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As told to Shy Watson, 2560 words.

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On yearning for connection

Writer Emmeline Clein discusses self-indictment, widening perspectives, and deconstructing the issues your work seeks to solve.

What, to you, makes a good essay?

My favorite essayists are people like Elizabeth Hardwick, Hilton Als, and Renata Adler, those kinds of vibes. Usually I do like there to be a strong first-person narrator, even if they're not writing memoiristic content. I really like to read something where the writer is willing to indict themselves and deconstruct a problem, social issue, film, or book from the perspective of, "I think I feel this way, but I actually don't think I necessarily should and I want to know why my first impulse is to read it this way when in fact I think there might be something sharper beneath it."

I also enjoy reading essays that are diagonal to what's going on in the larger discourse, as opposed to taking on the hot thing. If there's an assortment of takes, what can we pull out that's at an angle to all those takes? There is an essay in VQR that I was obsessed with a few years ago about trichotillomania—I felt like there was a lot of stuff in the media, at the time, about feminized depression and sad girl things, but nothing that was looking at the way that a neurotic woman's sadness could manifest in a surprising bodily way.

Dead Weight has some memoiristic content. You, as an author, share that you share a history with some of your subjects' struggles. Do you think this made your subjects more willing to speak to you? Were there ever points where you and a subject disagreed?

People with eating disorders have been manipulated by journalists en masse for most of the history of reporting on eating disorders, both from a medical perspective and from a mainstream media perspective. In one academic study, doctors interviewed people and then put them into an article that called bulimia, "anorexia's ugly sister." That was what a doctor was calling it in 2004. Obviously, doctors are not going to be able to fully understand or adequately portray what their subjects were trying to convey.

And then you also have mainstream media outlets writing about the pro-ana internet in a way that makes these teenage girls look like vain illness vectors inducting each other into crazy cults of thinness rather than girls who are trying to help each other survive a society that wants them to self-harm.

All of which is just to say, because of that long history, often when I'd reach out to someone I found in a forum or who I was referred to by somebody from a support group, they would be very reticent at first. I spoke to one person who was like, "I've spoken to journalists before who said they were going to do the forums that have given me life-saving support systems justice, and instead they made them look like incubation spaces for disease."

I feel like there's sometimes this impulse to maintain journalistic objectivity by not giving the subject that much information on what's actually going to be in the piece. But with this book, I was really trying to come at it from a perspective of solidarity and to amplify and attend to the stories that do not fit the dominant eating disorder narrative, which is one that I find to be very sickening for most people.

I was very open with subjects if they had any questions about what I was trying to do. So they would often know pretty much when we were starting whether they agreed with me or didn't. That set a really open discourse in action because they could tell that I wasn't coming at it from an asshole place. So they were like, "Even if I disagree with you, I am going to be honest and I know you're not going to make me look like I am selfish or a bad influence on other people just because we disagree."

When I came across a subject saying something that I strongly felt was counter to a point I was trying to make, I would really try to sit with it and see whether my point had a blind spot, which was often happening, and then I could reorient my angle and widen it or see the ways that what that person was saying actually did fit in the argument, if in an unexpected way.

You got your MFA from Columbia. How was that?

It was an amazing experience. There aren't so many creative nonfiction MFAs. When I first learned about them, it was radically disorienting to my understanding of genre, which had been preventing me from writing because I felt like the types of things I felt I was capable of writing were neither novels nor the straight journalism or straight review-type criticism I had seen. And then I started reading writers like Kate Zambreno and Leslie Jamison, who taught me there were so many ways to subvert existing genre categories and that often the writing can be more honest and get deeper analytically when you're not trying to fit within a genre structure that might force you to ape objectivity and pretend not to have positionality, both of which are impossible, if you are, like me, a person living not in a vacuum but in a society.

It was incredible in terms of space, time, deadlines, and also I wish I was the romantic ideal of a writer that I had in my head as a young girl, one who's just tapping away on the typewriter no matter if any of the pages ever get read. But I write out of a yearning for connection. And so I do need to know someone's going to read it, not to write anything, but to really do a project at length. And so on top of the deadlines and the time and space, it was amazing to know that the things I was writing were going to be read by people I deeply admired and wanted to connect with, both my peers and my teachers.

Something that I was really fascinated by that I didn't know before reading *Dead Weight*, which I've since brought up to several of my friends, is what amounts to basically this weight loss industrial complex of dieting apps, treatment centers, venture capitalists. I wasn't aware of this and I was curious if you could speak a little more to how you came about discovering this and what it is or what implications it has for anyone who hasn't yet had a chance to read your book.

All of that information was, in its specificity, something I discovered over the course of my research. At first, *Dead Weight* wasn't nearly as anti-capitalist, nor did it report heavily on the tentacled hedge funds that are actually funding both the eating disorder and diet industrial complexes. Once I had all the cultural stuff together, I was like, "Okay, something seems to be going on here with the fact that the treatments don't work and the treatment centers are exploding in number despite the treatments continuing not to work."

This is the most expensive form of treatment for mental illness besides addiction treatment, which has similar relapse rates, and yet no one's talking about this. And there's also a weight loss industry that seems pretty powerful that seems to be causing a lot of eating disorders. And could they perhaps be related? And in fact, they were. And one of the big pieces of connective tissue there is that the concept of obesity as we think of it today is one that has really been promulgated by the medical weight loss industry and the diet industry, especially regarding the specific BMIs that we currently classify obesity as a disease at.

BMI itself is a racist misogynistic measure. It's not a good way to measure health, but it is the measure that's mainly being used.

Obesity was only categorized as a chronic disease in 2013 after great amounts of lobbying and millions of dollars spent by drug companies. And that was against the American Medical Association's own advisory committee's suggestions. And even within that, it's only concretely proven that obesity at high grades is actually as dangerous as we are made to believe all fatness is. A lot of what we associate with obesity, the cardiovascular disease, that type of thing, appears in long-term correlational epidemiological studies that are often funded by weight loss companies. So they're not controlling for factors such as weight cycling, which is when you gain and lose a significant amount of weight throughout your life. And people whose body weights put them in the overweight or obese BMI categories usually have a lot more weight cycling in their lifetimes than people who fall in the normal category because we live in a very fat-phobic society that makes your life easier if you're thin.

So people are repeatedly going on diets. We know diets don't work. There's a scientist I talk about in the book who literally came up with the term "the dieting depression" in the 1950s to express that not only do you gain weight after you do a restrictive diet, but you get extremely depressed. You basically have all the psychological symptoms of an eating disorder, and because you put your body in starvation mode, now you're craving a binge. It leads to a horrible cycle. In the few studies I found that do control for weight cycling, there's pretty much no change in mortality between being in the normal category or the overweight or obese grade 1 categories. So we have this entire industry that's predicated on a belief that is just one possible interpretation of data.

And in reading it one way, we've constructed obesity as a disease and then what we've constructed as the "cure" for that disease, dieting, is likely actually the initial cause of what we're now calling the disease. And we have so many corporations profiting off of that problem of mistaken attribution that it's hard for me to see it as an accident.

You have companies like Weight Watchers where the CEO says in leaked memos that the company makes money because the product doesn't work and people on average do it four to six times. And you also have a lot of people going on diets, whether they're caused by fat-phobia or they're caused by the fact of being a

person who can't healthily embody the beauty standard she's been fed, pardon the pun, of that emaciated ideal, who then goes on a diet that is coded as healthy in the media, but might in fact lead to weight cycling or an eating disorder or both.

Diets so easily spiral into something extremely restrictive: 35 percent of diets become pathological. If someone becomes ill enough that they qualify for clinical care, which we set far too extreme a benchmark for, a benchmark at which people are often so sick that they're less likely to recover, then they go into these residential treatment centers where they're given treatment that often reinforces the logic of their disorder by obsessively tracking their weight and making them eat in these very theatrical and regimented ways, and not teaching them how to eat in the context of their own lives. So when they leave, they often relapse or gain a lot of weight in recovery because their body has been starved for so long, and then they go on a diet. All of these companies are simultaneously benefiting.

It's not necessarily a grand conspiracy, but the people that are funding these companies have no incentive to make the eating disorder treatment work because they're making so much money off this cyclical customer. The weight loss companies only have an incentive for dieting to be a lifelong hamster wheel, and then the drug companies have an incentive for people to believe fatness is a disease so they can treat it with drugs. So it's all this horrible octopus that was very disturbing to discover, but honestly weirdly cathartic and empowering to discover because I was like, "my disease isn't just my doing." I feel like there's a narrative around eating disorders these days that says "We have feminism, so why are women still taking these beauty standards so seriously?"

And it was so liberating to realize, no, there's actively a web of very powerful corporations who are often being funded by the same few investors and hedge funds who want me to be stuck in this cycle, whether it's a diet or an eating disorder treatment center or both back to back. Once you see it, you realize that it's just beneath the surface. So if enough of us see it, while it's a very powerful machine, it's not a very smart one. If enough of us notice it, we could be the screws that don't turn instead of the ones that let it keep going.

I feel like that essay should be on the front cover of *The New York Times*. It feels like you discovered something huge. I mean, you did. I had never heard anyone else talk about this, so it was—

They're excerpting it in *The Nation* [in May].

Yay! Love to hear it. How do you avoid burnout?

It's sort of a holy trinity of strategies. The first is simply hanging out with friends and making sure to prioritize that, even if that feels like something I should be shaming myself for doing because I have so much work to do or whatever. I find having a conversation with someone smart who I live, laugh, love with is such a source of energy, intellectual inspiration, and emotional succor.

So hanging out is one. Reading things that are completely unrelated to whatever I'm working on is another. And specifically reading things that are not contemporary, which often involves rereading. I have a few books I go back to when I feel like I'm getting disillusioned by feeling like writing's a hamster wheel or the publishing industry is evil or nobody's being honest in their writing or whatever I am thinking on a given bad day.

Renata Adler, Walker Percy, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Caroline Blackwood are my go-to's to inspire the thought, "Oh my god, the prose can be so fabulous." You can totally gossip. You can wring some genius Semiotic theory out of a fake self-help book. Percy's book *Lost In The Cosmos* is a satirical self-help book from the eighties, and it's truly one of the best books I've ever read. I return to it all the time when I have no hope for literature or my mental health, so I highly recommend that.

And then the third thing in that trinity is ultimately going to have to go ahead and be a teen television show. I have rewatched *The Vampire Diaries*, *the OC*, *Gossip Girl*, and *One Tree Hill* a really disturbing amount of times. I find them deeply soothing.

Emmeline Clein recommends:

Watch the 1999 films *Drop Dead Gorgeous* and *Dick*

Read *Lust* by Susan Minot and *The Ritz of the Bayou* by Nancy Lemann

Eat soft shell crab and/or crawfish whenever possible

Name

Emmeline Klein


Vocation


writer

Fact

Phoebe Jones

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