed dreaming of Instagram dachshunds splaying out on linoleum floors, baying for my attention one last time before nodding off to dreamland.

Humans weren't meant to be stretched this widely.

We were meant to be smaller than this.

We were meant to be imperfect, wild, careening storytellers making shadows on the cave walls with our campfires — not because it drives engagement, or will help you "make it big." We were meant to stretch each other. To make things because they entertain our neighbors, or because they feed our friends and family.

Because being a human is fun, guys. How the fuck did we forget that?

I'm in a band now.

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We play covers, sure, and it's a learning band. But it's a band. I play music for other human beings now.

I feel like I've walked in Carole's shoes. I've had one too many with Ben and banged on the keys far too late in the evening. And now (just a bit!) I can feel my own voice forming. Something resembling arrangement on the fly.

I'm learning to love the instrument I've put all this work into. It's not an easy instrument to love (she's quite demanding, actually!), but after a lifetime of strife we're finally getting along.

Maybe I'll start writing songs, dog help us all.

Even the way I write changed.

I learned in a very particular style; that of the email listserv message. I remember calculating out how many words I could fit into a single segment before my email got rejected as spam. (4000 words, for the curious.) I learned to start from "Once upon a time" and finish with "the end," and between those two points I grabbed the bull by the horns and held on for dear life. It's part of why my work is so cinematic; I had to grab readers anew every 3000–5000 words.

I worry less about perfection now. Perfection is easy when you have a second brain. Raw is in.

And maybe I'll collect these logs, eventually, into something that means something. A book. A memoir. Something to say "This is what living through this was actually like."

Someday.

But I keep coming back to something simpler than that. Something embarrassingly personal.

Phil's lessons weren't really about the theme. They were about the human part of writing.

When I write, the actual words use rarely matter. It's their rhythm. Their feel. I imagine them like notes that I play in rhythm, building a scene like a sax player sets a mood. If they're AI, or if they're human, they can still sing in tune.

The thing that makes a writer a writer is something more sinister: it's that the best writing involves placing your own beating heart onto the page, pain and all, and describe just how much your soul aches for it. How watching yourself bleeding out reminds you of a funny joke you heard one time.

There's a condemned man whose noose is too tight. As the Judge reads his sentence, he nudges the hangman.

"Can you loosen this?" he asks.

The hangman laughs. "Why?"

"I don't want to choke and distract the man," he says, nodding to the Judge.

My brain is still adjusting to a world where failure is this easy to overcome. Where the cost of trying again has fallen so far that clinging to the first version (of anything) has become its own kind of trap. I spent a long time learning to live carefully inside constraints. Calculating drafts. Saying yes to cribs and Care Bears because the alternative was nothing.

The alternative isn't nothing anymore. It's detonating the space between idea and execution and trying things. Not because they're necessary. Not because they make sense. But because they're fun.

Because we're humans, and we make stuff. It can be as simple as that.

I lied. I wrote the joke myself.

The theme is that ache.

Otherwise, the spell breaks.