

On Drinking Less

written by Mairead Case | August 17, 2016



“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” – Audre Lorde

Mostly I think the personal essay is a shimmery truth—not the feelings and the sentences in it, the actual word-blocks—but the wrap-up of it. The resolution. Because when there is death, let’s look at a body. And when there isn’t, or when the body is gone, let’s take it sentence by sentence, because we are still here and we don’t really know the end—for example, yes I still miss her. I could torch a field. I saw the moon that day. I am not being sarcastic. On nights I miss the moon, I need to be told—which is different than knowing—that there are other nights. This is how we stay inside our bodies in this world. I’ve spent so much time feeling angry, feeling shipwrecked by late-stage capitalism and white post-second-wave feminism that often I forget the easiest way to resist being objectified, which is itself a death: make your body look out too. This does not need to be huge, just a hello: Hello.

I’ve kept a personal diary since sixth grade—I used to write to a name, like sending notes across an ocean to someone I was going to meet—now the notebooks sit in three hard-color rows near the bottom of my pantry, underneath the beans and above the jug of vinegar. These days I eat mostly fruit and cheese and bread, fists of meat, so the pantry holds more words than food. I will never publish these personal essay notebooks—these hard tries—I will never make their rawness public, not because I’m embarrassed by it but because that writer is a stranger to me now, sometimes. Often. I do not understand people who say I should save the notebooks for my children, because today I don’t have children. I have a pantry full of notebooks and

rice. And anyway I want to make stories, not essays, because I don't understand the world right now, I don't understand what is happening to us. What are we doing. Do I even want to be here. What's more, I don't know that I want to understand it—I want more homes, impatiently, and less death. Today I am all gravity, no grace.

But I've been a big sister longer than anyone else—my earliest memory as myself are the Xs that said three days until my sister comes home, my sister and now I'm her sister too—and so despite this despair I want to help. To fight. I want to comfort. And so I want to say: I am drinking much less alcohol this summer, and it is helping me a lot. Maybe it would help you too. So here is how I am doing it.

I was straightedge for years—didn't drink a full alcoholic drink until I was twenty-two, wasn't drunk until much later—because people in my family—people I never met outside of photos and soup recipes and my own suddenly-fluttering heart—were definitely not straightedge, and their alcoholism swallowed parts of our oral history whole. My parents explained everything they could to us—my mother even taught my junior high sex ed, because our Catholic science teacher (I am Catholic) wanted to leave out condoms, was weird about blood—and yet we never talked about what happened with alcohol. My parents did share wine sometimes, but I never saw a beer in the fridge until long after I left home. Wine was something they drank to celebrate or talk privately, and alcohol was a radioactive bad.

After eight years of panickedly watering my drinks at parties, like trying to grow flowers from solo cups, I moved to a city, where I started drinking because my friends were drinking, and we had all moved together, sort of, and it was all very exciting. Plus I am an anxious person, and with beer in my hand I felt not only less anxious but also like I belonged. Like what I said was smarter. I was less self-conscious when I drank, and that was a relief. And then I started falling in love with people, in different ways, and sometimes they worked at bars or they played shows and we'd be paid in beer. So I drank. And I started reading and organizing in public, and I drank. When I drank, I could read without wearing a wig. I always knew wearing a wig was silly, was play, but I didn't know how else to get onstage.

And as I became stiller I started learning about my neighborhood, and the buildings that used to be breweries, or the stoops where union men—mostly men—would hunch and drink from coozies and talk about money, and so I drank too. When I couldn't afford internet I would frog-sit in the hallway for a couple hours, siphoning off the bar below, and once it opened I would walk downstairs and write some more, and drink. I loved, I love the dark quiet of bars, the sitting in a corner and reading, and looking up, and reading more and not being bothered. You, I can be visibly alone in dark public. Alone in my apartment, sometimes I forget my body exists.

Soon however I started meeting family ghosts, in the faces of people I loved who would suddenly stagger or cry or vomit, stumble into being someone else. These others hit me, they barfed chicken wings into their hair. I try to understand, and sometimes I do completely, and I still care—the world is hard and cruel—but it made a before and after. Maybe all I'm saying is I grew up.

My own change happened after I worked a weekend—just a weekend—of anti-military demonstrations in Chicago. I was on a bike the whole time, taking notes to keep my friends safe, or if not safe then at least located, in eye contact, and I saw the shape of a shoulder sharpened by a club. I saw hot mean mouths broken into skin. I saw kids. When I came home I sat on the floor and sobbed into the cat. It was the first time I remember not knowing how to hold everything inside my body.

That night I started having scream-yourself-awake nightmares—in them I am always safe but my friends are about to be hurt, and I am the only one who knows—and I kept, I keep having them. I am not saying that I couldn't handle my work—I can, I still do it—but that these actions change my body. When it became too embarrassing to fall asleep around someone new, because of how I might scream, I started drinking right before bed, because then at least my brain would shut up enough to sleep. Trauma is not comparable, I don't think. This is my story. I listen to others too, and take them with me to bed and out into the world.

Enter years of continuing and increased political involvement—usually in an administrative way, or a protective one, in part because I present a lot of white cis het privilege, no matter how I identify in beds and books and bars and the one other ear, and this means shutting up and making way. And tithing. Am I prepared to lose my privilege and fight? Yes. I do. And I will. But nights are hard, not because I doubt these actions but because there are bodies on the wheels. I started going to sleep dull and waking up sad.

I used to think people who stopped drinking for any period of time were not my people. Plus I am too good at making rules for myself — once I made too many and followed them all and almost died. But drinking, I was turning to stone, so I thought: find the ley line. If you are drinking to numb, what would make you not want to be numb? How can we wage nonviolent war on a world that doesn't make room for us, and others? Obviously there is no one answer, even for one person. For me right now I changed the colors in my apartment—read: taped up pretty papers, found different jars and vases for staples and brushes, started baking and burning things that smell bright or smoky. (I am also on prescription medication.) I let myself have the privilege of an apartment that is my haven, instead of transposing that to a bar or sacrificing it so everyone else can sleep here too. This I think is a challenge a lot of us know. This is how I am solving it right now. I put acupuncture needles in my ears. I drink tea with mimosa flowers in it, or mugwort. I scream.

Also I allow myself to drink booze I like. Before I was drinking to not-think, to kill nerves, because shower beers are nice when you feel wrecked and ineffective in a room or on the street. Now I am allowing myself to drink, to make or buy what I enjoy, and who cares if I don't finish the glass. If I can only afford one. The rules I do have are based on my one own body: if you drink more than two straight shots of whiskey you will feel angry or weepy, later. If you drink several beers in a row, even in a room full of people you love over the space of several hours, in the morning your brain will feel like cotton and you will loathe yourself chemically for half a day. I know I am lucky to know this and to be able to stop. I am not going

to end this paragraph triumphantly—I had cotton-brain last weekend, and staying lucid means sometimes I feel bored, and ashamed of that, and I neon-remember names of people and countries so I argue about them, which means I have to mean it more, to know better, and if a date is bad-strange then I will just leave. I won't order another drink because I don't want to go home. Writing isn't any easier, but more of it is happening, which could possibly be worse. Feeling fully is scary as hell, but this is preservation too. I don't know how to be older than I am now, but if I turn to stone I can't hear anything at all.

I don't believe we decide the taxonomy for the work we make, the work I write, so okay maybe I'm eating crow and writing a personal essay anyway. What's important though is that I am trying. I am trying to be here with you. I am not trying to write an essay where I am the hero, where I triumph over body-flattening depression, where I am dry (though if you are I'll meet you there). I am trying to say hello. If I say hello and you say hello back, then we're not in a void now. Hello. OK now I'll listen.