

SKETCHBOOK ADVENTURES

Prompt 6: Creative heroes – Expressing awe for extraordinary makers

When my hamsters or goldfish died, my mother and I would put on boots, walk to the edge of the grassy area in the center of all the condos where we lived and side step down a dirt hill to a patch of a still untouched land. We'd dig a grave with big metal spoons and I'd read an elaborate eulogy that I'd spent the morning tearily composing. These tiny pets, despite my best efforts to integrate them into our family, never fully assimilated. They were relegated (under the control of my mom's germ phobia) to their cages and bowls in my closet, which made it impossible for them to be a real part of our family. Real pets that I could interact with, beyond sprinkling food flakes in a bowl or sticking my hand in a cage for a gentle two-fingered hamster petting session, were out of the question. Pets that you could cuddle with were pets that shed and would likely give you a disease or worse, kill you in a fit of rage, according to my mother's OCD-driven pet rules.

"They're animals! They're full of bacteria. One of those 'dogs' attacked a toddler a few streets over last week!" she said. The dog she was referring to was actually a coyote and the attack was actually just a sighting by a man, not a toddler.

I named my fish and hamsters after songwriters or characters in films, television shows and books I loved. When I first found artists (whether they were singing a song that made me cry or acting in a movie that made me weep or writing a novel that made me feel less alone in the world) that elicited a deep emotional feeling in me, I couldn't help but want to immortalize them somehow. Being a child with very little control over her life, I opted for the one thing I could do and named my pets after these creative heroes.

My first pets were fish named Antoninus (after a character in Stanley Kubrick's film "Spartacus," which I was obsessed with), Henry (after author Henry Miller, whose books I couldn't put down, didn't fully understand, and probably shouldn't have been reading when I was in junior high) and Nina (after my favorite jazz singer Nina Simone). Sadly, none of these fish lived for more than a few months before they went to their final resting place in that patch of dirt.

Years later, as an adult (and finally was able to get a "real" pet that I could actually pet), I got a dog and I named her Nina (since my first Nina died so quickly I felt okay about carrying on the name to another pet the way a father passes his name down to his sons). Nina II is my dog's name and she is awesome.

Nina II has way outlived Nina I and is strikingly more similar to the singer she's named after than my fish. Nina II has all the passion of Nina Simone. She barks incessantly, protecting her family the way Nina the singer belted out ballads, and when Nina II is happy, you know it. She cozies up to you and pulls you into her world with her glance, much like Nina Simone did when she sweetly sang love tunes that seemed like they were written just for you.

Since I first fell in love with Nina Simone's artistry, I've been enthralled by other mind-blowing singers, makers and artists of all kinds, but I have a house rule of one pet per person so I needed to find an alternative way to pay homage to these inspiring human beings. I began dedicating pages in my sketchbook to these inspiring creators.

For this prompt you don't have to go out and get a new pet to express your appreciation for the creatives that inspire you. Make a list of the heroes who inspire awe in you and then begin dedicating pages in your sketchbook to them. Maybe it's a musician (like David Bowie in my first example or Nina Simone in my second) or maybe it's an artist or a writer (like Raymond Carver in my third example). No matter who you choose, it's a chance to revisit the creative heroes and their impact on your life.

