

On telling your own story



Writer Aurora Mattia discusses beauty, control, high femme artifacts, and the power of myth

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As told to Lindsay Lerman, 2543 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#), [Mental health](#).

First of all, I want to say thank you for your book, *The Fifth Wound*. What was it like to write it? How did it come to be?

I started writing it from a basic desire. One of my exes had told me that I was pretty but not beautiful. Months after we broke up, I began medical transition. I wanted to understand why it was that one phrase from an ex could cause me to rearrange my entire life. The first draft was a lot more plaintive and accusatory. But in trying to process some of the shit that happened to me in the last few years, I developed a better understanding of the freeze state my ex was in when we were dating years before—his own PTSD. After a few major traumatic events in 2020 and 2021, I started acting much more erratically with partners and friends and family and eventually came to see how traumas that had happened to me were reaching through me and hurting everyone I was connected to, passing through me like an open door. It took a while for me to take responsibility for that door.

But the traumas also allowed me to contextualize why my ex might have acted the way he did in our relationship, which changed a lot of the second draft of the book. And in the process of learning to take responsibility for myself, my life, my actions, I started thinking a lot about ways that, as my ex shared with me, I had hurt him. I hadn't realized I could hurt him. I thought he held the capacity for hurting because he was the one who would come and go, not realizing that his coming and going was in part a response to the ways that I was hurting him.

That changed so much of the way I wrote the book as I edited it. But it was a book that I wrote inadvertently, without a plan to make it a novel. It started because I felt stuck in my life, really disembodied, really far from my ability to experience desire. So I started writing a little bit about the last time I'd felt embodied, this relationship with my ex, and, like a crustacean, it just kept accreting more and more layers. Because more events happened while I was writing the book, so the book just kept going on and on until, essentially, it was due.

But it was very interesting to me that the due date and the arc of the narrative really coincided, which makes a lot of sense with the book because at the time I was living my life very much for the story, for the sake of the song.

I love the multi-layered crustacean quality. It has this wild intertextuality, too. Most of the art I'm drawn to has a kind of intertextuality and playfulness and promiscuity. And it also feels true to the sacred quality of the book that you've written. Part of it has to do with the fact that it's invoking other sacred texts and myths. But part of it, I think, is that it just seems to have this big desire for life. And that is special.

You mentioned the line in the book about being told you're pretty but not beautiful, and that stood out to me immediately when I was reading it. I started thinking about the way beauty can be a shield, and I wondered what you might have to say about that. Like whether or not beauty can be a shield, and if so, what is being shielded? Or, is it more of a weapon?

I spent so long pursuing beauty. Eventually I found—in the way the world was responding to me—that I had achieved what I was looking for. But I also found that I was no closer to my capacity for pleasure than I had been at the outset of my pursuit. I was trying to paper over something that my beauty could no longer reach. The past already happened, and the reverberations of the past were already in my body and in my life. Becoming beautiful wasn't going to protect me from what had already happened. With my womanhood, so many experiences have had to be public before they became private: I didn't have breathing space to decide something privately and then "bring it out of the closet." Everything up for grabs by everyone else, open to their interpretation, especially at the outset, when I couldn't control people perceiving me as a woman or as some kind of indeterminate, frightening or freakish thing. That led to a lot of shit of its own happening back in 2015 and 2016. I thought beauty would protect me from that. And it did, to an extent, in public life. But it also exposed me to new ways of being followed home.

Yeah. That is familiar to me.

I did, however, start to feel more ability to manage the atmosphere of desire surrounding me. I felt more in control when I was being approached as someone beautiful than when I had been approached as something frightening.

That said, I was still more afraid of people's anger than I was protective of myself. I guess this is kind of adjacent to Stockholm syndrome, but I felt gratitude that people were no longer interacting with me as a freak, so I was doing a lot of emotional caretaking of people who were not respecting my boundaries, whether they were intimate partners or strangers.

Such a common experience. Especially for anyone who is interested in intimacy.

But when the pandemic hit, I had the privilege of being inside a lot more, which I was grateful for, right after being outside had become violent for me in a new way. My femininity was allowed to become something that wasn't constantly public. For the first time, I was able to relate to all of these high femme artifacts in ways that I had always intuited I wanted to, but had to bypass in order to use them, instead, for protection in public. For the first time, acrylics, corsets, eyeshadow palettes, all these things became ritual practices for me in a much more intimate way. That was absolutely thrilling.

I started to realize that what I was thinking of as "beauty" was actually a feeling of sacredness for high femme artifacts, and for the ability to perform those rituals together with other people. In the book I talk about a "yearning for being beautiful together," which doesn't necessarily point to falling in love and having sex. A lot of that for me meant finding other people to perform rituals of femininity with.

I can feel that energy pulsing through the whole book, for sure.

I wrote because I couldn't sleep. I needed a container for the wings of fantasy and desire that would brush over me while I was trying to fall asleep.

Let's talk about your routines and rituals. How did you find the time? How do you use time?

I was able to write the beginning of it because I had just been laid off. I was on pandemic unemployment assistance, and then I started my Onlyfans, which became a way to control my time totally. It also involved another way of becoming public, through Twitter, advertising on Twitter, but my beauty was, more than ever before, under my control. I drew a lot of energy from it. I would say a lot of the energy for writing the book came from this inflow and outflow of passion. I was still feeling largely disembodied, but I was absorbing other people's desire and giving it back to them. I was doing something alchemical with their desire, changing it in some way and giving it back to them so that it felt like it wasn't theirs anymore. That gave me a lot of time to write.

There was a period of time when I was going to bed at 9 a.m. and waking up at 5 p.m., which is to say I was on a 9 to 5 schedule. Sometimes I stayed up for multiple days at a time. I wanted the writing of it to feel as extreme as living had been feeling. I wasn't intentionally performing a synonym of a kind of Simone Weil fasting-to-

become-a-dwelling-place-for-god thing, but there is an element of Saint Catherine of Siena in the book and her whole thing of surviving on pus alone, pus from the sick. I wasn't literally consuming bodily fluids, but the book is so much about bodily fluids and the divine that it became this sort of practice of "consuming my own bodily fluids," my own mess, really, and then surviving from that.

This brings us to something I wanted to talk about. Catholicism is having a moment, and biblical myth and tale are also having a moment, but in a very different way than in your book. I see so much use of Catholicism and biblical imagery and that general aesthetic being used as part of the move to strip as many people as possible of rights. What's happening in that fringe scene—which is actually not that fringe—what they're doing with the primal power of myth and the primal power of the biblical tale in this culture is very, very different than what I see happening in your book. So, I wanted to ask you about the role that myth or the biblical tale plays for you in this book and in art and creation in general.

I haven't been much on social media, most of my life. I only started, really, when I moved to New York, and on Twitter I definitely picked up on a certain reactionary reuptake of Catholicism as an aesthetic. Something along those lines that I wrote in the book was, "Fantasy is not in itself ethical, but it is the means by which an ethics is made."

I'm going to take a byway here: I went on a long research spiral about a religious cult, the Galli, who lived and practiced in what is now Turkey, and whose goddess and ritual apparatus the Roman state violently assimilated. I noticed a lot of white trans girls who didn't want to recapitulate Christian aesthetics were attaching themselves to this ancient so-called "Roman" cult of "transfemme high priestesses." But actually, the Galli were a Phrygian cult to a goddess called Cybele, who had come to earth in the form of a chunk of black meteorite, called a baetyl, which the Galli kept, enthroned, in their temple. The Roman state abducted the baetyl and brought it to Rome, installing it atop a sculpture of a woman's body, as if it were her head. They wholly re-narrativized her as a goddess of chastity, constructing an origin story that represents her as presiding over marriage between a "pure Roman woman" and a "noble Roman man," that positions her as the mother of the Roman state, rather than a fertility goddess from Phrygia, whose devotees were specifically so-called feminine, gender non-conforming people, who performed, ritually, an ancient form of bottom surgery.

If I had just scratched the surface of this research, it would've appeared to me that the presence of the Galli in the Western historical record was proof of state- and spiritually-sanctioned gender-conformity in ancient Rome. But the Roman state had decided to, for entirely unrelated political reasons, assimilate Cybele into its pantheon, and at the same time, to cut off the Galli their own ritual practices. The Galli were forced to stay within the walls of her temple, and were no longer allowed to participate in any public ritual related to her worship.

All of this I found out because I was looking for myths along the lines of my own ancestry that could animate me, because I knew about the femminielli in Naples. Some of them make a yearly pilgrimage to a monastery in the Mountains—very near where my grandfather's family was from—that, I found out, was originally a temple to Cybele. So I realized this Italian form of gender-nonconformity was not Italian in origin after all, which has had me thinking a lot about the intentional layers of imperial erasure and renarrativization that have accrued over time.

But to answer your question more directly, I think a lot of what's happening with specifically Catholic aesthetics right now in the "Dimes Square" scene has to do with trying to make whiteness not seem like whiteness, using an ostensibly ironized, ostensibly transgressively-sexualized "chastity" or "purity" to try to pass off what is fundamentally another expression of white supremacy as some kind of chic radical new pose.

As for my relationship to Christianity, when I was sixteen I had my first serious relationship, not surprisingly with another person who would later realize themselves as trans. Before we broke up, they joined a sort of evangelical cult—a so-called "low church" acoustic guitar revivalist cult—whose representatives were proselytizing at my school in a very underhanded way. The youth pastors had dyed hair and piercings and listened to Sufjan Stevens and were very into poetry, and one of them would sit in the cafeteria, attracting young queer kids who were trying to figure themselves out. After our breakup, I joined, too, started going to praise sessions and

meeting with the youth pastors one on one for prayer, because it gave me a feeling of intensity and embodiment that was papering over what I couldn't understand about myself, couldn't name yet. I became obsessed with the Gospel of John, which makes sense because it's the visionary gospel, about god as a form of language—but language that creates rather than responding to or describing the world. That feeling of spiritual reaching got bound up in my very nascent and buried femininity; my pain about queerness is wrapped up in these thorns and fragments of Biblical myth, so much of which is bodily and nasty and delicious and ecstatic and gender non-conforming.

In *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant writes, "Within the collective books containing the sacred and the notion of history lies the germ of the exact opposite of what they so loudly proclaim." I was looking, in my own sense, for that germ. As I came to understand my body and my femininity, these myths had intuitively started resurfacing, and I was realizing how much of it felt intimately related to what I was experiencing about myself.

Aurora Mattia Recommends:

Music: Stevie Nicks performing a demo of "Wild Heart" backstage at her Rolling Stone photoshoot for Belladonna; Bill Callahan's cover of "The Breeze / My Baby Cries" by Kath Bloom.

Perfumes: Hermès, Eau de Merveilles; Lancôme, Idôle L'Intense.

Food: dry pot from MáLà Project in the East Village; salsa from Little Mexico in Bouldin Creek.

Stories: "Gloss, or the Strange History of Our Lady of the Sorrows," by John Keene; "The Imitation of the Rose," by Clarice Lispector; "Dump Gull," by Fanny Howe.

Small Pleasures: blue raspberry bubblegum; mourning doves.

Name

Aurora Mattia

Vocation

writer

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