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As told to Shy Watson, 2374 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Identity, Mental health, Time management.

On pushing forward no matter what

Writer Rachel Yoder discusses propulsion, interacting with the unsaid, faith, being awake, and living an artful life.

What, to you, makes a good sentence?

I like a sentence that is propulsive. In *Nightbitch*, I was reveling in long sentences. I like a sentence that takes you into it, and then won't let you out. But then I also think there's something really beautiful about the deeply controlled, crystalline, finely distilled sentence that kind of has a *ping* at the end of it. I just read a book called *Chouette* and every sentence has a like, *ping, ping*, at the end of it because they're just all utterly balanced and refined.

I loved the long sentences in *Nightbitch*, because they made me feel way more rushed and anxious. Propulsive is a great word for it.

I'm really interested in a sentence that feels sung and I think long sentences, the way I write myself through them, they're closer to music and singing than they are necessarily to prose.

Do you play music?

I was raised in a very musical family. I played the piano from an early age and I sing. I've moved away from music, but I still really crave it. I think I bring that into my writing and musicality very much informs my writing. I usually feel my writing and hear my sentences before I process them intellectually.

The more *Nightbitch's* narrator transforms into a dog, the better she is at being a mother. I was curious about that.

Having a kid showed me how much of an animal I really am and how much biology can short circuit your higher intellectual brain and take over your entire life. How caring for your young is this innate animal urge. For *Nightbitch*, giving into those animalistic qualities allows her to mother the way she wants to mother. When a child's that young, they're such a little animal and they're so embodied, right? They're so

in touch with their instincts and their base wants. And so for the mother to go there with her child, she's able to be present as an animal, to be in the moment, and that's a beautiful experience to have with your offspring.

I loved it. The narrator also seems to fear expression, whether it be asking the book mommies if they are dogs, updating the husband on her canine developments, or even asking the husband to do bed times. How do you explore the unsaid in your work?

The whole experience of writing *Nightbitch* was an interaction with the unsaid. It was bringing into language all of the sensations and tensions and questions and struggles of motherhood that were swirling around inside of me, and which I had never heard articulated, and which I also wasn't yet able to articulate for myself. Working with these tensions in fictional space felt like the safest way to explore this unsaid rather than diving into it, headlong in my own life.

I would describe the book as brave, because I feel like it's a faux pas in polite society to admit to the frustration of motherhood, even though it's natural and, really, innate.

Thanks. I feel like there's all of these rules about politeness and niceness that get applied, especially to mothers. Mothers are supposed to be caretakers and sweet and endlessly giving and endlessly self-sacrificing and it just all seemed like bullshit to me. You don't stop being a person when you become a mom. You're still this full complicated person, so why can't we see that in our literature, too?

For sure. *Nightbitch* speaks a lot to art being an inherent result of simply living. Can you talk about how this does or does not prove true in your own life experience?

I think especially with writing *Nightbitch*, it became very apparent to me how there really isn't any separation between the life I'm living and the art that I'm making. It's all of a piece and perhaps for some other people it doesn't come from such a personal place. My writing has always originated out of a deep, personal need that I have or some problem or question that I need to work out in a safe creative space. That's what *Nightbitch* was for me, and everything I do sort of informs what I'm working on or what I'm thinking about. I really do think that living an artful life, for me, just means wanting to be very awake and very conscious to what I'm experiencing.

Do you have any particular methods that you use to stay more awake or present?

I've been getting into routines this past year. I bought this line-a-day diary and every morning I sit down and I have a beginning task. "Okay, this is how I start." Right? I write one line about what's going on. I sit in my sunroom, and I look out the window at the plants. I light a candle. I touch a piece of rose quartz I keep on the table. Coming up with a routine and having these items that I can touch each day I think has also been a function of the pandemic, too. How to ground yourself in the pandemic. How to keep going despite circumstances which challenge the process, which tell you that it doesn't matter.

I also usually read a little bit from a book about art or process or psychology. There's a wonderful book called *Art and Fear*, which I read through during the pandemic, just like a morning meditation, and have now finished and am starting again. Also just trying to be off my phone more and be present in the world has been really transformative for me, too.

I was wondering if you would say that.

I've become so addicted to it, and it's such a way to check out. I'm trying to be really conscious of coming back into my body. I have to come back into the actual space that I'm living in. I can't just always be in this imaginary ether space of people I don't know and their words. So for me, it's just been these very kind of basic quiet ritualized things of returning to a paper and pen, returning to a book. Sitting in the heat and feeling my body sweat in an actual environment. Stuff like that.

I know that you're the founding editor of *draft journal* and that you've played a big role in organizing Mission Creek Festival as well as assisting with other literary events and organizations in Iowa. How do you balance these projects with your own creative work. How do they help or hinder each other?

They have been really great. These other projects definitely take time away from my writing time, which is the drawback. But there are so many benefits from them. For instance, with *draft*, I'm talking with other authors about their processes and going really deep into a single piece, talking about sentences, talking about craft, something that I haven't done since I got my MFA. It's this wonderful re-engagement on a deep level with writing and the creative process, and with craft, that you just don't get every day. It's hard to find that if you're not in an MFA program. I use those conversations with authors to then return to my own work and start examining it that same way.

The same thing with Mission Creek. It takes a huge amount of time to plan all that. The benefit is, whenever I go to a reading and hear an author not only read, but talk about their work, I start thinking about my own work, and it gets me excited to return to my own work because I'm just so inspired by what they've said or what they've read or they've given me an amazing idea I want to explore. It's this constant process of donating some of your creative time to making these cool things happen. But in return, you get this great inspiration and you get a framework for returning to your own work in a more engaged way. In a more excited way.

Your narrator is a visual artist. Have you worked as a visual artist before?

I have dabbled in the arts, but I'm not an artist by any means, like a studio artist. I did take screenwriting classes and considered going to film school and have always really loved the film medium. That's really as far as that goes. In terms of all the arts stuff, I was an Iowa Arts Fellow, which is this grant that's given out by the state of Iowa, back in 2017. I toured the state with four artists: a sculptor and a filmmaker and a musician and a painter. We went around Iowa, presented our work, and I was moved not only by their work, but by how they talked about it. I was like, "Wow, why are writers and studio artists and filmmakers and musicians not all in school together?" Because it seems like there's such amazing synergy that happens when you get all those different kinds of brains, disciplines, and ideas in the room.

Nightbitch has this project she made in grad school with the bones and carving the bones and the gold and that is completely stolen from one of those artists. Her name is Lee Running; she's an amazing sculptor who would find roadkill, clean all the bones, and carve them. That thing is real. The sculpture of the recreated deer is a real thing that Lee made. And I became obsessed with this sculpture to the point that I said to myself, this is going in the book, even if I don't know how, it has to be there.

I didn't for a second think that was real. That's such a wild project to take on, picking up the roadkill, everything. Another example of art that is very brave.

She is a badass. Her work is absolutely incredible. We still have a relationship; she just emailed me the other day. We're on the same wavelength, but we're operating in different disciplines. It's really interesting to be in conversation and be like, "Oh, what are you working on? How can my brain sort of use that for writing?"

Aside from money, what are the rewards of your creative practice? What do you get out of your work and what has it taught you about yourself?

I know that I am the most myself and the most at peace with myself and the happiest when I am regularly and consistently writing and making space in my life for creative play and fantasy and hopefulness, because I do think writing is an inherently hopeful act. Especially in these times of global climate crisis and pandemics, why would I still keep writing? What is it going to do to help these seemingly insurmountable problems? For me, it is an act of hope. It is also an act of self-love and supporting my own mental health.

Writing is almost a religious act. It's taken the place of religion for me in that it's something I have faith in, that I know isn't going to fail me. It's something I return to daily. It's a ritual. It's something that puts me in touch with not only myself and my own dreams, but it also feels like it puts me in touch with something much larger that I'm tapping into, a sort of larger mystery that I get to interact with via writing. It's fulfilling a lot of different things for me, a spiritual need, a personal introspective need, even my need for community, because it connects me to other writers via this contemplative endeavor we've all committed to.

How long did it take you to write *Nightbitch*, and what the process was like?

It took me about three years. I wrote it after two years of not writing, which for me was an epically long time to not write. I was very panicked that I was never going to write again and maybe I wasn't a writer, which is my worst nightmare. Then I just kind of got this little gem of an idea and it seemed really bonkers and like it'd be super fun. I could be totally free on the page, and it poured out of me. It took me three years, but I wasn't writing every day.

Jami Attenberg started this thing on Twitter where she said, "I'm going to write for the next two weeks, a thousand words every day. If anyone wants to join me, let's do it." It has the hashtag #thousandwordsofsummer. That has not ever been the way that I write, word count for a number of weeks, but I was like, "Okay, well, I don't have a lot of time, so I'm going to do it this way."

I would write a thousand words for 14 days, have 14,000 new words, and I wouldn't write for a couple months. Then I would do it again, and that's how the book got written. It was written in these chunks, over a number of years. I was really, really determined to write a book because I was almost 40, I had a little boy, and I had two MFA's, and I didn't have a book. And I was like, "Rachel, you are writing a book now!" So I was focused on putting enough words together for it to be a book and absolutely determined. The determination was a physical sensation, of pushing this huge pile of words forward, no matter what. Some days were exhausting, because I didn't want to write and didn't have anything to say, but you write something anyway. You keep going no matter what. To have this work to do is a great gift.

Rachel Yoder Recommends:

Titane by Julia Ducournau is a perfect movie

Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking by David Bayles and Ted Orland

Louise Bourgeois: Drawings and Observations by Louise Bourgeois

Radical Compassion by Tara Brach

The grassy, perennial gardens of Dutch designer Piet Oudolf

Name

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