

On establishing balance



Writer Anelise Chen discusses the difference between physical and intellectual labor, the problem with binary thinking, and why it's important to find balance.

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As told to Thora Siemsen, 2358 words.

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You've written about habits born from an urgent need, or habits growing in wayward directions. What are some habits of yours that particularly trouble your writing?

I have the habit of negative thinking which greatly troubles my writing. As a response to the anxiety caused by my negative thinking I soothe myself through distraction, so I also have the habit of enjoying myself too much. I prioritize joyful things instead of writing. I have the habit of not waking up as early as I want to, and I have the habit of social media, which troubles my writing.

I don't think of you as being on social media.

Oh, that's true, but I just have no ability to tolerate social media, so every single time I'm on it, it destroys me for the whole day. It takes me more time to recuperate from 10 minutes of social media than probably the normal person.

If you see something as work, are you more or less likely to put it first?

If I see something as work, I'm definitely more likely to put it first. But I have the habit now of convincing myself that fun activities are work so that I give myself permission to do them first.

Your debut novel, *So Many Olympic Exertions*, observes a doctoral candidate studying the world of sports. What did your own research of that world look like in order to create that character?

I was living a similar existence to my character in that I was going daily to the library and going to the pool, and feeling crushed by the monotony of my routine. My life was pretty much bound by these two activities. I swam because I was struggling with writing, but at the same time, the act of swimming back and forth was initially unhelpful because it felt, as one feels when one is simply pushing words around on a page all day long, pointless. When you're in the pool, you're exerting yourself in this very contained space. It's like running on a treadmill. Something about the activity made me feel a little bit uncomfortable at first. But I think after I learned to embrace the containedness of the pool and of the page, the book came out quite easily after that.

Didn't you write in *Poets & Writers* about Jonathan Lethem writing from the treadmill?

Yeah, exactly. I love the idea of maintaining some sort of awareness of the body while you're in this heady intellectual place. Lots of writers write in their heads while they're walking or hiking. New sights trigger new ideas, or the cadence of foot fall and breath. Swimming cultivates an appreciation for repetition and boredom. There's nothing to see or hear or think about when you're in the pool, so somehow you have to squeeze your own meaning out of it through your imagination.

What's your earliest memory of a dichotomy between persistence and failure?

I think as Americans, we're definitely conditioned to think in terms of success and failure, but it all exists on a continuum. In the book, I talk a lot about how it's often at the height of an athlete's career that other things begin to fall apart for them. We have a very narrow understanding of success and failure, as though they were absolute states. Consider the price one pays for victory: hours of pain and sacrifice and self-denial. When you consider all these factors, a victory isn't really a victory. Nothing can be a pure victory. I think about that a lot. Any success can also be considered a failure, in some sense, and every failure can also be considered a success because it presents an opportunity to learn.

There are these individual stories you use in the novel to illustrate failure, or the consolation of a postlapsarian existence, like that of the runner Shizo Kanakuri. What does his story mean to you?

He was a runner in the 1912 Stockholm Olympics. It was extremely hot that day, and he wanted to stop to drink some water, but after his break he realized he had no chance of winning. Instead of alerting anyone, he basically got on a boat and went back to Japan. Everyone assumed he had died. A lot of athletes had died during that particular Games because it was so hot. Somehow, many years later, the Swedes found out that he was still alive and invited him back to finish the race. His final time was something like 54 years.

I think that his example, to me, shows how a race is nothing more than this arbitrary construct of time and space that allows for meaning to occur. I think how a contest is just a thing we've created to be able to call some people winners and others losers. You can reject that construct, like Kanakuri, and insist that it doesn't mean anything to walk away from a race, or you can use that construct to make a whole life. You can turn it into a commitment. Athletes truly have to believe that it means something to run from here to there as fast as possible, that it matters whether the ball stays within the lines of the court. It's always life or death. And in a way the stakes are that high for them. I think about that story "The School" by Donald Barthelme which ends with the question, is death that which gives meaning to life? Humans crave containment: beginnings, ends, finish lines, goals, destinations. Without containment we would be overwhelmed with the vastness and indifference of the universe. Containment brings the horizon a little bit closer.

You also write in the novel, "Whenever I spend all day inside, I think of the 19th century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi... proof that purely intellectual labor is just as cruel and unnatural as purely physical labor." How do you think we could attenuate intellectual labor so that it isn't cruel and unnatural?

I think intellectual labor might always be cruel and unnatural. Intellectual labor is literally back-breaking labor. I like to think about animals. Thinking is very

hard, and somehow I just can't imagine the same kind of unnecessary strain happening in the animal kingdom. I have a very complicated relationship to art, too, because art feels very unnatural.

I'm taken with the way that you describe it as "purely" intellectual labor, as if you could somehow dilute its formula.

I guess there are pragmatic artists and there are pure artists, as I think I was saying about Leopardi. But the ability to step back and just do the things that a life requires, like clean the bathroom and eat breakfast and go out with friends. Those things, those activities don't feel like much, but I think those are the dilutions, maybe, of purely intellectual labor.

From the novel: "Pessimists perform best when the world lets them down." What are some perks you see of being a pessimist?

Pessimists are perhaps more clear-eyed and a bit more humble. If you see the downside to everything as well as the upside, then you're able to have a wider perspective. I think that goes back to the success and failure question. If you are a pessimist, you're already thinking about all the worst things that could happen. So when something bad happens, you're prepared, but when something good happens, all those potential bad things are also wrapped up in the same moment. I think that's a kind of wisdom to be able to see all of those different possible outcomes all at once. You know what I mean by that?

I think I do intimately, yeah.

Yeah. As opposed to optimists, they fall so hard. When they're disappointed, they're *so* disappointed because they haven't anticipated bad things happening. When something bad happens, they have no ability to respond.

What types of texts unburden you when you're stuck?

I love reading diaries of artists and writers because it's really hard to explain the creative life to the average person. People always ask me, "What do you do all day?" Your daily life can feel a little bit indulgent. When I read diaries and letters, I'm always struck by how banal it all is. It's not about creating most of the time. It's just about living. I find great comfort in those texts.

We're so lucky in New York because we get to meet creative people all the time. I see my friends and I see my colleagues. We're all sort of living this life, and so that's very reassuring. As a kid, I didn't have much access to any kind of creative person, so I had no idea that you could live a life this way.

You're The Paris Review Daily's "mollusk" correspondent. In your column, you write of inquiring about marine calcifiers dying off, and a research director of the Biosphere 2 Ocean biome answering in terms of, "Unquestionably, there will be winners and losers in the new environment." How do you see themes of winning and losing as throughlines in all of your writing?

I did grow up doing sports, and I was so brainwashed by this way of thinking, of winning and losing. I just question it deeply, especially now with the current administration. I started making a collage of all the times, and many people have done this, but all the times Donald Trump says "winning" versus "losing." It's very sickening to me to think of things in that way.

I didn't realize that this binary was going to be a throughline in my work. Maybe with this next clam project, I will explore this further but I can't really see it now. That's why it's so great to have these conversations, because I realize things about my work that I hadn't thought of before.

This new project that you mentioned is a book based on the mollusk column. What stage of that project are you at right now?

The overall scope I've figured out, but I still have to do a lot of research. I'll just be spending the next year or so working. I'm really excited about the project. I would love to have more mollusk conversations with people, so that's always welcome.

When did your fascination with the mollusk begin?

I think I always had a fascination with mollusks. My dad has a fascination with shelled creatures. He's always comparing himself to a shelled creature, and I think that's just sifted down into my consciousness. It really began when my mom kept texting me to "clam down." It's just so funny. My sister would laugh about it all the time. My mom continues to make this typo to this day. What does it mean to be a clam? I like thinking of myself as this quivering, vulnerable piece of flesh encased in a shell.

You've also analogized the shell to a wall in the way that we talk about walls in contemporary society. Could you say more about that?

I think we erect walls when we feel endangered, when we don't feel secure somehow. We say someone is building a shell, or someone is not coming out of their shell. There's some insecurity involved there. I'm thinking about the ways in which insecurity manifests in societies, and why it is that we don't feel secure in the world, why we feel this compulsion to build walls.

I think if we stopped thinking in terms of winning and losing, and them versus us, these very divisive binaries...I don't really believe in borders. I think the more borderless we can become, the better. At the same time, I recognize the need of every animal, organism, every living thing, to feel safe and to develop strategies against being eaten. I'm still working that out right now, but I think we need to rethink our relationship to shell building and wall building and borders.

What does not believing in borders look like when creating work?

We have such calcified ways of thinking about genre and form. Every time I try to describe my work, it's always a combination of five elements. I don't believe in restricting myself to any one form.

How are you feeling about writing at the moment?

I'm feeling excited about writing, but it's only because I'm not doing it. When I'm doing it, I feel miserable. When I'm not doing it, I can't wait to do it again. It's so frustrating to write, and I get so depressed when I'm writing. Right now, I'm not writing and I feel great about writing. I feel very hopeful and I can't wait to set up my office because I'm in between spaces right now.

As someone who writes about the body's achievements, what are ways you think of the balance of taking care of your body and working?

Now, I'm pretty good at taking care of my body. I know that I can only write about four hours maximum, and then I have to go and use my body. I need to go run or walk or bike or do something. I didn't know that I needed to do this before, and I would just try to write for hours and hours at a stretch, and that is not a good idea. We're always romanticizing writers who take uppers, like Balzac who eats his coffee. We really valorize intensity, but I'm more about balance in the long-term.

Anelise Chen recommends:

anything by Cecilia Vicuña

[adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy*](#)

Eduardo Kohn's [How Forests Think](#)

videos about [bioluminescence](#) narrated by David Attenborough

[Ernest Reijseger](#) (my friend Shahpour introduced him to me)

Joanna Walsh's new book [Break up](#) published by Semiotext(e)

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going to actual bookstores, hailing actual cabs, eating actual food; not using amazon, uber, facebook, netflix, etc, companies that destroy competition and diversity and degrade quality of life

Name

Anelise Chen

Vocation

Writer

