

awakening

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For:

New York

Margaret

Sergio

&

those seen and unseen

who came before me

hold me up

and guide me to

complete the circle



Preface

This book is 38 years in the making. At 17, I remember Mr. Tom Williams, high school Humanities English teacher, who made us look at the quote above the door of his classroom over and over again Junior year: *The journey is more important than the destination*. I guess that was the lesson he was trying to teach me when I turned in my first protest poem, a page-turning epic masterpiece. All I remember is the line “See the people marching in the streets.” I was proud of it. I didn’t know anything about editing. At that point in my writing career, editing meant that you couldn’t get it out right the first time. He returned my poem covered in red ink. I shuddered at the thought of revising it but I did – smugly. Once again, it came back covered in red ink. I went through half a dozen revisions until, exasperated, I asked him what exactly he wanted.

To tell you the truth, if I told you how he replied I would be lying. I can’t remember what he said. I imagine it was something like, “More! More! More!” or “Meeee? What I wanted...?!” or “I want you to tell me it’s done” or some other sage, Miyagi-esque, gigantic writing-slash-life lesson that I took with me through the rest of my days, culminating in the here and now. No matter the words, the sentiment got under my skin. I carry it with me now and remember that revision is a necessary and frequently traumatic exercise.

Although Mr. Williams turned me against revisions for a very long time. I still wrote poetry. That ended when I discovered theater – and the rest is off-off-waaaaay-off Broadway history.

I started with poetry in kindergarten (see Afterword) and after high school I gradually put it down. My twenties felt the absence of it. My thirties are almost over and finally, *finally*, I am taking poetry by the hand once more and asking for a dance. I'm getting reacquainted. I'm learning things I didn't know because of the naiveté of youth, lack of experience, timing, ego.

I've learned that I love poetry now for the same reasons I loved it then: because it helps me express my deepest self without the need to hide behind plot or character. Poetry lays you bare, strips you down to just a voice, and never apologizes. It can be uncomfortable, emotional, hilarious – but it's always the truth.

I'm learning to love revision. And workshops. (And I'm learning to reduce my use of “and.”)

I'm learning to love poetry again. As a result, I'm learning to love life, creativity, myself.

losing

you are winning
they say
if you have a 9 to 5
way more square footage than you need
a patch of lawn to mow
a v8-anything with rims and a/c
and payments on
everything

winning

but when the day ends
there is an idea left in your head
as you lay down at night
exhausted
thinking of the work that needs to be done tomorrow
the people that annoyed you today
this idea - a story, a poem - pleads with you to let it out
It fights for air
your creative spark flashes, sputters
you think about reaching for a pen
but you have no paper

besides
it's late

And you'll remember tomorrow

descent

we come off the mountain quietly
our night spent alone giving way
to a meandering morning
sunlight on moss covered stones
conifers curtain our secrets
woods whoosh by
every curve of our descent
a twisting thought unfurling
a question left unspoken

there are memories in these mountains
at every turn i am your tourist
you tell me of family vacations
time spent at a cabin at this turn off
you brought your own bedding
here a hot springs
fun with your brother
his family and
you and yours

the sun spins the storm from last night
into a gauzy mist covering the valley
your ghosts gather to me
as we get into the grey
i try to push out thoughts of your past
who drove this road?
who laid down the bedding?

who fed the baby a bottle at midnight?
did you love each other then
or were you going through the motions?
and why does it matter now?
each moment with you
is a mix of selfish pleasure
the joy of us together
the jealousy of a past spent without you

i look up at the wall of sad silent stones
the clouds like batting above the pines
the river white-capped and agitated
rushing away
you talk
but i'm far
down the mountain
ahead of you
waiting

hearsay/heresy

he never comes around,
my mother complains
to those with ears
a circle of women playing
cards on a Sunday afternoon

he's a cock
strutting one minute
then the next he's
a sad sap
inebriated on the porch at 6am
begging to come home
"he never pays child support"
a distant cousin says
"he doesn't take them on the weekends"
an aunt adds
"he's less than human"
the rest ruminate,
"an animal without feeling"

He's still my dad,
I want to say
from behind my mother's chair

but i am only 7.
still.

growing up

will your children suck you dry till there's nothing left for me?

i had rules.

no divorcees, no kids

then i met you

i've shared my ugly with you

and you didn't flinch

i've tried to tell you it won't work

but you haven't run away

we've shared recipes

tears over loved ones lost

laughter in seattle

buffets in vegas

now we share the same heart but

still

still

i am selfish

i need attention

someone to care for me

feed me

listen to me

reassure me

i am a child in need of a parent myself

how can this child find a way

to share you with your own?

no divorcees, no kids

still

still
even if i am the broken one
afraid of the future, your ex
afraid of being the babysitter, the enemy,
the second thought
i try
until one day
opening the front door to
dinner at your place
i hear my name, just once
a welcome, high pitched song of
happiness that's makes me feel all grown up

daughters of the american revolution

i hope you never understand
how hard it is to leave your home
your native country
your parents your siblings
your son
because you fell in love
there was opportunity yes
but i moved to america for love

your father though
he loved rainer beer and funny cigarillos
he forgot about me, you, us
the country we had just come from
remembered instead his high school sweethearts,
hendrix house parties and summers at the lake
the way life was before war
then i found my blouse
in the corner of our room,
my lipstick wiped off
on the sleeve

i hope you never understand
the pain of pushing out the man you loved
because he was high
and the children were scared and crying
even though you hardly knew the language
even though you had two baby girls

even though he was the love of your life.

i hope you never know the panic
of being a single parent
alone in a climate opposite the one you grew up in
pine needles instead of pineapples
people who eat meat with no rice
children who talk back to their mothers
take their free education for granted
have no chores or worries

i hope you understand
that everything i've ever done
has been for you
even though you made fun of my accent
resisted learning my language
and always came to me wanting
i never understood why
you needed new shoes every season
when i walked barefoot through the jungle
to fetch well water when i was four

our lives so different:
you wanted slumber parties
new clothes, art classes,
freedom to ride the bus alone
i wanted you safe at home

away from a world i didn't know,
company to cure my loneliness

you think i'm all stone and fire
but you don't realize
i've shed all the tears i have in this life
on goodbyes and heartbreak and you
all that's left is anger bile melancholy
and gratitude for having a house with a garden
for food on the table,
for being able to send money home, for
having survived.

you will always be my little girl
though you've only heard i am proud of you
through others
i am sorry the understanding between us
remains as wide as the Pacific
but one day you will
comprehend me as a woman
before you appreciate me as a mother
even though you are American
and i am foreign to you.

weight/wait

“Perhaps,” my therapist said, “you should think less about the weight you’ve gained and focus on what’s weighing you down, what’s out of sync.”

What spurns the appetite of a locust?

Was it my parent’s lack of devotion?

my fading self esteem, a lack of pride,

a problem with expressing emotion?

Now age brings an ever widening divide

between broccoli and chocolate bars.

At eighteen i ate the food i wanted,

when middle age seemed distant as the stars.

Now i rebel and the scale is haunted.

My therapist says it’s never too late

But sweets sweeten strife and the diet waits.

Process of Revision

One revision I was particularly happy with was the protest poem, hearsay/heresy.

When I brought this poem to workshop, I was generally happy with it, but the group members were confused. They suggested adding quotation marks around what each person said. I decided to do this only in the second stanza, mainly because I wanted the first stanza's sentence to stand out on its own. Josh Griffin made the best suggestion of the group: to tie the idea of a circle of women complaining to the second stanza by imagining them to be a group of hens clucking. I like the idea of the double meaning behind that second stanza's first line.

Once I turned the poem in and received Bret's feedback, I revised once again. I took another one of Bret's suggestions: the single "still" at the end of the poem. What does a seven-year-old who wants to express their feelings say to an adult in that position? Certainly not a whole lot. "Still" is a good start.

One of the challenges I have in my writing is tense. Bret suggested revisiting the it. With that in mind, I kept everything present tense, which makes the poem feel more immediate. This feeling of immediacy translates nicely to the idea of the women in this poem acting rashly. How well do any of them know him? How quickly do people judge? How quickly does one hateful complaint turn into three?

The change in tense of the poem is the most significant part of the revision. Changing “but I was only 7” to “but I am only 7” extends the reader’s sympathy to the narrator and magnifies the feeling of helplessness she feels in defending her father. This is something that couldn’t have been accomplished in the past tense, as an adult looking back.

Afterword

Wherefore

The best way to answer is
not
to discuss what it is
or what it was
or what it should be
But to say plainly what it isn't

It's not the way to make money.
That's what my mother said when I told her I wanted to be a writer,
after Mrs. Vanderklomp wrote on the board in kindergarten
"Complete this sentence:
The rumple in the garden means..."
and I concluded,
"The footstep I took to smell a rose"

It's not the way to teach proper punctuation;
thanks\
mr
e.e.
cummings!

It's not the way to a human's heart
full of professing and pining,

so verdant and fervent
People don't have time for that anymore
Besides, that's what Hallmark is for

It's not the way to fit in
It will make you *one of those* people
a beatnik liberal dreamer deadbeat
democrat

There are those who pay their bills on time
and there are those who read and write that nonsense
while they smoke weed
listen to world rock and
brew their own beer

It's not the way to spend an hour or two
Who has time for watching sunsets
or feeling the fullness of their spirit
or money for the theatre
or a moment to spare
for appreciation of any kind?

It is never perfect, it is never enough.

But you have a choice.

Do you become cynical, settled, angry, bitter? Or

do you pass through the world
with a different lens, a special understanding, a thirst
for all there is to experience?

I choose verdant creativity, laughter,
the scary flutter in my stomach when I read a poem for the
first time to a group of people who are there to receive it with open
minds.

I choose “alive, with a full heart”

A late addition

Grandma

Two of us alone together.
You in a morphine slumber.
Me suspended in silence.

Through the picture window
a placid breeze flips leaves like coins.
Walls of foliage falter
Dark green side
Pale green side.

I hold your hand.
I cannot heal you.

You will leave your body
when the gale gathers your name
with the names of those who came before you.

A sparrow rides to the top of my throat,
beats its wings against my tongue,
taps its beak against my teeth.

I open my mouth to tell you my heart.

Nothing but the bird comes out.

