

Chapter forty three

An Autoethnography of What Happens

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Writerliness, for Barthes (1992), is “*ourselves writing* before the infinite play of the world . . . is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system” (p. 7). In the largest sense of writing as poesis, the writerly subject, already multiplied and amplified by its own strange and continuous efforts to emerge (Lepselter, 2016), is a reverb with the like worlding disturbances of a form realized, an attunement mis-firing, the pooling up of thought-matter-feelings in a situation. Here, writing of lives in a reverb of qualities and capacities, I explore how an “ourselves writing before” worlds can become a co-charging, generative contact. Here, an autoethnographic writerliness is not an angle of refraction between a self “in here” and a world “out there” but an activist capacity to be *with* the thresholds of expressivity conditionally accessible in what’s happening. The poetic subject is a labour of contact, elaboration, endurance, digression, and return. Like a thought realized by finishing a friend’s sentence, it senses out what could be otherwise, is already otherwise, in a bodily state, a tendency witnessed. Words, acts, wishes, and matter alike imprint with the potentia of *that* look, the texture and density of this pause, the precisions of a gesture, the surprise spread of an ordinary sensibility, a sensation slowly dilating.

As a mode of thought, poesis trains on what floats in the airs of a spoken story, what weights the atmosphere of a page, what ricochets off an accretion underway. Think of the improvisatory conceptuality of a “prism, a crystal of space-time (that) . . . acts upon (what) . . . surrounds it . . . extracting from it . . . vibrations, or decompositions or projections, or transformations” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 384). Think of Henri LeFebvre’s *Rhythmanalysis* (2013) abstracting the sheer rhythm of a day or a street or Fred Moten’s (2017, 2018a, 2018b) method of voicing a performative landscape of thought.

Experiments in poetically re-pairing composition and critique such as autoethnography, prose poetry,

fictocriticism, flash fiction, and many others matter, not as models, embodiments, or performances of thought but as the actual thought-acts of sounding out, timing, voicing, cutting, chafing, gliding over, evading, and so on. Their objects are not genre tools, concepts fixed for the sake of clarity, or the perfect description *per se* but relations of extension, condensation, pattern, intensification, or exhaustion in what presents (Gibbs, 2015). As a poesis, autoethnography reverbs with a worldly generativity through its own labours at syncing, resonating, dreaming, and mattering. Leaning in to what might show up in a cut, a stuckness, or a lyrical jump, it learns to attune to what’s familiar or flattened in an encounter, the over-doneness of a form, the frankness of a spoken word, a rhythm overtaken, the layering of what’s been lost into an ongoing practice. This is not a practice of self-expression through found or stolen objects, but the subject as a point of impact latching on, like a method actor who invents her character by sharpening herself on the pivot point of a limp or an accent (Berlant, 2011; Berlant & Stewart, 2019; Stewart, 2007).

The problem with poesis for critical thought now is not that its objects are messy, invisible, or beyond thought—just too much—but that its too-muchness aggravates modernist modelling meant to stabilize, generalize, summarize, and transcend its objects of thought. When poesis becomes audible in a formal academic situation, the room can get moody. Autonomic responses polarize into the pleasures of the prolific singularities of thought, a sense of relief and repair, and the disorienting sense of being pulled into the deep end,¹ a vertigo, a territorial melodrama. The job of the room gets pushed into questions of being in a meta-conceptual field. Sins can be declared against disciplinary right-thinking and bodily comfort. The short-handling trick of shared, pre-fixed concepts can go to ground, pushing writing itself into an imaginary epiphenomenal realm which is then accused

of irrelevance in the face of real-world problems. Glad-handing normativities conjure up the otherness, excess, abjection, or freedom of their leftovers, lending writing the supplementary corrective work of repeat-gesturing at the denaturalized state of what withdraws from phenomenological and representational efforts at reduction and paraphrase (Harman, 2012). Both sides, under pressure, load and reload in circuits of reaction and invention.

Instead, an autoethnography of what happens might hold its focus on the co-compositional generativity of subject-world relations and the sensations, oscillations, gaps, and sticking points that comprise both experience and writing in the first place. As Stephen Muecke (2009) argues, the writerly in an intimacy with the force of what can't be simply accounted for, takes place in paths of alteration, leaving its unique signature on the jump cut, the interruption, the remnants languishing in a social friction or flourishing in a sense of humour. Think of a life, then, as a density composed of fits and starts and afterlives, a habitual labour that senses things out, a set of elementary capacities to endure, extend, treat, color, share, fail. Think of an autoethnography of that.

Philip Lopate (1997) writes of the personal essay as life "exposed on the stage of the world" (p. 50). But think of the stage as a *staging* set off in elementary contact with whatever's at hand and developing forms and tempos of its own. An autoethnography of this staging poesis might suspend summary judgement to stay with the intensity of the encounter, to push the restart button on what could be happening, to complete a thought intuited in the scene. This is what Didion (2006) approaches when she remembers a self-world exposé in the precision of an invented detail.

The cracked crab that I recall having for lunch the day my father came home from Detroit in 1945 must certainly be embroidery, worked into the day's pattern to lend verisimilitude; I was ten years old and would not now remember the cracked crab. The day's events did not turn on cracked crab. And yet it is precisely that fictitious crab that makes me see the afternoon all over again.

(p. 103)

The crab is Didion's signature on the event of her father's return, marking the suspension of sheer description, a positivist real, in favour of the occurrent composition of an absence, a waiting, and the rematerialization of a relation in uncertain and unremarked elements. In the poesis of a life lived in worlds with

others, speculative elements cohere not through a synthesis or because of an objectivity or subjectivity proper to them (Hansen, 2015) but as elements intrinsic to the potentia of what happens.

A "life" generating with what happens and surrounds has an activist bent. It shifts, drops out, finds some little something to spend itself on, has its likes and dislikes, loses itself in a distraction, finds itself again in something else, feels the flare of a nostril, exhausts itself on a tendency taken to extremes, lashes out. As a compositional worlding, it's in what's been figured, an attachment or an abandonment, or what's known only in the shadow of a gesture or an inexplicable taste for anchovies.

In this register, even a definitive loss is not a dead end but a reanimating loop, a resounding that cuts, the pain of a phantom limb.² Alfonso Lingis (2015) thinks through the non-progressive time of irrevocable loss through the story of a young man whose wife is killed in a car accident. After biking to his wife's grave, the young man just keeps going, spending a year riding a bike across the country all the way back to the grave. He pedals, he journals the day's effects on a calf muscle or a day-long ride through heavy rain. Carrying the weight of his loss in his pumping body, he generates a labouring capacity that remains. His autoethnographic poesis takes place in moving in a world that becomes marked by the time

of dawn returning over the dark-forested hills, of the poised pause of deer, of the invisible rush of winds, the gyrating clouds of butterflies and gnats, the dull rumble of thunder and the frenzied rage of lightning, the drifting of seeds cast in the flowering fields, the time of nature tunneling into him.

(p. 172)

Here I follow some of the lines and stills of my family living with our mother's lead, her slow loss, and the sensibilities and capacities generated in being with what happened.

It starts with missed phone calls in the middle of the night. A brother, a sister, again, again, at 2, 2:20, 2:45, 3. In the morning there are voice messages: "Call me" and, finally, the stutter "Mom's gone."

At first the only question is "What happened?"

The last time I touched her, her fingers walked down her starving body to find my hand and then moved off again, restless and unmoored.

I kissed her forehead.

What happened?

The aides tell us she died peacefully in her sleep, smiling, her hands folded over her chest like a miraculous maybe.

This seems odd after the last three years of days and nights driven by pleas.

Aides drifted by, straightening the sheets.

What happened to her toothbrush? Where are the little pearl earrings she was wearing?

The living live in a state of dispersal.

Thoughts pass through us like bullets through flesh.

Realizations are sickening, and after the fact.

Eyes track listlessly, time is sluggish, words are a muffled wallpaper.

Edges smudge like a child's crayon experiment.

Landscapes are a drowned forensics as if the shadows on the hill could turn out to be mounds of flesh in the aftermath of a mass killing.

I make a stupid decision to cremate as if *that* was obvious and what I vaguely recall someone remembering her once saying she wanted.

Then I'm at a loss that there's no body at the wake when I finally get there.

Someone's boyfriend pulls a joint out of his coat pocket to show me in the middle of the receiving line. That's the end of him.

We're intensely alert and looking for things to do, still tracking all the years of teetering with her, relearning what to do with our bodies, scoring over the compositional capacities we thought we learned from her. But now she's gone it's on us.

We're scrambling at a tipping point already slipping away.

Fault hardens up, siblings vie for the place at the dead center of her.

There's been an unforgivable omission in the obituary.

It's on me to write the eulogy
one word or story image at a time.

At the church I have a theatre of singularities
... she loved winter squash and the smell of green onions, the blues and purples of a winter sky, her window cracked open to let in the air.

My aunts' hawk eyes train on my body for my final report card: look at Katie's arms; she's got the Stewart fatty tumours.

She'd pull her feet up on her chair, eyes trained on what came out of people's mouths. (people are nodding)

She'd doodle bombshell women while she listened on the phone.

As a child she had the Shirley Temple curls.

People would take a double take just to make sure she wasn't somebody.

By ten she drove her father's truck; by fourteen she was everyone's driver.

She had projects.

Antiques she bought for two dollars from Vermont barns when the dairy business collapsed and refinished in the driveway.

Her tin lamps and paper-cut lampshades.

Scenes she painted on boxes and stools.

Her whole paycheck deposited into a college fund for thirty years . . .

One of my brothers says there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

I sleep hard. Awakened by busy bad dreams, I drop down again as if drugged. Mouth dry, I get up to pee and fall back on the bed like an animal, snapping my neck back into alignment like a neck is nothing. I see myself as old and grotesque. I shuffle my feet, then I remember I'm paralyzed, I'm in her body, going on with what needs to be done even though I don't care.

In mourning, we figure her in us, out there, but not exactly here.

We drew as close as we dare.

Stand her up, walk around her, wish we had or hadn't.

Count out her capacities as gifts and threats.

She was the one who went first.

She could hold on,

she could size you up in a glance and cut you with a phrase.

At wakes, people gathered around her in a circle of chairs in the far corner.

When she bought a camp in the mountains, others looked for property nearby.

Her geraniums climbed their windows with southern exposure, covering the camp in a mass of red through waterless freezing winters.

Her jade plant grew so big and robust people spontaneously claimed it must be five hundred years old.

We had watched her hone herself down to the sheer labours of contact and surprise.

When she was still in her house and my sister and I walked with her to the library to find an audio book. She ran into a sister-in-law and the two sat on a bench in the park for two hours chatting while the sun went down.

After my father died suddenly one Christmas Eve, she became one of those who do what the living do.

She'd make a cup of tea for herself and her dog, Hank, an English muffin for dinner.

She wanted the spring to come; she wanted the beautiful winter light to stay with her a little longer today, she settled into the chair by the stove, catching a glimpse of the scene of your life in the window and longing for it.

Numbers got hard, then impossible. Little slips of paper and little notebooks all over the house with phone numbers written on them—kids' numbers, sisters', friends', twenty different attempts to get a doctor's number right. She was trying to find new systems that would work for her; she realized her writing was going off the page so she learned to feel for the edges, her fingers were covered with paper cuts. Frank took her checkbook away when he found checks half written all over the house so she went to the bank for cash. She'd drive to the drugstore; she'd manage to get the SUV into the garage without hitting the walls (a few broken side mirrors) but the hatch got too heavy for her to pull down; she couldn't even reach it, so she spent hours in the freezing garage trying to rig up something to stand on, finding a rope, trying to attach it to the latch and tie it around her waist, her fingers frozen, fumbling, in the dark, she had to give up, she turned off the lights in the backseat so they wouldn't run down the battery, she didn't tell anyone. She had to wait until someone came to visit.

The eye doctor takes her driver's license away. She calls her daughters with opening lines about getting it back, baiting them to come up with something, increasingly desperate at their evasions, the blank where the line of a plan once happened. She sets out every day to walk to the drugstore or the grocery store for a loaf of bread; she realizes she can't carry much.

She falls off the high stool where she eats to watch the shapes of people walking by, the neighbourhood kids playing basketball in the driveway. Her hip breaks. She tries to get by with it for a couple of weeks, taking secret falls into corners, until she's finally discovered. An operation, rehab, home in a wheelchair. I arrive, but that night, in a hurricane, a hundred-foot oak tree in the front yard falls and splits the house in half. By 5 a.m. the channel 5 weatherman is standing on the tree shouting through the wind into a microphone looking through her bedroom where she has him on TV. For two days the cameramen bang on the door trying to get a picture of the shut in. She loves the physical therapists who come right to her house—they're so nice. They move her from the wheelchair to the shower or the bed, the bathroom is made accessible, a ramp is

built, finally the house is pieced back together and she can get back to her chair by the stove.

She gives in to the pressure to put Hank down because she's taken to clinging to her ankles and we need to do *something*. But it's a mistake and wrong. Too quick, too heavy-handed. The look in Hank's eyes when they carry her out fills my mother with remorse and now, she's alone. There are dozens of other episodes, efforts to help, mistakes, bad timing, super capacities that have no traction.

She's humiliated by a bad fall onto the granite curb in front of the post office. An ambulance, the hospital, assisted living. She starts to learn the ropes there. She pushes her walker down to get your mail, feeling for her box, she eats dinner in the dining hall, tries to make friends, takes exercise classes, tries to go grocery shopping in the van, sets up a bank account in the building so she can get a little cash to keep on hand. She finds a blind woman she likes and goes to her apartment a few times to hear someone read a book. That's the high point. Then her friend is gone, she doesn't know what happened.

Things happen fast. She ends up in intensive care for weeks and then back but upstairs this time to the nursing home. Who knew all *this* was up here? All these people, its own dining room and activities room, it's amazing. She learns to hold a fork again. They've started to carry her down the hall to physical therapy. She sees small dogs in the hallway, the next day someone tells her they're real; there are red cylinders, something bluish you can sit in and move your arms around in, something like a robot that runs down the aisle. Her bed is alarmed so she can't get up and fall. She begs to be let up, just for thirty minutes so she can straighten up her dresser top. Every night when I try to leave, she springs to attention like this is her chance. "OK! Just help me get the label (l-a-b-e-l) on top of the walker. . . . Let's just do that before you go. OK. Let's just figure it out. It's gold, it fits in your pocket, it goes over the . . . like a . . . table (t-a-b-l-e). Can you see it? Why won't you help me? I just need you to do this one thing for me before you go." Then she sinks down, deflated. A few minutes later I try to leave again. She shoots up again "Ok, let's just get this one thing done." A stab in the dark to discover a labour that might include her.

Her language comes back. She loves the word-retrieval therapy. They tell her she's awesome. They give her kisses on the cheek. She eats her meals in the dining room with two women who have become her friends. Others come and sit next to her at activities. The assessment team calls her *the* social role model.

She asks me to tell her about her room. It's a cottage. There's an ash outside your window, the snow

is falling hard, there's a full moon, horses with wool blankets, we went sledding on Half Mile Hill this afternoon. She's amazed: "Oh!!!" There are two Adirondack chairs and a table at the top. You can see the whole lake and mountain range. **"Really?"**

I call every day at two and try to get someone to put the phone up to her ear. She's interested in the aides' stories, where they came from, what it was like there, who their mothers were. Haiti, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic. The aides touch her on the shoulder. She can't remember names. She wonders how she'll make doctor's appointments, where her checkbook is, whether they're bringing up her mail.

They send her back to her apartment when Medicare's thirty days is up. She misses having her meals with the women in The Meadows. She asks her blind friend Eleanor what her tricks are. Eleanor says she doesn't have any. She stops eating in the big dining room because it's just too much, people getting dressed up, she can't find her way to a table or see her plate. But there are still things she can do. She has her sister go get her a new prism for the double vision in her one eye just in case. They take the door off her bathroom and replace it with a nice gauzy curtain so she can get in there herself with her walker but she's shaky. She can't use the stove but she might have my sister get her some little chicken pot pies. My brother says she can't even stand to make herself a sandwich.

Back to the nursing home again, the weird bling thing, bright colours, "Doesn't she look pretty in her hat!" "Are you going to a party?" At first, she musters a smirk but she doesn't like the bullshit, there's no jumping off point. I roll her out in an unwieldy wheeled bed to sit with the flowers, under a fall tree; she's terrified moving over the uneven sidewalk; I throw my back out moving too fast and hard trying to get it done for her.

There are fictions, luminosities, fires in the fireplaces, alarms being pulled in the night, ambulances quietly coming and going, unremarked. Deaths are hidden. "You look beautiful! "What a hat!" "Are you taking a trip?" "Are you going to a party?"

She'd come back to herself when old friends visited, reciting the names of golf clubs and ski areas in Vermont. Small tasks completed were still a relief. Someone wiping her face with a warm cloth called up a self.

A guy named Mike came once a month, his booming voice singing and telling stories while the residents had Tuesday afternoon tea with hand-painted teapots and cups. He had a red Brazil bird which was never going to grow up. He was a devil. He would close himself in the kitchen cabinet and tear the

labels off the cans and shred them. He ate by dipping his whole body in a gooey nectar, licking it off his wings, and then shaking like a dog. His bird house had to be cleaned every day. Someone says "Imagine!" One of Mike's mice keeps escaping the ball as it rolls across the floor. Someone says "Oh! I don't like mice."

There was pain, she was burned badly by her soup, we were informed that a report had been filed with the state, there were constant UTIs and its madness. We were all hard witnesses and complicit in the incapacity to do anything. I would leave notes a dozen pages for the nurses and aides outlining better care schedules.

I tell her the story of my cat stuck on the roof—a stormy night, hard wind, hard rain, thunder and lightning, him crying up there all night but I couldn't get him to come down the tree. In the morning I got a tall ladder and went up and pulled him off. She says, as if she's been waiting for the chance, "Now you know how I feel."

Her long-dead father appeared in the corner of her room by the dark window, drunk and raging.

Her face a mask of horror at the thought she might be carrying his stain in her blood.

An apparition of some boys who needed her help.

She could get a ride, she could get the key to an apartment somewhere in town

there would be boxes of clothes and dishes in her long-gone basement.

The snow came down on the hill outside her room.

She couldn't hear Emmylou Harris playing on a loop next to her ear.

I sometimes dream of rediscovered rooms in houses cluttered with others' beds and toiletries, closets and corners crammed with cleaning supplies, dog beds, and scraps of aluminium foil.

I forgot there's a second floor, a desk piled with letters and bills, some man's pipes and playing cards.

I sat for years with those auratic, watering eyes.

The elongated fingers of an old hand wavering over a body.

The unmooring together in a sheer seriality of unimaginable things.

Practices and routines becoming hollow gestures that mattered as such.

Fierce and febrile attachments.

I had to learn to just sit and where they kept the face cloths.

I could go on and on.

NOTES

1. Thanks to Erica David, personal communication, for the thought-image of being pulled into the deep end.
2. Thanks to Lauren Berlant, personal communication for the phantom limb thought-image.

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