

On grief as a creative force



Food and culture writer Mayukh Sen discusses how winning a big award can affect your work, and the ways in which grief continues to inform his writing process.

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As told to Thora Siemsen, 4147 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Failure](#), [Mental health](#).

You write about everything, but there are definite focuses on food and film. When did you first start to feel literate in those particular subjects?

I don't feel literate when it comes to food. I'm slowly achieving literacy. Food writing happened to me accidentally. I was freelancing before [Food52](#) when an editor at Food52, Kenzi Wilbur, contacted me about this Staff Writer opening they had. They wanted a culture writer, a generalist who wasn't necessarily a food writer, to take on this role and write about food in a way that was accessible for people who are not avid home cooks and try to reach this new audience that the site hadn't tapped into yet. I'd never really considered food writing before that. I'd mostly experienced food writing in the context of restaurant criticism, which I associated with being moneyed and white, and thus I thought that space was off-limits to me.

Even when I started as a food writer, the landscape, at least digitally, struck me as sort of sterile. It became clear that many food publications were speaking to a narrow audience. Most of the stories I saw were hyperbolic or purely service-oriented. Or apolitical. After Trump's election, I realized that food media doesn't go beyond being barely left of center. In other words, I felt like my suspicions about food writing were confirmed. So it took me a few months to understand what I could contribute to this landscape that felt so buttoned-up.

It's the opposite with film. I grew up wanting to be a film critic. My dad was an occasional filmmaker, but more generally a cinephile, so I always grew up watching movies. Many of them had subtitles. I mean, in my spare time in high school, I would do shit like memorize every Best Actress nominee from 1960 onward. Total, borderline sociopathic loser stuff like that. But it gave me the feeling, or at least the confidence, that I have a well of knowledge I can draw upon when it comes to film.

That's what is so exciting about being a food writer, though. I'm constantly learning things, because I'm approaching many food stories from a complete idiot's perspective. It gives me a firmer grasp, I think, of what people might look for and respond to in a story that's about food.

The American film critic [Pauline Kael](#), who wrote for *The New Yorker* from the '60s to the '90s, is oft-cited in your work. How would you say a knowledge of her career seeps into your thinking about your own?

It's become somewhat gauche, or even frowned upon, to openly declare you like Pauline Kael. But I can't lie. She was the first film critic I really responded to in my teens when I read her. Her writing struck me as so electric and punchy, and born out of genuine love, rather than disdain, for the medium. I was stunned by her ability to write about her gut reaction to a piece of work and express those impulses so cogently. Plus, I've got to automatically idolize anyone who dislikes *The Sound of Music*. I admire that she came into this stodgy field as an outsider and shook it to its core, pushing people and setting a new kind of standard on her own. Nowadays, there's a lot of debate about what kind of standard she set and whether it should be considered the benchmark to aspire towards in film criticism. Many people take issue with her basic allergy to theory. What I really responded to in her writing when I first encountered it in high school was the fact that she seemed to be writing with a complete disregard for what gatekeepers had deemed worthy of praise.

So she basically parachuted into this boring space and really fucked shit up. I'd like to emulate that as I situate myself within food writing. I got here, I feel, not necessarily writing with the same voice and perspective as other people around me, but I hope I can stretch people's ideas of what food writing can be.

How do you wrestle ethically with writing about people who are no longer here, either the deceased or the disappeared?

I think the fact that I gravitate towards subjects who are dead, or who are forgotten in some way, has a lot to do with the fact that my father died a year ago in June. He was sick for three years before that. Along with my mother, I had the responsibility of taking care of him. More generally, I felt a compulsion to just be around him because of the knowledge that he wouldn't be around for much longer. Being in that kind of position, especially when you're entering this period of your life when you just graduated college and you're being told to be as selfish as possible and put your needs before anyone else's, is very humbling. Especially when you look around and see that so many people in your age bracket still have some privileges you don't.

Now that I'm approaching the one year mark of his death, I'm realizing that there's so much about him—his voice, his mannerisms—that I don't remember. There're so many things about him that I wish I could remember that I don't, and I'll never have access to them again. My memories of him are evaporating, which is very scary. I realize how awful this is for anyone who experiences it privately.

Oftentimes, I begin by talking to the family members when they're available. It's probably an impulse I had in anticipation of loss. I tried to do this with my piece on Irene Kuo, who I [wrote](#) about for Food52, but her family wouldn't speak to me. I did this with my [piece](#) for VICE on Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor.

Speaking to family members obviously introduces you to the risk of encountering some degree of bias. But I think it's useful to examine someone from the reference point of loss. Because what I want to convey so often in my pieces is how a person's loss can echo beyond the people in someone's immediate orbit, how the rest of the world is worse off for not having a Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor around. Often, the people who can speak most eloquently about that loss are family members and close friends. Speaking to those people, and filtering their grief through my own reporting, goes a long way in showing how someone's loss can echo beyond that small circle. My chief aim with a lot of what I write is to recirculate someone's legacy. Starting with the people who are in that person's direct orbit, who are dealing with their grief every day like I am, allows me to make that leap to express how big that loss is beyond just those people more gracefully.

I realize, in looking back at the work I've focused on for the past year, that I've been working through my grief in my writing. Sometimes it's literal, sometimes it's more subtle. You know, there were so many parts of my interviews with both of Vertamae's daughters, Kali and Chandra, where I just started crying because everything they were saying about loss and how to deal with it reminded me so much of my father.

How has talking to them, the Smart-Grosvenor family in particular, changed how you think about what's at stake in your work?

I was talking to a friend who also lost a parent a few years ago. She's a writer and editor, and she was telling me that experiencing this kind of loss when you're young emboldens your desire to do work that feels meaningful. It sounds corny, but that way of viewing the world really stuck with me. Speaking to the Smart-Grosvenor family reminded me of what producing work I find beautiful and meaningful actually looks like.

This also motivated me to quit my job as a Staff Writer, which had me writing a lot of stories I didn't necessarily want to have my name on. Over the past few months, I've felt myself growing more protective of my byline. I want to be writing through my grief, and what that requires is giving myself the space to do that. Being entrenched in the news cycle day to day does not necessarily afford you that kind of mental space.

Bereavement as a writer seems tricky because your grief is just tumbling around in your head with the work. Has it made you feel more sensitive to what readers or subjects could be going through as well?

Yes, it has. The whole experience of losing a parent at 25 has been incredibly alienating for me. Returning to the world after this two-week period following his death, where I was just with my mom and my sister, felt so jarring. So many stimuli felt so caustic. It didn't feel like any of the people around me could sympathize with whatever I felt was happening to me.

Now, what I've realized I want out of my closest relationships is people who are going to affirm me and push me, but always want to see me happy. It's forced me to excise all the people in my life who don't do that. Trimming the fat, basically, and getting rid of the people who make me feel like shit.

Through my writing, I'd like to think I'm creating a sense of comfort for people who might not find it otherwise. It's so hard to find sources of joy when everything feels so circumstantially joyless, you know?

Returning to the question of ethics when writing about people, you also write about those who are living but seem removed from our stratosphere, icons including Cher, Buffy St. Marie, and Barbra Streisand.

Well, for subjects like Barbra and Cher, I often come at them from a place of feeling that they've been misunderstood in some way that feels unfair to me. It's like I'm working out my feeling that I've been told lies about them, lies that don't square with how I respond to their work, and I want to know who is to blame. In the case of those two women, it's almost as if their greatness is taken so for granted that no one really deems it worth treating as a serious object of inquiry.

With Buffy, it's a little different. I wanted to know, basically, how the fuck did this First Nations woman breastfeed on American television yet get so little recognition for it? How is this not something people are constantly talking about?

There's a challenge in writing about subjects you have affection for and feel have been dealt a shit hand. I don't want to over-correct for what I see as the unfair and unjust way they've been remembered or misremembered, but I do just want to bring a considered, thoughtful approach to their output that I hadn't encountered otherwise. I'm working off the assumption, usually, that there's a sense of dismissal regarding the work that these women have done. That they're taken for granted, I guess, which is its own kind of forgetting?

When the movie star Sridevi passed away this year, you took up the difficult and dual task of eulogizing her while translating her importance for a Western audience. Do you crave doing more projects where you don't have to explain a reference bank?

Absolutely, constantly. For food, it manifests in writing for publications where you have to describe a dosa as an "Indian crepe," or use some sort of Western reference point. It almost feels as though it's preventing me from doing my best work, because I'm constantly having to over-explain things and also write with a specific kind of audience in mind. I had to do that a lot at Food52, where I'm writing in anticipation of getting really awful comments from people, which was terrible. You kind of Stockholm Syndrome yourself sometimes, or at least I did when I was in that job, because I said, "Oh no. It's making me a better writer by asking myself constantly who I'm writing for. What assumptions am I making about my audience?" It doesn't actually help you grow as a writer. It really stymies you. It bludgeons a lot of creativity, because it is a form of self-censorship. You really put a ceiling on what you can achieve and express within your own writing if you're constantly in this state of anxiety, of anticipation that you're just going to get mauled in the comment section. So within the context of food writing I would absolutely want to write for more publications where I don't have to explain things like that.

In the case of film, well, it's equally tough. The really difficult thing about Sridevi is that I'd heard so many people describe her as the "Meryl Streep of India," a comparison I hate for many reasons, as I explained in my piece. But that very rhetorical gesture, to say someone is the X of Z country in the global south, infuriates me in general. I wrote that piece on Sridevi quite quickly, out of a determination to write it for a Western outlet because she was this icon of global cinema who could so easily be overlooked. But I read that piece and I consider it a failure. If I could rewrite that piece, I would, because I ended up asserting that she was closer to Julia Roberts than Meryl Streep, which is a nuts comparison in itself.

I'd like the chance to write about her again if I could. To get really granular and just talk about Sridevi, her output beyond Bollywood, within South Indian cinema. South Indian cinema historically gets very little recognition within India, and especially outside of it. So for me to kind of reproduce that weird power dynamic within my own piece about her, which is ostensibly a tribute to her work, felt like a colossal failure on my part.

You won the 2018 James Beard Award in Journalism in the Profile category for "She Was a Soul Food Sensation. Then, 19 Years Ago, She Disappeared." When did telling this story about Pamela Strobel, known as Princess Pamela, occur to you?

Early last year, I saw a Publisher's Weekly article stating that this long-lost cookbook of this missing soul food restaurateur was going to be re-released. It was originally released in 1969. The re-release was being spearheaded by these two white male chefs, the Lee brothers, who, by the way, are incredible.

I was just totally drawn to and saddened by the fact that this black woman, whose food had touched so many people's lives, disappeared without a trace. It seemed so metaphorically apt that this black woman, a woman who belongs to the very demographic whose contributions get most easily ignored in the culinary world, literally went missing. I had just read Toni Tipton-Martin's incredible book, *The Jemima Code*. In that book, she writes so beautifully about the history of black women who'd authored cookbooks in the U.S., and so many of the women who wrote these cookbooks, have slipped from public memory. Princess Pamela was just one of those stories. I saw Princess Pamela's as an opportunity to interrogate who food media values historically, who gets called "great," who slips into the margins and why that happens.

It was the first story of that ilk that I wrote. After that piece, I started writing a lot about cookbook writers, specifically women of color who were lost to time. When I wrote the Princess Pamela story, it felt like new, exciting territory for me. I was tapping into different registers as a writer that I didn't know I had.

It's weird, though, because right now I'm in that stage post-win where I keep on rereading that piece and thinking, "Oh man. I would have cut that word. Oh, I'm so ashamed of this piece. I hate this sentence." I think that's going to be a constant condition of being a writer, being hyper self-critical and telling yourself that you don't deserve whatever kind of praise you get, whether it's an award or something milder.

Do you feel a sense of belonging to a milieu of food writers?

I do now, yeah. A bit more, at least. The Beard win helped so much. I've never been as happy as I've been in the past two months since I got a James Beard nomination and then a win. When I started my full-time career as a food writer a year and a half ago, I remember getting in here being like, "Okay, I don't know how the fuck this is going to go, but I'd really like to get something like a Beard nomination out of this, however long this ride lasts." I was quite determined.

I know so many people who've been working as food writers for so much longer than me who've strived for a Beard throughout their whole careers. I'm so lucky to have gotten this award at 26. Because I'd always viewed the James Beard awards as representing this very small circle I could never permeate.

So, yes, it does make me feel like I belong in some way. Now, I'd really like to use this award to kind of fuck shit up a little bit. I want people to feel like they've unleashed a monster, because I have felt myself spending the past year writing in a way that's so genteel, so timid. In doing this, I feel as if I've compromised some core sensibility that I have as a writer, blunting the skepticism I try to approach the world with. Now, I hope I won't have to fight to be taken seriously as much as I did before, which will free me up to write in my own voice.

What are some of your fears about where you are at right now?

Within food writing, I've encountered many people who position themselves as allies but seem to want to undermine me and my work. I'm fearful of letting them get to me. I've had people say, "Oh, you only like to do a very specific kind of food writing," the implication being that I shouldn't be doing this very long, or that I don't deserve to take up space. I so want to prove those people wrong. What's so exciting right now in this period of my career is that I feel like there are so many food stories I don't even know that I want to tell. I want to show people that I can do anything.

By that same token, I think, I don't want anyone to pigeonhole me into a specific beat and specific kind of food story and say, "That is all he's capable of. He's reached the zenith of that. It's time for a new voice." It's also just really boring for me to strum the same note as a writer, you know? I'd like to prove to both myself and my critics that I deserve to be

here.

Post-Trump, too, it feels as if there's been an impulse to fetishize voices of color, and queer voices, within food media. I am both. So it can feel very scary to think that some gatekeepers see you as a person who's fulfilling a need that's basically been defined by white liberal anxiety. To be completely cynical, I worry that within the next year or two there's not actually going to be space for any of the kind of food writing that I want to do.

When do you feel most creatively satisfied?

Maybe this is just a condition or byproduct of having gotten so much hate mail throughout my very short career, but I feel really at ease when I have strangers write to me about how much meaning they found in my work. I remember this email that I got about the Princess Pamela piece from some dude who told me how much respect I put into writing about this person who is no longer around. It felt lovely. I want to be reaching new people through my work. I want someone like Princess Pamela's story to reach someone who may not have ever known her or known that she existed at all.

My satisfaction should not be dependent on how people react to my work, but I can't deny that it so often is.

Do you feel sentimentally linked to what you've written about usually, or can you bifurcate and write something with gusto that you then move on from?

I like to live inside a piece for a long time. To just think about it, make sure that I'm writing it in the most complete, holistic way possible. But there's danger in this. When you're inhabiting one mental space for so long, you really run the risk of overthinking and starting to lose touch with how a normal person might respond to writing. Once I put a piece out into the world, though, I try my best to divorce myself from it and the mental exhaustion that put me through. A lot of pieces leave me because they need to once I'm done with them.

I think that when I look at the pieces that I'm proudest of, though, I will always be touched by the subjects in some way. They never really leave you. Like that Vertamae piece I wrote months ago. It still stays with me. I think a lot about her daughters and the pain they've had since their mother died.

In your piece, "[The Sad, Sexist Past of Bengali Cuisine](#)," you write, "When we ask where our food comes from, it's usually more about the people and not what they're feeling—their joys, their disappointments, and whatever mess exists in between." What are some ways you attempt to share some of those feelings in your work?

I've been living in a total mess for the past year of my life, mostly because I lost my father at 25. I'm writing through that mess a lot in ways that I feel are very public. It's funny. I was talking to another friend who also lost a parent a few years ago in their 20s. They were telling me that they really want to save this experience and write about it when the time feels right and when they've processed it enough. I just can't relate to that feeling at all. I want to write through this constantly, this experience of grief. I don't feel like saving this experience. I want to write through it. I have that luxury, I hope, now that I'm freelance and have more control over what I put my name on.

This whole year has made me feel as if time is slowed. My priorities have shifted inevitably, my sense of what I really care about. I just want to produce meaningful work. That sounds like a very lofty pursuit, I know, and maybe impossible, but I'd like to work towards that.

I'm always writing about death in some way, because what this whole experience of taking care of a parent, and then seeing him die, has taught me is that so quickly that person's memory can evaporate no matter how many lives they touched. I'm losing these images of my father that were once just in front of me for so many years. I want them to live on in some way. That trickles through to my writing, whether that's through writing about him specifically or people who have gone through something that feels as seismic as this loss does. I want to write those stories. I want to do something to preserve that memory.

Mayukh Sen recommends:

Moondram Pirai (1982). Sridevi's best performance, in Tamil. She was 19! But don't watch the Hindi version, *Sadma*; she's terrible in it

This rare music video for "[Tunnel of Love](#)" by Dire Straits—lovely, because most of their videos from this era are so hilariously literal and, plainly, suck!

[Timepass: The Memoirs of Protima Bedi](#)

Vatika Coconut Oil for your hair

[Mimi Swartz on Farrah Fawcett](#)

"[Dil Dhoondta Hai Phir Wohi](#)" from *Mausam* (1975). I listen to this song every day

Time-hopping your neighborhood back to 2007 in Google Maps Street View. What a ride!

["I can't talk now, I'm on the phone"](#)

[Haldiram Soan Papdi](#)

Everything Liza Minnelli does in *The Sterile Cuckoo* (1969)

Name

Mayukh Sen

Vocation

Writer

