



Write a Place for the Pain

Writing on Writing for Writers

Content note: This little collection touches on many topics which may be upsetting, triggering, or painful. Some of these include: trauma, rape, childhood sexual abuse, suicide, self injury, drinking, alcoholism/addiction, miscarriage, police, and court. I trust in your capacity to know what you need, to choose to read or not read in a way and at a time that makes sense for you.

Introduction

This is a tiny collection of writing about writing. It is an invitation to write. It's a place of worship, a space of reverence for the call to the page. It's a love note to the biggest part of who I am, something I was so afraid to choose, and maybe you are afraid to choose it too.

This is a tiny collection of writing about writing and it is an invitation to write. It's an affirmation that your desire to write is real and powerful and that you are worthy of it. In the middle there are some writing prompts, some questions to stir you up and get you writing.

Most importantly, this is a collection of writing that connects writing to our bodies, to our experiences of pain and trauma, and to our desire to live and heal and create a more liveable world. Like all writing it is a magic spell. I am writing a place for the pain, and I am inviting you to do the same.

May we be transformed by the work. May we be humbled by it. May we fall madly in love with writing. May we be brave enough to choose it.

Write a Place for the Pain

This piece is an excerpt from my book The Size of a Bird.

Write. Find the words in your spine. Find the words in your fingers. Find the words which are not words which are sounds. Find the bathtub words, the swing set words, the words for grassy lawn laying. Find the words for break ups, broken hearts, getting on your knees and praying. Find the words for hope, laughter, running down sidewalks. Find the words that are choked up in the back of your throat, breathless. Find the words that ache in your gut. Find the words scrawled on the back of your hand so you won't forget.

Write. Find the words you wrote in a letter to your first girlfriend after she broke your heart, the words for the way you went back to your math class and lay your head flat on the desk, crying. Find the words for no, for not now, for not ever. Find the words for get off me, for I'll fucking kill you, find the words for never fucking touch me like that again. Find the words for I'm sorry, I miss you so much, I did the best I could. Find the words for long lost fantasies, what you thought would be, what never was.

Write. Write till your hands hurt, till your mouth is dry. Write past the running out of words. Write past the pointlessness and

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the not knowing what to say. Write until you remember. Write until it makes sense. Write until it doesn't make sense anymore. Write until you forget.

Write about being nineteen and getting drunk on martinis and pretending to be grown up. Write about the words your ex best friend said to you. How she said you were a writer and you told her no. You haven't been writing much anymore.

You haven't been writing because there is nothing to say. Ever since he stripped you naked and shoved dry fingers inside you. There are no words for it. You couldn't write about the pain or the shock or the way you laughed and danced around his room naked. The way you let him become your boyfriend. The way you decided that you must have liked it. You were fifteen. He was eighteen. He was your friend and he was supposed to be a good one. Write about how you never called it rape. You couldn't find the words for it.

Write about the things you would write in the margins of your diary. 'Back thoughts' you called them. The things that didn't fit into the narrative, that didn't quite make sense. Write about the fear you know deep down. The terror there isn't words for.

Write like razor blades and beer bottles and smashed glass and blood. Write like one night stands and lost condoms and puke.

Write like weed smoke and black eyes and I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. Write like you're so fucked up when you drink no one wants to be around you. Write like suicide attempts and liquid charcoal and getting formed. Write like I want to live I just don't know how.

Write to know how. Write a love letter to the future. Write away the impossible pain. Write the hope which blisters and burns. Write tomorrow. Write today.

Write the letter that you wanted to receive, the words you needed to hear. Write that love unconditional. Write that witnessing. Write that it wasn't your fault and it never should have happened. Write that it's okay, you fucked up, you can try again.

Write the honest truth, the messy overflow, the silence. Write what wasn't said. Write what you remember. Write the gaping holes where memory should be. Write I'm sorry. Write I'm not sorry. Write I did the best I could with what I had and now I'm trying to do better.

Write it out. Write it down. Write a new world into being. Write a place for the pain. Write a second chance. Write possibility into action. Write the night skies reflecting starlight on black water.

Conclusion

I have a secret to tell you. You are a writer. You, yes you. You wouldn't be reading this if you weren't. You wouldn't feel that pull, that draw, that desire, that need. I know it's a terrifying thing to choose. Maybe a writer is a small part of who you are or maybe it is everything. But either way, I have to tell you that writing has already chosen you. So be brave. Answer the call. We are waiting for your words.

Yuknavitch, L. (2010). *The Chronology of Water*. Hawthorne Books.

Write the words: I'm still alive.

On Writing and Why It Fucking Hurts So Much

Sometimes I want to write but it's too painful. It's not that I don't know what to say, I know the words will come once I let them. It's just that I'm afraid. I know that writing is painful. I know that to write is to crack myself open. I know that to put words to my feelings is to see them, to feel them.

I am a writer. A person who writes. Even, somehow, a person who lives off of her writing. When my second book came out my childhood best friend messaged me and said "You did it. You always said you'd be a writer." I feel like an impostor, a fraud, as all writers do, but underneath that I know the truth. I know that I'm a writer.

To be a writer is to feel the feeling I don't want to feel, to say the things I don't want to say, the impossible things. There is nothing easy about living and loving and staying alive and learning how to live and love this life. There is nothing easy, even, about ease itself because there is so much work that has to be done to get there.

So, I procrastinate on my writing. Not just my writing. I procrastinate on cleaning the kitchen and washing my dishes. I keep saying I should visit the traintracks. I'm in the neighborhood again, I should go. What does this have to do with

like the touch of dreams in your fingertips / She is coming with a vengeance." (2010).

Standing in front of the bus surrounded by bags and weary travelers, somehow, suddenly in Toronto, I felt a fire in my skin, a certainty in my heart. Writing. Yes, writing. The decision was made. I will be a writer. I will choose what my heart had already chosen. I will refuse to talk myself out of it with a million excuses. I will say yes. I will write. Write.

Thank you Lidia Yuknavitch.

References

Morrigan, C. (2017). Trauma Time: The Queer Temporalities of the Traumatized Mind. *Somatechnics*, 7(1), 50-58.

Reviews of *The Chronology of Water* on Goodreads. Retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/9214995-the-chronology-of-water>

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My creativity is stunted and stifled by the shame which Yuknavitch describes. I am unsure if I am ‘any good’ as a writer, no matter how many times people write to me to express the impact my writing has had on their lives. Making matters worse, I am afraid to speak of this doubt, fear and shame, let alone write about it. So, I keep it my secret and my secret eats away at me. My writing suffers. My creative impulses stay locked up tight. I don’t dare to dream. I don’t dare commit to my craft. I start everything with an explanation, downplaying my abilities before I have even begun.

Yuknavitch’s honesty about her own struggles with these demons helped me put my own into perspective. Yuknavitch’s love for writing burns off the pages. Her drive, her love, her desire, her commitment lights a fire in my heart. I remember my own love of writing, my own drive toward the page, my own fire onto which I so often heap fear, doubt, shame. Yuknavitch finishes her interview, and thus, the book with these words

“I believe in art the way other people believe in god. I say this because books and paintings and music and photography gave me an alternate world to inhabit when the one I was born into was a dead zone. I say it because if you, inside whatever terror itches your skin, pick up a pen or a paintbrush, a camera or clay or a guitar, you already have what you are afraid to choose. Volition. It was already in you. Just be that – what moves inside you. It’s already there, waiting: / Hush for the line / Crouched

being a writer? Everything. To be a writer is to be a channel, a passageway through which unspeakable things are spoken. To be a writer is to be alive.

I can't just scroll on my phone for hours and hours, this new high tech form of dissociation. I mean, I can. I can do exactly that, but that's not what I'm here to do, and what I'm here to do is so fucking painful. Growing is so fucking painful. Transformation is so fucking painful. The work, this work, is so fucking painful. But it breaks me open, it changes me, it makes me free, when I show up to it, when I give myself to it.

I feel like it's frowned upon to be too sure of your work, to believe you have a purpose, a calling. Capitalism is fucking us all up, we're all trying so hard to survive. Who the fuck am I to be a writer? But the thing is that a writer is what I am, I can't be anything else. No matter what, no matter my circumstances, no matter how fucked up and broke and dysfunctional, I was always writing. And I am still afraid to write.

I notice this in other people too. We are so afraid to do what we are here to do. For many reasons. Of course there is the crushing doubt and impostor syndrome, the resignation from such heartfelt desires, but underneath that I think there is something else, something deeper, more profound. I am afraid to write because I am afraid to do something true, something real. I am

afraid of being here with myself. I am afraid of what I might say.

This is why I must write. This is why I must go to the traintracks. This is why scrolling on my phone and slipping into the void of oblivion feels so good, because it feels like nothing. And everything, everything, this whole huge beautiful world, this life and its wonders and terrors and everything we have lost. All of that hurts so much. To wake up, to want, to give a fuck, to remember, to transform, to change, to open, to become invested, to become willing, to surrender, to decide. To write.

Write.

“[I]t is important to understand how damaged people don’t always know how to say yes, or to choose the big thing, even when it’s right in front of them. It’s the shame we carry. The shame of wanting something good... The shame of not believing we deserve to stand in the same room in the same way as all those we admire... Aspiration gets stuck in some people. It’s difficult to think yes. Or up. When all you feel is fight or run” (2010).

These words gut me. They ring in my ears. They sting with recognition. Four years sober, healthier than I have ever been, and I am still unable to think yes. I am still unable to choose the big thing, to believe I deserve it. I still think fight, run, freeze.

Sobriety and recovery have created so many opportunities for healing in my life, part of that is finding my way back to my writing. Despite my continuing self-doubt and insecurity, the shame which Yuknavitch so accurately describes, I published my first book in sobriety, *Rupture* (2012), and wrote another book which has been accepted for publication in 2017. Despite these accomplishments, I remain mired in doubt and I struggle to write. My inability to write as much as I would like is rooted in the shame the Yuknavitch describes, the trauma of child abuse and other violences, the legacy of pain and shame they have created in my life.

oblivion, while important to give voice to, are for me, unremarkable.

It is Yuknavitch's drive toward writing, which she is dissuaded from, and returns to, which she fights for and believes in, which she comes to claim, that struck, and utterly changed me. I was at a poetry reading last night and the host asked us to say nice things to the people who got up on stage, joking that being a writer is thankless and lonely. A room full of writers laughed at this because in many ways it is true. To write is to pour yourself into your craft, to make vulnerable your deepest self, to dare to take risks and leaps of faith, all in a glaring uncertainty of how it will be received.

Maybe all writers feel this way to some degree. Maybe my immobilizing doubt, the doubt which far too often prevents me from writing, is larger and more consuming than the doubt of most writers, most people. Maybe the inability to say 'yes' to writing stems from my own history of child abuse, trauma, and addiction. Yuknavitch writes candidly about her lack of faith in herself as a writer earlier in her life. She writes about her "inability to say yes" (2010). When confronted with the possibility of a book deal, with the offer of an agent, with people who saw her talent and the worth of her work, she was unable to leap at the opportunities. She writes

The Questions

Pick a question at random. Go through them each one by one. Start each day with a question for one week, or answer your question right before bed. Write in a coffee shop or keep a notebook in your bag and do it in the park. Create a ritual. Light a candle. Procrastinate on these questions for months. Decide you have to do them perfectly, correctly, every day, and then don't do them at all. Be a perfectionist, be a failure, be a writer because that is what you are.

Set a timer. Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes. Don't let your fingers off the keys or your pen off the page. Let it be bad. Let it be the worst thing you've ever written. I promise there's a freedom to that. I promise that means you are doing it right. Don't think so much about it. Don't worry if you're not really answering the question. Don't answer the question at all. Write the question over and over like an incantation until something comes. Let it come.

If you need something to ground you, to make you feel safer, to comfort you, you can have that. Maybe you need holy basil tea. Maybe you need a drop of lavender oil on the tip of your nose. Maybe you need to go for a long walk. Maybe you need to let yourself cry curled up in your bed. Maybe you need a friend to

read your writing to or maybe you put it away and don't look at it. Start with that. Start with this question:

What do you need?

What do you remember?

Where were you when you first knew?

What is the way forward? What is the way back?

Do you have any secrets?

What makes you brave?

What are you willing to fight for?

What is your body trying to tell you?

Do you have any stories about bathtubs?

my body, face down, into the floor. This would not have been acceptable.

Ultimately, what Yuknavitch's book did for me is bring me back to writing. *The Chronology of Water* is a book about trauma, addiction, sexuality, relationships, pain, but perhaps more than anything, it is a book about writing. By writing about writing Yuknavitch allows writing to be a part of the story, a part of her life. More than one of the critiques I came across was critical of her for doing this. It breaks some fundamental rule of writing. I have come across this rule when I was informed by an anonymous reviewer of the manuscript of my second book that I should never write about writing or being a writer. As an emerging writer who has not yet gained confidence in my craft, I obeyed and took out the offending pieces.

Yet to write about my life without writing about writing is to remove an incredibly important aspect of my life. When I saw Yuknavitch doing this, right from the beginning writing about the book she was writing, I was surprised. By the end of the book I was grateful. If Yuknavitch had played it safe and not written about writing she would have removed the heart and soul of *The Chronology of Water*. Writing, in this book, is more potent, more driving, more explosive than even the most graphic sex scenes or descriptions of drug use. While other readers may have been shocked or titillated by these aspects of the book, for me, as an addict, they are familiar. Chasing pleasure, chasing

metaphor of collecting rocks. Shortly after the telling of her miscarriage she offers the reader some advice. Collecting rocks, she informs us, helps. She goes into a long description of collecting rocks, inviting the reader to engage with rocks: name them, feel them, listen to them, taste them. She writes “[r]ecognize when there are no words for the pain, when there are no words for the joy, there are rocks” (2010). Later, in the interview which follows the memoir, Yuknavitch explains

“I am not sure it is possible to articulate grief through language...The best we can do is bring language in relationship to corporeal experience – bring words close to the body – as close as possible...Poetic language ... is probably the closest we can bring language to experience... So after I name my primal grief, the death of my daughter the day she was born, it felt precise to move directly to poetic language. The metaphor of collecting rocks is more “true” ... to the experience than to say, I was intolerably sad” (2010).

This use of metaphor to “bring words close to the body” (2010) offers a way to express experiences which cannot otherwise be expressed. The telling of my rapes in the little room in the police station or on the stand in the courtroom were not tellings which could get anywhere near the truth of my rapes. Yet these were the tellings which were demanded of me. It would have felt more appropriate to get on the floor of the courtroom and press

Do you have any stories about sidewalks?

Do you have any stories about green grass?

Do you have any stories about the night?

What have you lost?

Who calls to you still?

What was the turning point?

How did you learn what love is?

How did you learn how to heal?

If your future self could speak to you now, what would they say?

If your past self could speak to you now, what would they say?

What is a place you pass by regularly but never notice? What's it like there?

What is your favourite thing to touch?

What makes you feel safe?

What makes you feel seen?

Who are you now?

Who have you been?

Yuknavitch's website *Corporeal Writing* declares that the "things that happen to us are true. Writing is a whole other body" (nd). Like her concept of the chronology of water, this assertion about the relationship between truth and writing, even within nonfiction writing, shapes her memoir. In the interview which follows her memoir Yuknavitch explains that

"every narrative and linguistic choice you make forecloses others, directs a story a certain way, focuses on a particular image... what is "true" in non-fiction writing is also always "crafted" – given shape and composition and emotional intensity – through our narrative choices as writer" (2010).

This distinction between writing and truth is important. Something can be true, and it can also be told in an endless number of ways, ways which may seem to contradict each other. How we choose to tell our stories, as survivors, and/or as writers and artists, offers us a space of agency in which we decide how we want to shape our stories. Rather than follow the disciplining dictates of law and psychiatry, we can tell our stories in ways which are meaningful to us. Writing and art are particularly powerful spaces for this kind of flexible, creative telling.

Yuknavitch employs metaphor in order to express aspects of her experience which cannot be expressed using straightforward telling. A particularly striking example of this is her extended

When I was a child, after being sexually assaulted by my grandfather, I carefully retold myself the story of what happened. All of it, from the sinking pedal boat that I swam home from, to the bathroom door I didn't lock, to my grandfather's exact words, before and after. I told myself the story again and again, compulsively, carefully, I don't know how many times. I had no one else to tell so I told myself. I pushed against the current of forgetting which was coming over me like a flood. I remembered. But my memory is a story. It is a story I told myself. The actual memory of the assault, like the memory of my rapes, is not a story. It is a black hole of terror. It is a nonverbal, illegible knowing in my body. It is not something that can be told, in the traditional sense of the word. And even the story, which I so carefully recorded, I accidentally displaced. The summer I was so sure it happened in, was in fact, not the summer it happened in.

Memories move through the current of my life in different directions. They are not fastened to a sturdy rope called time. Yuknavitch's concept of the chronology of water, so beautifully illustrated in the way her memoir unfolds, is incredibly validating and inspiring for me as a survivor and as a writer. It gives me permission to be honest, to write authentically, to resist the disciplining forces of law and psychiatry which attempt to shape my bodily truth into a legible, chronological telling in order to determine its reality.

Things Writers Do

We procrastinate. We are disciplined and write every day. We don't write for months, for years. We stop in the middle of the sidewalk and write poems on our phones. We are sure we aren't writers. We deny being writers. Who me? No, I'm not a writer. We write. We write in notebooks. We lose our notebooks. We burn them in dramatic rituals of surrender. We regret it. We get used to the regret. We don't write. We submit our writing. We get rejected. We get published. We never get published. We never submit our writing. We decide we can't risk rejection and besides we aren't really writers. We make self deprecating jokes. We quit our jobs and write full time. We are sure that isn't a real thing to do. We keep our day jobs. We write in the scraps of time we find. We never show anyone our writing. We go to writing groups and put our hands up first. We are proud. We hate our work. We have imposter syndrome. We decide it's just a hobby. We feel an ache in our chests. We read but not as much as we should. We try to find a better way to say it. We aren't sure what we have to say. We have writers block. We are dry rivers. We are out of ideas. We rush through the house looking for a surface to write on. We let the words flood from us and it feels incredibly right. We keep coming back to it. We keep giving up on it. We give our whole lives to it. We don't give ourselves at all. We deny we are writers. We know we are writers. We doubt we are writers. We write. We write. We write.

Volition: An Excerpt of a Reading of Lidia Yuknavitch's The Chronology of Water

This is an excerpt from a paper which will appear in my upcoming book, Trauma Magic.

The Chronology of Water opens with Yuknavitch's miscarriage. The reader is immediately brought into a scene of incredible pain. After revealing this scene and its aftermath, Yuknavitch writes

"I thought about starting this book with my childhood, the beginning of my life. But that's not how I remember it. I remember things in retinal flashes. Without order.... All the events of my life swim in and out between each other. Without chronology. Like in dreams" (2010).

This recasting of time from a unidirectional flow of events, to a space in which things flow in different directions and rise to the surface without apparent order, is a more accurate representation of time for most people, and is especially useful for survivors of violence. Elsewhere I have argued that trauma can queer time (Morrigan, 2016). Yuknavitch's concept of the chronology of water is a beautiful method for allowing and encouraging the queer temporalities of trauma, rather than suppressing or

avoiding them, or forcing them into a chronological telling, a violence in itself.

In the courtroom, during my rape trial, I was asked very specific questions about the order of events. I was asked in detail about the chronology of my rape, and how that chronology fit into the larger chronology of my relationship with my rapist. The reality of my experience, which I could not tell in the courtroom, is that I don't remember my rapes exactly. My body does. There is a black hole of seething terror when my mind tries to get close to them. But the experience itself isn't exactly 'there'. I remember the context, the surrounding violence. I remember writing a note in the corner of my diary, words from a Hole song, in all capital letters: YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU'LL FORGET.

These words were a secret message to myself, a cue, a trigger. The words allowed me to remember my rapes even as I forgot them. I certainly could not say on the stand that I know I was raped because I wrote myself an obscure note in my diary. And yet, that is true. The blank space of my memory, accompanied by the illegible terror in my body, are made comprehensible by what I know that note to mean. There is no chronology to my rapes, or if there is, it is the chronology of water. The water follows a current, gets sucked into a whirlpool, spins around dizzily.