

reflections on
writer's block

reflections on
writer's block

reflections on
writer's block

***hi**

I want to say that it started sometime during the pandemic, but I know it might've been as early as 2018. It was kind of always there, like creeping around the windows. When it began to seep through the cracks, I tried my best to fan it away, flitted my arms periodically in delayed panics to clear the smoke. I once put up a decent fight, I kept it going until I couldn't.

I want to say that it happened one day when I woke up, but I know it was a slow progression. I sat around dumbly as it made its way into my house and I never looked at it because I was too scared to look at it directly, I kept my head down and watched, peripherally, something coalesce.

This nebulous cloud was sharpening its knives day after day after day right next to my ear, and I just let it. He has a shape now. It's pretty big and dark and brooding and everything about him paralyzes me. He's sitting across from me right now, watching every single thing I do. I've given him a lot of time and room to grow in exchange for all the time and room I ever set aside for myself to grow, so now he takes up all that space he's claimed and occupied for himself. I've fed him with silence and passivity, with fear and self-scrutiny. It'd be so easy--It'd be so easy to just say something, to break that sound barrier and--

I do want to say that I know this problem is bigger than me.

I wish I could compartmentalize all the writing I need to do and bullshit when I need to and produce whatever I want, when I want--but I just can't.

This isn't a guide as much it is a sorry attempt at putting a kind of shape to the abstract mental blocks that have been keeping me from writing the things I've been wanting to say. I wish I didn't have to be so fatalistic and wish I could guarantee that there's a happy ending to all this somewhere because I know I'm always an optimist (sometimes to a fault), but sometimes it feels so bleak.

The truth is, I sat down to finish this creative project/zine/op-ed by myself. It's finals week, and I've temporarily been crashing at my friends' apartment. I sat alone outside after begging my friends to "not talk to me" and "not engage with me" because I would give in to their endearing bullshit and get nothing done. I sat down to get it done alone, but hours passed by and I was just thinking in circles and being mean to myself. I went to go brush my teeth and asked the room what they thought about writer's block and once I opened it up it all just cracked open and *happened*.

The fact is, we don't get through hard things without other people. It takes a village, and if there's anything that these horrible few years of choking on my own words have given me, it's that I've learned how to be vulnerable, to let in kindness and support when I can't be there to provide them for myself, to divorce writing from my ego and allow myself space to speak in concert with other people and other voices when I can't get something out on my own. All we have is each other.

***a conversation with I.S.,**

whose reading habits genuinely frighten me. (a few days ago when they found out they didn't have to go in to work, they laid down and started reading Max Weber (???) so they are a bit crazy but I love them)

the **bolded** text is me - Stella
normal text - I.S.

highlighted - the highlights--because this isn't the cleanest dictation, but I also didn't want to edit the transcript too much
(parenthetical text) - my own asides

OK, So what did you say earlier about writer's block? That was really good.

All right. The writing process usually begins before you even start writing, so it's usually you have to experience things or. You have to have lived life before you can write about it. Unless you're writing about something that's like completely unrelated to experience, but I think for most writers they're going to write from experience. But if you haven't experienced anything, there's nothing to write about. Yeah, yeah. So I would recommend like I mean the steps to getting over writer's block would be to just live your life. I mean. And also it's a personal satisfaction thing, so. If you're not personally satisfied with your work, it can be hard to turn in work that you just felt like. Yeah, and this has to do with what is required of us in Academia usually where it's like. Preparation isn't as valued as participation. And to participate, so it's just simply

produce

and produce.

Yeah. Oh my God.

Yeah. When the Creative act of, like, writing is supposed to be. Somewhat truthful, like I don't think it's like capital T truth, but like it has something to do with truth, right? But if you're just producing something for somebody else. I don't see how that's as truthful as writing that's. Not necessarily. Like practical. like a piece of poetry. Right?

Yeah.

And like.

What do you think about people who just compartmentalize like, Whatever, so that they can participate or produce.

I think. To do so would be to turn yourself into a worker, and I do feel though that for me. **For me, being able to be a writer in in the way that I want to be or in the in the way that I see it and like the way I see a lot of artists is. We're not producing something that's necessarily. Practical. And then by practical, I mean in the narrow sense of like, it's not going to build farms, it's not going to build hospitals, but it can nourish the people who will do these things, and I think there's so much value to that.** Like everything we know about languages, it's out of our control. Even the

language that we use. We have control in refusing it and in changing it through the use of it but a lot of it is already, for example, racist, it's gendered. It's already sexist. There's already the misogynistic part of it simply by the fact that we live in that kind of culture. And so I think for a lot of writers to reduce yourself. And not to say that like. The writer isn't also a laborer or a worker, because so many people have the right to live like to eat, but that. To reduce yourself. To just production. I think is a disservice to writing and to oneself, so I think that in order to get over writer's block, one of the things you have to do is probably live and then. Also think about like why you're writing and what for and if you're just writing to produce something, then I mean, there's always a place for that, but. I wouldn't place that on the same level as like Baldwin or like, you know, like, yeah, you just you just can't put it on the same level.

No, I think, yeah that's. True, because I was listening to [this podcast](#) with Kiese Laymon. Who wrote? Is it heavy? Yeah, he wrote this book, but he was talking about how when he's not being good to himself or like, not really respecting what he thinks or. How he lives his life, like when he's living more shitty it reflects in his writing and vice versa. So I think that's like really true because [writing] it's just like a reflection of your thoughts or writing is. Your values and like how you see the world so.

TRESSIE MCMILLAN COTTOM: That strikes me as not just a creative practice, as you talk about, that's about what kind of human being want to be.

KIESE LAYMON: Oh, it's taught. You know, I had a coach who said, you play the game the way you live your life. And this is my college basketball coach. And I really don't believe that actually. But in writing, I find that I live my life better if I'm playing the writing game with more integrity. I live better. I treat myself better. I treat the people I love better.

I treat the world better if I'm like — you know, like have a dutiful relationship to art and trying to make it more beautiful with every time I go into it. Like when I don't read and I don't write a lot, I'm just a terror to be around, you know? And I know that now.

Yeah, I think that's very true. And I think the reason why writing is so devalued under capital society is. If you are critically thinking. And if you are there are some conclusions you have to come to and they are always at odds with capital, they're always at odds with. White supremacy. They're always going to be at odds with. Heteropatriarchy like it's always going to be. Put you on that path to be critical and a lot of like institutional writing you have to do or like

academic writing, you have to do feels like that sometimes you're exactly outside of your criticalness. Yeah.

yeah. It's like is there a space for all this? Like, sometimes the dread just kind of. Overwhelms you before you've been started. Yeah, I don't know or it's like. Or is there a point to this? Yeah.

Yeah. That can all be disheartening, but I think. To get over writer's block, you have to define for yourself, who's going to read this? But I do think that for a lot of writers, they do feel responsibility. I draw a lot from, writers like James Baldwin. And he says in that interview from when he's in Paris. And the interviewer is a Frenchman and he asks him, did you come to France to escape the racism in America? And he says as a black man, where could I go in this world to escape racism? And he says. To the effect of like.

Oh my god I? I wrote this down. I went to a panel at the [LA Times Book} fest and I literally wrote this down. It was Morgan Parker who brought this Baldwin quote up and I was wondering like 'cause, she was asking like one of the other poets, like, oh, did you have

to, leave that space to write? And she mentioned how Baldwin talked about that And I was like, oh, I have to find, like, where James Baldwin said that because I felt like. That was sooo--

(
I start rummaging through my backpack to find the notes I took at the Poetry as Historical Reckoning panel at the LA Times Festival of Books. We then start watching the Baldwin video where he's being interviewed by the Frenchman. It's [really good](#).



*otherwise of course you can despair; walk
2:57
down the street of any city
2:59
any afternoon and look around you.
3:04
you got to remember, what you're
3:04
looking at is also you
3:08
everyone you're looking at is also you
3:12
you could be that person you could be
3:15
that monster you could be that cop
3:21
and you have to decide, in yourself, not to be
3:32
the logic of despair isn't for me you know,
3:35
cut your throat right?
3:37
but there's something wrong, you know,
3:39
with someone who says he's in despair
3:41
who keeps on writing, because a despairing
3:43
man doesn't write
3:45*

(
“everyone you’re looking at is also you. you could be that person-”

I step foot on campus at the PWI and think about the weight of choosing not to become that person, and try so hard to compartmentalize-

I wrote that Baldwin quote down at the panel because Morgan Parker bringing this up made me realize how I really hadn't written much since going back to my parent's place in 2020. It was always hard to write, but being back in that particular space has made it so much harder; I go to school during the day and try not to become that person, I go home at night and again try not to

become that person, I can hardly tell what kind of person I am sometimes because I try so hard to just not think, to just not *be*. And so I just don't write

)
And in terms of like the responsibilities of a writer. Um, I remember distinctly. Like Baldwin's critique of yeah, Baldwin's critique of Camus, so, like Camus there's, I'll, I'll send you the link later. But Camus has this Nobel Prize speech, and he says that the role of the of the artist is to be responsible to the people that they write for and create artwork for and. Baldwin criticizes Camus for, you know, being an Algerian born colonizer and writing on the side of the French, writing on the side of the executioner.

Right,

like he says. Like, you can't be on the side of the executioner. But he is complicit with the executioner. So. We're also talking about, like complicity and betrayal, so I'll also send you the link for that. But I do think that when you're faced with these things, it is overwhelming and unless you can compartmentalize, which I don't think anybody who can critically think should or can. It can become so overwhelming that you just don't want to write anything. **But. There's something about silence that chokes us that we.**

Audre Lorde.

(
We'd just talked about this Audre Lorde essay the other week--

“Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences.”

“What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?”

)
Yeah, Audre Lorde. That if we. Every word that we can't say, we just have to choke on them and I and I do feel that that is so much worse and. More than that, like there, there are a lot of

silences to be broken as she says. And so for us, it's not a choice and and for Baldwin he also says that right? It's not a choice like a writer doesn't get to really choose.

For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.

to be broken.

Audre Lorde,
"The Transformation of Silence
into Language and Action"

And there are so many silences to

here are so many silences to

)

*additional resources on writer's block:

writing tools, quotes from writers/creative folk I admire, thoughts,
writings on the subject, personal advice I've gotten

here

this is a never-ending project and I hope this, in any capacity, can nourish you

:-)



tamara k. nopper
@tamaranopper



Note to self and anyone ready to
receive it:

Bitch, start writing.

8:22 AM · 2/3/22 · [Twitter Web App](#)