

Speechless

written by Barrett Warner | June 23, 2014



I kind of like having tuberculosis. I'm not too worried about dying. It's an old disease, and scientists have figured out how to treat it. Takes about a year, not counting the relapses. My lungs are clear of abscesses so I can still make the stairs no problem. Actually, TB can be anywhere, like your spine. My hand surgeon told me there is a woman from Australia who has it in her elbow. Mine is in my guts. It's only contagious if I shit on you.

The bacillus has walled itself up around my diaphragm. Affects my voice for two or three months after a crash. A crash is when your immune system just gives up. You go back to the hospital with a 104 fever and they flatten you with bags of amino acids, intravenous antibiotics, and fasting for ten days or so. They check and re-check your liver and your kidneys. They boil water. Once or twice a day someone asks you to turn on your side to culture your rectal bleeding. After a while the tech doesn't ask. You see her, and you just roll over.

When you go to the hospital a lot you notice things, like how they made the rooms different, moving the eight inch wooden crosses around, or who isn't on the night shift any longer.

Sometimes I don't know I'm not talking. I move my mouth as if I'm talking, and my brain tricks itself into hearing me speak. "I can't understand a word you're saying," my wife says, as if silence were a foreign language like Basque. Or else she says I sound like Marlon Brando. "A drowning hundred year old Brando who can't find his teeth."

Last November when it hit me hard I went through the calendar. I had a poetry reading scheduled in December. *Delete*. I was supposed to speak at a writer's conference in early February. *Delete*. AWP in Seattle? *Delete*.

I couldn't be happier. The way some are afraid of horses I am afraid of speaking. My lip shakes. My legs weaken, and I have to steady myself on furniture. Been that way since I was four years old. Talking to animals just seemed easier. I could made do with eye contact and shrugs. A few years ago I added rapid blinking to my repertoire. My wife said it made her think I was lying all the time.

The way stutterers can still sing perfectly fine, I started writing poems in high school because I couldn't talk. The great thing about poetry is its simplicity. It's just a conversation. You read some books, live your vocally defected life, and write some poems. I wrote poems for seven years before I knew there were poetry readings. It was a shock. Within a few more years I'd published a dozen or so poems. One day someone asked me to read a story in public. The piss ran down my leg in front of everyone at d.c. Space. I hadn't even gotten to the good part. I was so ashamed I threw the story in the trash. A few days later I dug it out, burned it, and threw it away again.

What, I wondered, is my fucking problem?

I didn't come from a particularly large and loud family, or a small quiet one either. I was the oldest of three boys—only our sister was older than me. She was an amazing chatterbox. None of us realized that she was legally blind until she hit the second grade and questions started appearing on the blackboard.

“Blackboard?” she asked. “What blackboard?”

My speaking problem didn't seem genetic. My brother Robert was given the title role to his high school's production of *Dracula*. The local newspaper said his voice was a velvety baritone. My other brother is a minister. Has a voice that could make God sit up straight.

I've come to think of it as a kind of perpetual confusion, like I'm seeing a certain shape or angle in a leaf or in the sky and it's impossible to describe. All of that made me feel self-conscious. I was never quite sure where conversations were going, what they were about, but with friends I could hide a little behind facial expressions. On a stage there is nowhere to hide. My fear of speaking in public was really a fear of being in public at all.

I began to frequent nude beaches. I reasoned that if I could get over my problem of feeling self-conscious I might finally be able to read my poems and stories without seizing. It was worth a shot. Although I was never one of those who could march around the surf and dunes, or play sports and sort of carry on like a naked politician, I did manage a quiet sort of beach-going commando. Me and coco-butter tanning oil never got along so I'd smear olive oil—enough for a small romaine salad—and then I'd try to stay within ten feet of a towel crusty with sand at all times. It was an awful public situation, full of imagistic panic. My goal was to learn to be completely bored.

The real solution came in 1986 at an Apathy Press reading and open mic. I had written a story about a butcher making sausage out of neighborhood children. It was published in *Berkeley Fiction Review* and, with an all-over tan under my denim, I was keen to try it out in the small, informal, un-self-conscious living room. If the listeners scared me I would just pretend they were all wearing clothes.

I shook the house with my trembling. Afterwards, Chris Toll offered to make me a hotdog. His advice: go home and watch a movie, any movie, then pick a character and try to imitate him as I read my poems. The only video cassette I had at home was *The Deer Hunter*. I watched it three times. Twenty-two years and a hundred readings later people were saying that I even looked like Walken. We had a great run together—Walken and me—spanning all sorts of venues, Monday nights at rock palaces, off-Broadway polka lounges, and free range bookstores. Then I got TB. Then I lost my voice. I lost my Walken.

I felt so stupid that I had never taken the time to record myself reading everything I'd ever written. A lot of people back-up their writing files, and I had boxes of manuscript pages, but I was ruined by thinking I'd never hear

my work read by me again. Hearing myself was such an integral part of my writing. Living on a farm, working with stock animals, my hands were always busy. I composed almost every first draft out loud. When I wrote I didn't compose so much as write down the poem or paragraph I'd already written in my mouth while harrowing, mucking, tagging calves, inoculating pigs. Would I ever write again?

I had only one recording of myself reading one poem. Tracy Dimond and Amanda McCormick ran a letter press called Ink Press Productions. They wanted to make a CD for the next issue of *Espresso Ink* and to hand-letter the box and its liner notes. Amanda helped me record my submission in the relative safety and calm of her Zen apartment. She even left the room during the actual recording part. In addition to my contributor copy I bought four more CDs, just in case my only copy of my only recorded poem got damaged or else stuck in the CD player of one of our pre-millennial pick-ups.

Someone else suggested a program that turned typed words into sound. I sort of knew about this from having a quad friend who'd say something and the words would appear on a computer screen. This was the flip side of that, but it made my poems feel robotic like telemarketing.

I had another friend who helped me with my computer. Every now and then the fingers in my bad hand would bump the wrong key and my keyboard mouse would stop scurrying. I'd call Jessica Dotson and she'd tell me which key to tap to make everything right. She suggested I start blogging. The funny thing is that for someone with trouble speaking I have no problem talking myself into anything. I reckoned the posting would be like talking, or rather texting. I could reveal something without worrying over the look in someone's eyes. In blogging, the lights are always off. I could be more intimate.

I wrote three posts about being afraid, as if I were surrounded by holes eight feet deep that I kept almost falling into. My parents made unexpected appearances in each, as if there were childhood wounds I hadn't considered or as if I somehow knew what happened to me at four which affected my voice. I never "published" the blog posts. "How ironic is it that you would write so openly about fear and then be too terrified to post," Jessica emailed.

My latest visit to St. Joseph's Medical Center came during the Triple Crown. Giddy reporters kept asking the Derby and Preakness winner, "If he could talk what would he be saying now?"

A month after the crash my voice is slipping back into its crevices. It isn't the Walken voice, but it's a voice anyway you cut it. It's what I got. Being tired makes it erratic. Or using it too much. I start resting it at eleven if I know I'm going to have a long conversation around five. One of those little vain adjustments. On weaker days my wife goes for the thermometer. On stronger ones we just forget about the sliding raspy slur of it.

On the calendar there's a reading in Maryland for *Little Patuxent Review's* summer launch. They used a poem about staying up all night and getting drunk with a rat. The piece has 28 lines—enough to send me crashing back to the nurses and nuns—but some of the lines have only five syllables. This is the

limit of my range.

I don't *delete*.