

ninepatch: A Creative Journal for Women and Gender Studies

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Awakening*

Article 7

7-10-2012

Starving to Write

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Recommended Citation

Clammer, Chelsey J. (2012) "Starving to Write," *ninepatch: A Creative Journal for Women and Gender Studies*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <http://encompass.eku.edu/ninepatch/vol1/iss1/7>

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Starving to Write

She says she wanted to be the starving poet. How I knew what she was talking about. The idea of a writer who starves her body in order to get to her mind. She sits in front of me, her short black hair framing a face that is finally not sickly, eyes that are no longer sunken. They smile now instead of hide. I sit across from her in a large leather chair, my legs are curled up to my chest. Her feet rest firmly on the floor as she slouches her back comfortably on the couch. I want to be like that, want to have that ease in my body. I'm trying to recover from my own eating disorder, trying to get out of the trap where I believe the starved body brings out the best words from my mind. She tried to do this herself, and failed. Or, she succeeded in finally getting past that old addiction of starvation and has finally recovered from the idea that a writer is a woman who is all mind and no body.

But how I want that. How she wanted it too. I didn't know her during her time of restriction, when she tried to starve her body in order to enhance her mind. But I know where she's coming from, have had my own life consumed with this notion.

High school. I sit in Algebra class in the early afternoon. I am tired, my eyes drifting down and blurring out the boring equations in front of me. Earlier in the morning I ran five miles with my cross country team. It is now two o'clock, and I have yet to eat. I'm preparing myself for my writing time after school, when I retreat to my room and push poetry out of me until I fall asleep. I always skip dinner in order to do this, in order to fill all of my time with writing. If I don't eat, then I think the light-headed feeling will help to push my mind directly into the space of creativity.

In this classroom with pale pink walls, the paint chipped and flaking off from the large cracks that consume each corner, my mind begins to drift away, to go into a zoned-out space. I am hungry, my stomach growling at me with all of its strength. I want to eat, am salivating over the thought of food that awaits me in my kitchen at home. But I must get through this class, must rush home and into my room to start writing before I start eating. In order to get to the end of this period, I jot down poetry in the margins of my notes. It is bad poetry, as most poems are that ride on the high emotional waves of dissatisfied teens. Through my increasing hunger haze, I drift away from my poetry and into the dream of being a starving, smoking poet. I imagine feeding myself words instead of food. And while I am a runner, I want to go into that deep, harsh feeling a cigarette creates, want to keep my metabolism spiked with nicotine.

I drift my eyes from the clock to my notebook, and continue to scrawl down words that rhyme, words that hold no solid meaning. The bell rings, buzzes that the school day is finally over. As I stand up with my bag full of textbooks, all words and feeling empty out of my head. My eyes zone out, I see red, then an almost-black. I verge on the fact of fainting. I feel my hand hit the desk as I try to stay on my feet. In a few moments, my mind clears, and I find my thighs leaning against the side of the wooden desk, steadying myself from a fall. The other students have rushed passed me as they filed out into the hectic halls. I re-gather what strength I have, and wobble to the exit behind them, keeping myself moving with the image of me as the starving poet. I'm getting there.

I go home hungry. I enter in through my garage door which leads into the kitchen. There, the white tiled floor hits my sandaled feet, and the smell of lasagna slams into

my nose. My mother has cooked me dinner, and urges me to eat some. I wonder if she's noticed that I'm starting to lose weight. Without thinking about my desire to be a starved poet, I immediately give in to the hunger that has consumed me all day. I eat. As I shovel globs of thick noodles and tomato sauce into my mouth, my body jolts awake, realizes that I am actually eating. I swore to myself I wouldn't do this. I am irate at the fact that I am sitting down at the kitchen table, wasting precious writing time on the activity of feeding myself. Infuriated that I have caved into the hunger, that I couldn't force my hazy, food-hungry mind into writing, I quickly finish up the meal so I can retreat to my room and chastise myself. I have not accomplished my dream for the day, have not fallen into the intoxicating image of a writer who barely has a body. I lug my now-full belly up the stairs, and smash my body down onto my bed. Crestfallen, I do not think I can write. I am distracted by my body, horrified that it exists. I think I do not deserve to write, cannot write if my body has been fed.

Thirteen years later, I see the jut of my stomach as I write these words. When I look down, look past the edge of my notebook, I am amazed by the fact that my body is there. And I am distracted by this. I feel as if I should just be a brain, just inhabit that small section of my head from where these words emerge. Curious as to if I need this large vessel in order to carry around all of the words in my head, I wonder, *Why must my body be here?*

In *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg says the body is a part of the writer. Our bodies bring us to the writing, allow us to fully soak into our skin, into ourselves in order to write. How you can tell when a writer is really into the writing, because her body is absolutely still, is simply a body that has soaked into the mind, is an entity that is engaged with the words it creates.

But what if the body distracts? What if I am so conscious of this body that I cannot focus on the words my brain is trying to create? I tell myself I have matured from this matter. That I am an adult now, have grown out of the magical thinking that a brain does not need a body. But there is the matter of blood. The blood that courses through my entire being in order to keep my brain thinking. How healthy is this blood? Is it full of nutrients that allows my brain to think freely? Or is it starved blood, consumed so much by the thought of food that it cannot think any other thoughts? How much do I let the blood flow, to let it be healthy blood in order to get the words to flow out of me? I want to say I recognize the importance of this.

I do not.

I sit and I write, and I again stave off the hunger by attempting to push words through my pen.

Another author, another thought on the body and writing. Julia Cameron has guided many people into their writing practicing with her book *The Artist's Way*. She brings together spirituality and creativity in order to join the forces of the mind and the soul through writing. After doing a series of *The Artist's Way* books, she came out with a new text 2007 called *The Writing Diet: Writing Yourself Right-Size*. In it, she describes how you can lose weight by creating a writing practice. The book aims to show people how to write when they're hungry in order to substitute words for food. Cameron assumes that people who do not express themselves creatively overeat all of the time, because they do not have that outlet in which to understand what their hunger is really about. Write instead of eat, she instructs. Substitute words for food.

I tried that as a teen. It led me to an eating disorder.

While *The Writing Diet* is disturbing in a number of ways, it does point to the thought that the body is a part of writing. Whether you try to avoid it (Cameron) or bring it fully into the writing (Goldberg), the body and brain must somehow relate to one another in order to create words. But *The Writing Diet* is intended for the author to ignore what her body is saying, to try and push through the hunger with ephemeral words about what the hunger is really about. By way of this, she feeds into the image of a starving artist. Perhaps Cameron believes the artist's way is the starving way. *The Writing Diet* does for the image of writers what bookstores do for women's body image when they put the dieting books on the shelf next to the books on eating disorders. Cameron teases her readers towards an addiction.

A few friends and I go on a writing retreat we have created for ourselves. We head out to a lake house and take the Fourth of July weekend to write and get into our heads. We lounge on the screened-in porch all day, the sun soaking into our sweaty legs. We smoke and we write and we throw ideas around the air. My friend the starving poet is there. As is a female author who is well known for her memoir about her eating disorder. My own body is there, riding out the last wave of my starvation period. And while my other friends have put more distance between themselves and their eating disorders, we are all learning how to be in our bodies, and how to do this while writing, while living in our heads.

There is a bowl of cherries we nibble on throughout the days. And as I tinker on a few essay during this four-day retreat, nothing of it really sticks. What I remember most about that weekend is my struggle with eating. The tempting bowl of cherries as I tried to keep track of my eating throughout the day, the cherries as I wasn't sure how many calories they contained.

Of the four women at our retreat, there is only one without an eating disorder. She cooks for us. She sautés vegetables with thick noodles, whips up gorgeous salads and scrumptious dips for chips. I remember not wanting to eat, wanting to keep my body small in order to hopefully expand the thoughts in my mind. And how this did not work. Distracted by hunger, I had a hard time concentrating on my words. I created nothing of any worth until I started eating.

I wonder at what kind of writer I would have been if I had figured this out thirteen years ago.

Last year, I started writing a book. I moved to Minneapolis to get away from the hectic Chicago city life in order to focus on my words. I was also trying to recover from my eating disorder, and wanted to get away from the city where there were so many people who had witnessed me at my worse. I wanted to be able to gain weight, but I did not want to think about how others would view me now that they saw me as healthy again. In my mind, I would have looked like a failure. I wanted to be able to go to a coffee shop and eat a bagel without wondering if someone I knew would catch me in the act of eating.

Thus the move. Once in Minneapolis, I started my writing journey every day at Spyhouse. It's a coffee shop at the corner of 25th and Nicollet with excellent outside seating. I would get to the coffee shop and start writing every morning by eight. I would try to go until one without eating. Addictions are hard to let go of. The eating disorder had followed me, had not yet loosened its grip on the idea of being a starving writer. I

sat and I wrote and I smoked and I stood up carefully when I had to get more coffee in order to lessen the head rush. I would sit for eight hours at Spyhouse, limiting myself to a liquid diet—vegetable juice or ginger soda. And there would be cream in my coffee, too, so I would count those calories as food. Now that I was finally focusing on my writing career, I thought my slim body would begin to take off again. Words not food. Words not food. Julia Cameron would be so proud.

What I remember most about Spyhouse was not the tables or the baristas or the Bjork that was always playing, but the bran muffins and rosemary fig scones. How I craved to pick at them while I wrote, wanted to slip the morsels into my mouth as I typed essays out of my fingers. But I would not eat. I would concentrate on my writing. I would not eat. Eventually my author friend with the eating disorder would come by and announce that we needed a snack. She had struggled through her eating disorder for years, and now she was in the space where it was no longer embarrassing to admit that she needed food, to know that her writing was pathetic if she didn't keep the brain juices fed.

It took me a year to start to take after her.

As my body began to be fed, it expanded a bit in the hips and the butt. My skin back out again, my curves kicking back in. And something else happened. My mind began to pump out words, good words. Words that formed into essays that started to get published. I was finally turning into the writer I always wanted to be, though I had a different body than I ever imagined. I *had* a body, and that body looked like an actual woman's body. All curves and flesh and muscle and fat. A woman's body. A writer's body.

What does a writer's body look like? Returning to Natalie Goldberg, a writer's body is in focus, is fully engaged with the act of writing. It is a body that does not disappear when the writing begins, but one that helps to coax the text out of the skin. The fingers make their infinitesimal movements, and the bones adjust to hold the brain up just so. The brain soaks into the body, and what is created are words that flow from the soul.

I am starting to learn how to do this. I started this essay hungry, sat sipping on coffee instead of eating the black cherry Greek yogurt I wanted so badly for breakfast. I thought I could get more into this writing, into the scenes and the meaning of it all if I could bring myself back into that space of the starved writer.

I wasn't getting anywhere with it.

The words looped around themselves, as my stomach started to churn around to its hungry tune. I couldn't avoid this body as I could see it underneath me, begging for me to pay attention to it—if only just to feed it. If I did that, then I could soak back into the writing. I took a break. I had my breakfast. I got back into the writing. And what came out of it was this. Words on a page, meaning spreading through the blood and ink, the muscles working alongside the brain, an essay that gets to the heart. The right diet for a writer is one in which she lives for the writing, eats for the writing, breathes for the writing. She keeps herself, her body alive so she can write.

Chelsey Clammer received her MA in Women's Studies from Loyola University Chicago. She has been published in *THIS*, *Revolution House*, *Spittoon*, and *Make/shift* among many others. She is currently finishing up a collection of essays about finding the concept of home in the body.