

On making art as an act of survival



Performance artist and memoirist Anya Liftig on the practical reasons for writing a book, merging past with present, and finding your reason.

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As told to Andrea Kleine, 1281 words.

Tags: Performance, Writing, Art, Money, Process, Identity, Inspiration, Focus.

You're a performance artist known for your work with plants, animals, food, and staring back at Marina Abramovic at MOMA. Now you've written a memoir. What made you want to write a long-form thing that now exists as a book instead of a transcript of a performance that happened? Or is your book a transcript of a performance that happened?

Well, writing a book is cheaper than making a performance, and at the time when I started writing, I had no money. Working on my computer was the cheapest thing I could do. I think working on a book allowed me to sit with something in a way that I never have with a performance. See, I never really rehearse. My performances are about stepping into a situation and letting it fly in front of the viewer and then it's over. Maybe there is a remnant in terms of documentation or some photographs, but it's not really something that one can change and shape and consider again. So, the book was an experiment to see what happens if I hold onto something much, much longer.

What are the similarities between your writing practice and your performance practice?

A strong sense of intuition, a strong sense of improvisation, a strong sense of impulsiveness. One thing that is quite different is that I've never really used words in performance, but writing and performing are incredibly similar for me in the sense that creating feels like being submerged in some version of imperfect perfection.

Would you say there's a performative aspect when you're sitting down and writing?

I always thought that a memoir might be performative in the sense that one is playing a character about one's life. But I discovered that memoir could be an unfolding of time. The reader could be an audience member you have a one-on-one connection with. I think the performative aspect was the questions I asked myself as I wrote. *What could I say to the reader that I couldn't express to an audience? Where could I go that I couldn't go before?* I think I found some of those places, but they were places that emerged after six years of writing and editing and revising.

I realized through the process of writing how impatient some of my performance work is and how it's sometimes about wanting to feel something, and then being done with it. A great part of the difficulty of working on the book was just waiting, waiting, waiting for something to happen, and trying to make something happen. Thinking I had something and chasing it and then discovering 50,000 words later that it had all just been a complete dead end.

The smallness of the community that you depicted in Holler Rat, the specificity of it, made me think about what constitutes a holler, to use that term as the name of a community. Your family seems very protective and tight-

knit and unique because your mother was from Appalachia and your father was from an upper middle class, college-educated Jewish community. I felt like you were isolated growing up because of the make-up of your family. Did you feel like your nuclear family recreated a holler?

Oh, yeah. There are multiple ways that the holler is metaphorically reproduced. What are the mountains that are surrounding us, either by circumstance or by choice? I feel very reactive to depictions of Appalachia that are negative. At the same time, I also want to be true to my own experience. To romanticize it might be creating another type of falsehood. In the book, I wanted to start from the literal holler, and then, when we get to the end of the book, I'm facing a metaphorical holler in a very different situation. And then the whole holler of my life exploded. "The waters came arisin'" might be more accurate.

There's a lot of great writing about the body in this book. Your childhood surgery and subsequent [physical and neurological] injury, the description of how your grandfather died, Mamaw and her pee can and cigarettes, and your tragic pregnancy loss. Your performance work also centers the body, and you're often naked. How did you approach writing about the body and putting your body on the page?

I grew up with this very detached relationship to my body, probably from being poked and prodded so much when I suffered a major medical trauma at age six and then for the years afterwards during checkups, followed by years of intense dance training where you're also poked and prodded and judged in such an intense way. I felt very much like a thing. There's a music video of Tom Petty's "Don't Come Around Here No More." It's an *Alice in Wonderland* theme and there's a shot at the end where Alice is lying on a table, she looks down, and she's turned into a cake, and everyone at the tea party is eating her. She's looking around like, "What the hell?" That's very much the way I treat myself in performance. I'm just a cake. People are going to eat me. Some of them are going to say I taste disgusting. Somebody's going to grab at me in an inappropriate way (there is always someone who grabs at you in an inappropriate way). But it's okay. I've still got my head.

So much of your book is about survival. At one point you were visiting the holler as a teenager and hanging out with a teenage cousin who was pregnant, and you thought, "There, but for my mother who left the holler, go I." What does it mean to survive a destructive marriage? What does it mean to survive the violence that was done to your body? I don't quite know where I'm going with this question other than that I think there's an unrecognized bravery in just continuing, which is what you seem to be doing.

I think of my Jewish father, who is kind of comic relief throughout the book but is a true polymath in actual life, and his complete obsession with the lengthy genealogy of my mother's Scots-Irish and Huguenot family. I think of how he learned to play the bagpipes because he wanted to understand her ancestry more, how he wrote a book about her ancestors, how he is even petitioning my hometown to recognize an unmarked grave because he has evidence that it is connected to an ancestral settler. Recently I asked him why he was so damn obsessed. He said that on his side of the family, there are no records, there is nobody to find, everything has been destroyed, everyone died. For some reason, he says, "We survived. You survived." On some days, I think I have found a reason.

Have you left your holler or have you stayed with your clan?

My holler is a place that I pick up and carry with me. I have carried it with me all over the world, but I definitely haven't left it.

Anya Liftig Recommends:

Film: I Love You Alice B. Toklas. Lame brain corporate cog Peter Sellers turns-on and gets groovy.

Writing: AJ Liebling's WWII War reportage, first-hand journalism like none other.

Place: Twillingate, Newfoundland. Lick an iceberg, fall in love with a seal.

Object: L'Eggs Pantyhose Egg, one of the greatest joys of the industrial age, especially the silver ones.

Book: Fact of Life by Maureen Howard, makes my brain go pop everytime.

Name

Anya Liftig

Vocation

performance artist and memoirist

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