

How I Learned to Write

written by Sophia Starmack | December 19, 2016



I spent a great deal of time alone as a child. This was due in part to my temperament, which has always been solitary and strange, and in part to circumstance, as my parents' troubles often required me to look after myself.

Let me amend my statement somewhat. As a very young child, I was not left alone so often, for I was a baby and of course could not look after myself. My parents, being very young and quietly bewildered by the existential pain that would never stop peeking up from beneath their hazy senses of themselves, wisely drew on the help of their own parents. Being the first of my generation, and blond and amiable even as an infant, I was well liked and doted upon by both sets of grandparents.

I do not mean to imply that my parents did not love me. In fact, they loved me very much and made many sacrifices for me, and to the best of their ability they lavished me with affection. They taught me to read and sang to me and I know they were astonished and delighted by the mysterious, pretty girl-child they had made by accident. But they were very young and had met in a youth hostel in Portland, Oregon, and I am softening the story when I say I believe there was a good deal of alcohol and many other, stronger, substances flowing. After I was born, my parents married, and somewhere I have a picture of them embracing under a gilded ceiling in a church in Minneapolis, where my father lived with his family. My father is tall and thin, and my mother looks bleary-eyed, smiling in her white dress and wide-brimmed hat. They had me baptized in my grandfather's Polish Catholic church and about a year later, they divorced.

My first memory is of my mother leaving the city of my father. My father's mother had wrapped a dozen tiny presents in white tissue to amuse me during the long drive, and now I'd undone each of them, and I lay in my paper nest in the back of my mother's little VW Rabbit, adrift in a sea of crumpled white tissue. The telephone wires fly by, and I squint my eyes and rearrange the world to my liking, making the running lines meet, then explode off of the thin black heating wires that run across the rear window. At night my mother and I sleep in a cheap motel and lights from passing cars on the highway sluice back and forth across my vision—white sheets, white lights, the white noise of tires through snow and rain on pavement. My mother sleeps

with her mouth open, and her breath is sour and slow. I watch her. I watch the headlights illuminate the gray motel and think the half-formed thoughts of a very small child: pop songs replayed, wonder and fear of the breath that escapes from my mother's opened mouth and somehow enters mine. My first nightmare is also born of this period: I lie in the backseat, playing my eye-game and singing to the radio words I only half understand, when suddenly I look up and into the front seat. My mother has disappeared and the car hurtles on, driverless. I have this dream again and again for many years.

The word-soup in me was born of this confluence of solitude and my parents' unspoken fear and extravagant, boundless love. As a baby, my mother, now single, recorded me talking to myself and singing in the bathtub: a song about a moo-cow, a song about baking a cake of barley flour. In my baby book, she copied down a poem composed in one such bathtub session:

Secret readers

Prime time

Lovers got the flyers

What in the world would I do

Without you

It was radio jumble and dependence, thrill and taboo.

My mother had a beautiful voice and she sang to me: the ballad of King Henry, the brave and gentle king who made love to a grisly, man-eating ghost; *Nature Boy*; *Raindrops Keep Fallin' on my Head*; old Joni Mitchell songs. We listened to Joan Armatrading and to country songs about eating ice cream on a stick and we watched the records spin round and round. My mother worked as a secretary at the city hospital forty miles away. In the basement of the clumsy old house where we moved with the man who was now my stepfather, I found boxes filled with the detritus of her youth: photos of her and her five brothers, drunk at a wedding; report cards from her private high school, where her Russian teacher lamented her unwillingness to develop her potential; notebook after spiral-bound notebook of my mother's poems, song lyrics, and sketches.

I learned about humanity from A.A. I went to meetings with my mother or my stepfather, or sometimes both, when there was no baby-sitter. In YMCAs, in church basements, and in elementary school classrooms I breathed in the determined cigarette smoke of sobriety and the bright, burnt smell of coffee in Styrofoam cups. Sometimes when I was lucky there was Swiss Miss cocoa with miniature marshmallows in individual paper packets. I played quietly by myself, reading a book or drawing pictures while grown men bit their lips around the butts of their Camels. Sometimes when the stories grew too grim or gruesome my mother would send me away to a corner if there were toys or to the kitchen if it was a church, and I'd perch on a tall stool among five-gallon vats and aluminum steam trays, peering out through the serving window at the men and women gripping their folding chairs as though to keep from falling off the wagon, or holding counsel as they dispensed courage and pithy slogans to newcomers. In those days in rural New York the Lord's Prayer was said at meetings in addition to the Serenity Prayer, and it was there I learned to say the Our Father, one hand clutching my mother's home-manicured

one, or gently grasping my stepfather's scarred and wizened one, while my other hand reached calmly for a that of a stranger. I saw many of my parents' friends at these meetings, and some of my teachers, and it was here I learned that a secret is not the thing that no one knows, but the thing that no one repeats.

Both my mother and stepfather were recovering Catholics and there was a tiny framed picture of Jesus over the sink, pointing to his light-flooded heart with one slender finger, hair streaming from his face in a posture of disappointment and compassion. I knew somehow that it was my stepfather who had put the picture there, and because of his immense suffering and his good disposition, I somehow associated Jesus with my stepfather, whose own chest was laid bare with scars and knots from the motorcycle accident he'd survived just before meeting my mother. There were things I understood deeply but vaguely; for example, that my stepfather's motorcycle accident and all the driving my mother and I had done when I was a baby were somehow directly related to the A.A. meetings we now went to. I also understood that my stepfather's missing arm, amputated above the elbow, and his wracked torso, were nothing to be ashamed of, though they were painful-looking and frightened children at the pool when we went swimming in the next town over. Yet I was proud of his good nature and all the sicknesses he continued to endure, and when he leaned over the kitchen counter for my mother to administer his B-12 injection, stabbing it with a practiced hand into the hard muscle of his buttock, his face was peaceful and beyond resignation, like one of the saints in my *Children's Giant Question and Answer Book*.

When I was sent to visit my father, who still lived with his parents, I had an *Illustrated Children's Bible* in the spare room where they kept my toys in a big wooden chest made for me by one of my uncles. I hid myself away for hours, losing myself in the pink wallpaper with its giant silver roses and in the stories of the Old Testament. When God breathed a great sleep onto Adam and leaned down to gently lift his rib, I felt a mysterious blush in my own side, the fingers of the unknown caressing an empty space under my skin. The way God made Adam unconscious was something like the way my own grandmother put me down for a nap, but it was also titillating in the perverse way of very young children who feel the thin boundary between waking and dreams as a place visited in the flesh. When the knifepoint pressed into Isaac's soft throat, I tasted tears and blood and then Abraham's deep trembling as God flooded into him and released him from his terrible promise. Unlike most children, I did not question the absurd cruelty of this story. I understood that desire was the thing that made a person willing to slit open the creature he most loved.

Perhaps because my experience of these stories was so sensual, I felt I should keep my Bible reading to myself and I grew pale with shame when my grandfather laughed and told my aunts and uncles how I pored over its pages alone when I was supposed to be sleeping. But he lifted me onto his lap and patted me on the head as I stared into his thin, leathery chest where it gaped through his purple terrycloth bathrobe. I reached for his heavy St. Christopher medal that lay in a patch of sparse gray hair. I understood that St. Christopher was for protection, and that my grandfather had once been in

a war and had come home safely, and I relaxed in his smell of Camel cigarettes, coffee, and hard work.

Back in western New York, the brief spell of regularity, with dinners at normal times and two grown-ups at home, had begun to dissolve as my parents' intractable sorrows resurfaced. My mother and I moved out of the house for a year, leaving my baby sister with my stepfather. We returned long enough for my mother to enroll in music school (she'd dropped out before I was born but at age 30 decided to finish at last) and give birth to a third baby girl. She went to a residential new-age therapy program in New Mexico. She had an affair. She asked to change back to her maiden name. Finally, my stepfather moved out. The two little girls (my "half-sisters," though I was forbidden to call them as such) shuttled back and forth, half the week with their father, half the week with my mother and I.

When I was sick, or when I had no class because of teachers' meetings, or if I just wheedled hard enough, my mother took me with her to the Eastman School of Music, where she now worked in addition to taking classes. My mother's voice teacher was a tiny, immaculate elderly woman named Mrs. Toribara. As a treat, Mrs. Toribara would show me how to fold origami flowers when my mother had finished her lesson. Mrs. Toribara adhered to a code of ladylike behavior that involved wearing a perfectly pressed suit and never letting her spine touch the back of a chair. I remember my mother coming home one day, triumphant after having won a battle over the choice of songs for her third-year recital. My mother wanted to sing a piece by Brahms which lamented, "I have sworn a thousand times not to touch this bottle, yet every time I see it I am born anew." It was a manly song, insisted Mrs. Toribara, not for women to sing. It was her song, insisted my mother. She knew exactly what Brahms meant.

Waiting for my mother to finish her lessons or her keyboard tutorial or her theory drill, I wandered the halls of the music school, an old-fashioned marbled and wood-paneled building with musty hallways lined with heavy, mysterious doors. I stared at the enormous portraits of former presidents of the college, and I longed for their air of elegance and calm authority. Surrounded by the muffled strainings of a dozen students practicing furiously behind closed doors, I hid behind the dusty velvet draperies and gaped at the molded plaster ceilings. I felt at home here, more myself than I did at our cramped little house where the laundry room had been hastily converted to my "grown-up" bedroom on the arrival of a third daughter. The appliances themselves would not be removed for another two years, and the labor of washing lumbered through my sleep.

I felt that these serious and funny students (my mother's accompanist one year was a beautiful gay Native American pianist named Tim, who told my mother dirty stories over my head and read my Tarot cards) were my true colleagues, more so than the students in the dreary public school where children from six villages all converged for mindless lessons in indoctrination to public order couched in a veneer of "fun." (Building a rocket ship for science class was terribly un-fun if you had to wait for permission before so much as lifting a pencil or picking a paint color for your cardboard tubing; and although I enjoyed my own penmanship, the

composition exercises we were given were tiresome and militantly graded.) I developed a habit of being sick enough in the morning to stay home, but well enough to accompany my mother to her school. I went with her to German class, where my mother leaned over and whispered, "Herr Scheier is shaped like an 'S'!" and to French class and to opera studio and to rehearsal after rehearsal after rehearsal.

Of course, most of the time there was real school. In junior high I learned to put in the minimum of effort to collect a handful of mindless, untried-for As. I did not like most of my classmates and they whispered to each other that I was a lesbian, or planning to become a nun. I skipped school and went to my mother's opera rehearsals. I dawdled around the wings of the theater long enough and at age 15 was given a paid job in the costume shop. My best friend Nadine, a 22-year-old would-be escapee from my same little town, doted on me and we tried on enormous velvet costumes and stayed up late into the night stitching and listening to old records of *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. I read everything I could find in the house (a musty paperback copy of *Rubyfruit Jungle*, my mother's German textbook) or in the dismal one-room public library (which contained nothing printed after 1950 besides romance novels). Nadine, likely seeing her own sad self in me, passed me the course books from her college classes, and so I read Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Tennessee Williams, Ionesco, Artaud, and Wendy Wasserstein. Nadine sewed for local productions of children's theater and Shakespeare, and she took me to help her when she couldn't keep up with a demand for two dozen satin-lined skirts or a teddy bear costume to fit a six-foot-tall man. The world was beginning to flow in.

And yet I did not write. I did not write and I did not write and I scribbled and cursed myself for my inability to rise to the world around me. I studied and prayed and wept and I hated myself because I could not kick through the mute dread that covered me like Rochester's endless snow. Then, at age twenty-eight, in the basement of a university library, while writing my MA thesis on French medieval rape narratives and female religious authority, I read Hélène Cixous's cry, "Et moi aussi je n'ai rien dit, je n'ai rien montré; je n'ai pas ouvert la bouche, je n'ai pas repeint ma moitié du monde. J'ai eu honte. J'ai eu peur et j'ai bouffé ma honte et ma peur.... (Et pourtant je n'ai pas écrit avant l'âge de 27 ans.)"[\[1\]](#) And finally the medusa unfurled.

It is beyond cliché to write that I was saved by sisterhood, and yet in that moment, half-buried under my miserable notes and the piles of scholarly articles I despised, slogging to write through my feeble understandings in a critical language that terrified me even as I longed to master it, I sloughed off the first rough coat of almost three decades of guilt and the lashings of my own intellectual insecurity. I understood: I had long considered as flaws of character my solitary temperament, my inclination to lose days or weeks to moody or rapturous staring, my ponderous dreams and the voices that woke me from them, to say nothing of my stubborn refusal to compromise for love or money the expanding space inside. Yet they were in fact the mark of vocation, and this vocation was called *poet*.

I was glossing over something, something that even then I knew but today,

rereading Adrienne Rich on collusion and the willful and politically motivated separation of art from life^[2], I can say more clearly: this sense that poetry chooses us, that it is something above and separate from real life, that it is "high," that it flows down into us if we make ourselves blank enough, and that we remove our sense of who we are from our conception of poetry, this is collusion. This is intellectual laziness. It is largely come by unconsciously, though no more forgivably and this too is what I saw in that flash, what that snippet from Cixous laid bare before me: I came from a long line of women who were blanketed by the same silence. And we colluded with it, we called it poetry, song. We said, poetry is outside of me, and I feel myself yearning, burning with the tremors of something real, something that I am dying to name, but that is not poetry. Poetry is not A.A. meetings or long afternoons alone or walking to the grocery store or laughing with my young mother. In all the songs my mother sang, in all the roles she played, which of them had come from a woman's mouth, a woman's pen? None. I can think of not one lied, not one opera, not one song cycle, not one cantata out of all those my mother sang and I absorbed, all those words in many languages teaching me the shape of words in my mouth, imprinting me with language and desire and rhythm and teaching my body song, not *one* that was written by a woman. Hindemith, Barber, Brahms, Donizetti, Carissimi, Monteverdi, Handel, Bach, Buxtehude, Menotti, Copland. None of them women. Women sang these songs now that the age of castrati was over, but they did not write them, and history, it seemed at last, was full of pretty songs which a woman might sing but not create.

Only in church were there hymns written by women: *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, *Nearer My God to Thee*. In church, it seemed, there was some space for female feeling, for a woman to give shape to the expansive and tremulous desire she felt. And this was why I was interested in church, in women saints, and this interest had led me in fact, here to the basement library at Bryn Mawr, poring over medieval women's convoluted musings about God and sex and duty. I had never disliked church. I pondered it at an intellectual distance often times, laughing within myself at certain texts or bristling at a pastor's soft-spoken attempts to bring a rageful and dogmatic psalm to a peaceful understanding, one fit for a world in which a white Christian vision of tolerant co-existence was a virtue. Yet I loved the singing, the sense of space, the quietude, the way I could be left alone for an hour or two in a pew, poring through a hymnal, sounding out the shapes and notes of words and tunes, building neural pathways that to this day lead me to shady alleyways within myself, arenas of quiet contemplation. I liked the rituals and seasons of church, the births and deaths, weddings (even then I liked them, though I knew that my desire would not fit itself neatly into one), baptisms and blessings and givings of thanks and washings of sin. I liked the way church (the best parts of it) did not turn from the horrors of earth-starvation, anger, hatred, fear, death, disease, pestilence, decay, oppression—but sat with them and prodded me with my own fear and remorse into hopefully thinking better and acting more clearly. Yet here, too, I saw the collusion, for in their desperation to be heard, to hear themselves think, the women hymnists wrote about a God who was (sometimes, admittedly, in a Transcendental way, shimmery and green and natural) exclusively male, and surely white.

And the women I'd come from used their Church-tinted speech against each other, counseling their sons to marry good girls, rich girls, god-fearing girls, white-skinned girls from traceable families. These women used their language to flagellate themselves and their sisters for their own sins, their jealousies and failings and ignorance. With every word with which she carved herself into existence, the white women writers I read as a child and young adult betrayed the racist and colonial infestations of their historical moments, the limits of their own cultural imaginations. Western medieval literature fascinated me with the many convolutions it took a woman to get a thought onto paper; every work, it seemed, from letter to fable, began with an apologia: the woman was stupid, wrote with poor grammar, and was presumptuous, but for the good of her son, or her kingdom, or because her confessor demanded it, she would try to write. (Flashing forward several centuries, Victorian literature fascinated me with its suicides: every woman who dared to free herself from a crushing marriage or a domineering father or the stultifications of a life of drudgery and intellectual atrophy just had to, it seemed, end up dead. And all of them, dead or not, were heiresses to invisible cotton plantations. Neither the writers nor their protagonists, however brilliant, could truly imagine a free and aware woman inhabiting the world.)

And it was that snippet of Cixous which put at last into words the shame and rage and failure I felt at feeling so much and finding nowhere the language to bring my feeling into being. The simple words *I was ashamed* jolted me awake. I was small-minded, I still could not pass my German exam, I labored to understand French theory till I wept, I dared not open my mouth for fear of all I did not know. I had somnambulated through my twenties by placing myself on the sidelines of an ever-expanding world so far beyond my grasp I dared not speak of it lest I presume, mistakenly and heartbreakingly, to speak for it. I feared so desperately, I *knew*, that in my ignorance I would collude. And yet my silence too was collusion, coercion. I was damned. Yet I could do this: I could take my pen and write, *I am ashamed*.

The hymns sung in childhood, the opera roles and *lieder*, the girl saints, Dickinson, Marie de France, and my dear Brontës—they had woven the fabric of my own time-bound consciousness. I delivered the final copy of my thesis and before my defense fell ill with a raging fever and a strep throat like swallowing a flaming torch. Alone in my bed in I sweated and twisted and through the lace curtains I heard my grandmother calling to me, begging her intractable drunkard of a father for \$50 to go to nursing school; and my great-grandmother Sophia, who was mad and said racist things at dinners and was probably a lesbian; and my mother, who still sings in church yet no longer reads books or writes poems. I felt them moving within me and begging me forward, and it was no longer possible to keep silent though every word I wrote tore at me, filled me with a twisting fear and heavy dread and bashed me against the limits of what I thought I knew. I laughed, wept, pounded at my burning head, and picked up the pen.

[1] Cixous, Hélène. "Le Rire de la méduse." *L'Arc* 61 (1975): 39-54.

[2] Rich, Adrienne. "Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet (1984). *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1994*. New York: Norton, 1974, 239-252.