

# On writing in order to stay alive



Author Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore discusses editing as a powerful tool, learning to work with chronic pain, writing what you want to write, and the violence of nostalgia.

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As told to Sara Black McCulloch, 2678 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Adversity](#), [Politics](#).

**Has the lack of physical connection during the pandemic impacted your writing and approach to it?**

What actually changed was what I was reading. And that was because of the lack of touch. I really got migraines where I couldn't read anything that wasn't poetry or formatted like that for probably six months. I read [Lara Mimosas Montes' Thresholds](#) and *The Grave on the Wall* by [Brandon Shimoda](#). Now that is not poetry, but it's written in a poetic way. I also read [Nancy](#) by Bruno Lloret. It's not poetry either, but a lot of the book is just x's on the page. Like they mark, in some ways, the gap or the failure of language, the failure of living, and memory. I really liked the spatial sense.

**I read that the original manuscript for *The Freezer Door* was 1,000 pages, and now it's 280. Is editing a more important part of your practice?**

Basically, with *The Freezer Door*, I wrote for several years. I basically write without intention of what it's going to be, because I want the form to come through the writing itself, not the other way around. After a few years, I didn't really look at it as a whole until I felt like it had arrived somewhere, and I didn't know exactly where, but I had a sense. Then, I always edit like that. I looked at that document and I kept looking at it. I always edit like this because I want to maintain the spontaneity of the writing process in the book. I keep that by meticulously editing. I do think, in a way, the most spontaneous writing comes from editing, which is ironic. Or maybe I mean the feeling of the spontaneity.

**Is there some specific thing that you're trying to edit back into it?**

I think it's the feeling. The editing is for precision. It's about getting to that place where the text can evoke something. It's interesting, because the book is a lot about repetition. It's searching, and it's about the persistence of gentrification. The persistence of loneliness, longing, desire, the impossibility of desire, or relationships that fail to hold. Or even things like dancing, chronic pain, or chronic health issues. Or the tyranny of masculinity, or the stranglehold of the suburban imagination over urban life. Or sex in the park, or trauma, or the violence of nostalgia. I think the way that I'm able to maintain the fluidity is through cutting and through keeping the same sense of the search in the original text. Because in the book, the text also loops around itself so it's not just that I'm searching but the text itself is searching, like language itself is searching. I'm searching for the way to say what language cannot say, and that involves a lot of gaps. I realized this more recently, but I think there is an embodiment in the text itself, that the text is searching for itself in a way.

**On the subject of writing into and out of those gaps, in *The Freezer Door*, you mention “crossing the text-brain barrier.” I wanted to know if you could talk about how important those gaps are in maintaining that spontaneity.**

When I first started developing debilitating chronic pain 20 years ago, that changed my whole writing process. Before that, I only wrote when I felt like I needed to write everything down in bursts. With the chronic pain, I couldn't write like that anymore. It was too painful, so I had to figure out a way to write, well, less at a time. Eventually, I started using voice activation software, which is rather horrible, and it took years to be able to do anything that was even slightly useful with it, but I had to. The thing that's fascinating about that was I hadn't realized how much the text itself was dependent on me typing. Speaking it, which seems more spontaneous, it's entirely less so, in terms of writing.

I realized just how much the text-brain barrier was dependent on typing, or crossing it. And clarity. I could have a whole essay in my head, which happens all time. I'll be lying in bed, and there's a whole essay there in the middle of the night or even in the morning. Then I sit at the computer, and it's gone. I cannot possibly get it out. That's my daily practice, in a way, and part of it is a trick—to just bring the thoughts out when they emerge, in whatever form. Another way is to write something that doesn't make sense, and see where the sense comes from. I don't know if those are tricks, but they're things that I rely on.

**How do you write when you're dealing with chronic pain?**

The exhaustion is the hardest part. I think the way I deal with that is I have to be okay with giving up. I know that I will not sit down at the computer and write an entire piece. I do sit down with that intention when it's in my head, but I have to be okay with one sentence if that's all that comes. Then I just go back. Editing is different because I can look at a whole essay after it's all there. I ended up writing my second novel, *So Many Ways to Sleep Badly*, that way. I wrote less than a paragraph a day. Then after maybe a year or two, I had 400 pages. I had never had 400 pages of anything before that. I would love to just sit down and write what I actually have in my head. It's those moments when I think I have energy and then I sit down and it's all gone. That's the hardest part. I can't say I'm ok with it. But sometimes it's not as disconcerting because when I have no energy and sit down for a second, a great sentence comes out. It's amazing. In the midst of a mess, there's a great sentence.

**I read that you discovered Language Poetry after leaving high school, and became obsessed with figuring out how to change language. I wanted to know how you use writing to challenge form and even audience? How does form reveal itself?**

I don't believe in explication, and a perceived center. When people say, “Think about your audience,” what they really mean is, “Think about this myth that there's this straight white Christian male center.” As soon as we believe in that, our writing is dead. I feel like we should never speak to that. My audience is whoever wants to relate to the work on its own terms.

For me, I think making the writing as specific to my own experience, the fiction of the characters, is actually what allows people to relate, not the other way around. I'm writing in order to stay alive. I mean that literally, because I need to understand and express myself, for myself, in order to feel it. That's what I mean by writing itself as a form of embodiment. It brings me into myself, when I think I can't get there. Sometimes, it takes a few minutes and sometimes, it takes a few years. I don't want to put anything out there until I feel it has reached its potential. That is why I edit so meticulously. Because I write towards vulnerability, and in order to be more vulnerable in my writing than I am in the world, I need the writing to get to the place that I want it to be, whatever that is. That doesn't come without fights. It's the publishing industry, you know.<

**You also write about the people in your life. How do you approach them and negotiate that?**

Whenever I write about someone in a substantial way, I always give them the text before it comes out, and the option to change their name. If someone has a big issue with some small thing, then I will cut it out. I don't really give people, necessarily, the option to remove themselves from the text, because it is my text. Also, most people are only recognizable to the people that already know them. I would say with *The Freezer Door*, probably

the person I wrote about the most—it brought us closer, and he has said that it feels like a gift. In *So Many Ways to Sleep Badly*, there was one person who was immersed in the process of writing the whole time, was thrilled by it, totally intoxicated, and totally engaged with it. And then that person's lover read it and was like, "Oh, this is scandalous," and then they changed their mind. There's a few times that's happened and ended our relationship. What I would say is it showed me that our relationship actually meant less than how they're being perceived. They're not talking to me about our relationship—that would be meaningful [if they did]. It's a tricky balance, because I do want to be ethical at all times. I want it to be a process where I am transparent. The process has illuminated the limitations of certain relationships, basically the ones that [I didn't quite realize] were already over.

I will add that in *The Freezer Door*, there was one person in particular who was a close friend of mine at the time, that I was thinking, "Oh, I don't want to offend this person," as I was writing about our relationship. And that I would advise no one to ever do—that self-censorship. Just write whatever the hell you want! You can change it later. And the relationship ended anyway, having nothing to do with the writing. People are like, "Oh my god. My father, my mother, my sister, my lover, my ex-husband, someone I slept with once, this person, they might be offended." Good! That's what you need to write. You can throw it away, but write it first, even just for yourself, for memories, practicing, or analysis. You can delete it from the computer, but you've at least written it. What's really interesting is that some of the people I was holding back on writing about were actually the people that threw me away anyway. Why was I holding back?

**Did you still feel protective of them?**

I was feeling protective. In one case, it's someone who completely threw me away, more or less. Then another case, I knew that person was sensitive about being portrayed, so I changed every detail, so no one would recognize them.

**I wanted to talk about Patti Smith and the violence of nostalgia. You constantly engage with inequality and privilege. I think the trend, currently, is to be very self-reflective and self-aware, and it generally ends there. Your focus is more on communal implications. How do you articulate your own comfort and then interrogate it?**

The first line of my book is, "one problem with gentrification is that it always gets worse," and so gentrification is the landscape in which the book takes place. It's not just gentrification in the way we think of it as displacement and real estate speculation, but also, it's gentrification of love, the body, of desire and public space. For me, the dream of the city is the place where you find everything and everyone that you never imagined. It's that engagement with public space, what surprises and changes you. In a lot of ways, what I'm writing about in the book is that tyranny of the suburban imagination over urban life, where people are walking around in a place that looks like a city, but they have this white-picket fence behind their eyes, and they're just suspicious of any unplanned interaction. For me, that's the death of the city. With accountability, I think in some ways, it starts with myself, but it also has to go on a structural level. It has to be everything at once. They're not separate. Me feeling excluded because I'm wearing a hat with a flower on it is connected to structural homophobia and mandatory masculinity among anyone socialized as male. It's connected to a gated mentality even among people who have been punished by the gates.

If I had to choose one piece of art that has been the most damaging to urban life over the last few decades, I would choose Patti Smith's *Just Kids* because she facilitates this mythology of New York, that fame is a chain of coincidences that happened because of her great talent. Patti Smith has a permanent kind of fame. It will never be taken away. She's reached the top level in that sense, but no one reaches that level without pushing people aside, fucking people over, doing things that they despise that make them feel horrible inside, but none of that is revealed. It also fosters this idea of these glory days, when you just walked into the Chelsea Hotel, and Janis Joplin sat down and started playing music. And then you went outside and met someone on the street, who had just stolen a steak and wanted to take you to his apartment and cook up that steak. It was Sam Shepard and it's just, "Oh, hey. He wants to work with me!" As long as we think that there was a golden age in the past, we can never make that happen now. That's the kind of nostalgia that to me, is violence. It squashes our potential to think, dream, believe, act, create, find one another, actualize, and challenge the world. It packages this

streamlined garbage as the ideal.

**How are you trying to counter that kind of revisionism that erases trauma? Do you make distinctions between your activism and writing?**

Activism is what formed me. When I moved to San Francisco at 19, I was in search of direct action activism. Being a part of ACT UP, being a part of a lot of other groups at that time, that was really what formed me. I don't consider my writing to be activism. I consider my writing more like a way to express myself, a way to stay alive, and a way to connect with other people. I think activism will always be suffused in it, but I would never call my writing activism. Actually, that's a perfect example of nostalgia. I moved to San Francisco in the early '90s, and people now will say, "Oh my god. The early '90s. That must have been amazing." There were amazing things about it. There were things that were possible then that aren't possible now in the same way, but at the same time, everyone was dying of AIDS. How can we romanticize that? I feel like that's what nostalgia does. It takes away the nuance, the messiness, the trauma, the complications, the fullness of the experience. That's why I always want to write against nostalgia. It doesn't mean I can't talk about something amazing from my past, or a memory when I felt connected. For me, the opposite of nostalgia is truth, and so truth is what I'm after. Truth is the antidote.

**Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore Recommends:**

Sarah Dowling's *Entering Sappho*

Going on long walks. I would say, go on as many walks as possible and get some fresh air.

House plants

I recommend color. I'm all about color. I don't really understand those weird, monochromatic grays, and browns, and tans, and black clothing only. I think color. Color wows. Colored furniture, colored clothing, just color. The more color the better, and clashing patterns, I love. Totally recommend it.

I do really love knock-you-down house music, with a lot of air raid sirens, pounding drums, and just like sounds that you don't recognize. Weird samples. As many weird samples as possible. Not that many vocals, we don't need vocals.

Name

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Vocation

Writer

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