

AFTERWORD TO WOMEN'S WORK:  
*THE FENCE AROUND THE FIRE*

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*I think Anya's "Women's Work: The Fence Around the Fire" is the best article Inkwell's ever had. If you have time and want to see these ideas in conversation, refer to her article often—my words cannot approximate the author's, and I cannot describe her experience or her ideas better than she does.*

## READER

It is four and a half years ago, and I am standing in front of the Writing Center, a prospective freshman visiting Evergreen with my dad. I stop and linger at a small red book, *Inkwell: The Student Guide to Writing*. The friendly desk person informs a shy me that it's free, go ahead and take a copy. I devour it that evening, in between flashes of *True Stories* (excellent film) and intermittent text exchanges with a girl I've been crushed out on. I am seventeen, dying to get to Evergreen as fast as possible, and I am interested in these articles, in these writers—I *could know these people soon—I could do these things. hey! One of them even likes Portishead, sweet!*

And then I am less excited, and more... floored. Thumbing through, I come across a piece—I only catch the subtitle at first: "The Fence Around The Fire." Women's work? I begin to dig into this work for the first time, and for the first time, I listen to a pain I am both familiar with and yet it entirely alien to me.

It is a pain of silence that rings from her voice, echoed in a rumble and a cacophony by her body. "My writing is a political act of healing," she states from the outset, and I am finding language on the page for notions, thoughts, that I've always encountered wordlessly. My body, too, is a place for dead words, as they flock into and under my skin. And yet, my pain is differed, exposed in its hiding, and I know this, twitch at this.

Because the site of attack, the site of silence isn't my writing, isn't my getting-better poetry I had already been working on for years. The site of silence in language is my body itself. Like my writing,

my body is seen as a man's. This is inescapable, in the air, on the tongue, in the hairs that sprout from me—I, like every other transgender person I've met, am the battered outlier of a definition that refuses to embrace them.

But I don't know this. I don't have the word for this. I am four-and-a-half-years-ago me, and I simply sit there reading about an unfilled ache that I'm not willing to place as not-mine. Anya conveys a driving sense that words are meaningful, that they challenge the real, and resonate from personal experience. Her message is that we must come to understand each other as struggling speakers, as people using the medium that articulates and causes their pain as a means to heal from it, to undo it. Regardless of whether I live in the gender dichotomy of woman/man Anya uses (I don't), I understand her discussion of language's denial of certain voices and the need for this to be removed. Anya argues, stirringly, that this is possible, that writing can heal "generational wounds," and become the politically powerful act it promises.

But I keep coming to, instead of Anya's conclusion, an itching sense that this is not quite so. That I am not in a position to decide when I am silenced. I am not positioned to scratch the back of the silencer, to educate them on why erasing my and others' existence as voices is dangerous. I cannot do this. Maybe, I think to myself sometimes then, now, and always, maybe I'm on a different emotional register than Anya, maybe my good days are her bad, my bad are unspoken to her. Yet we still somehow seem to share the worst days—the ones where words go dead again, and I have to feel the full weight of them inside my gut. It's an empty socket stuck in my chest; the incessant, rapid beating of it all gone. No spark, so to speak. This is four-and-a-half years ago; this is two years ago as I become a tutor at the Writing Center I admired so much; this is also now.

#### WRITER

Still, I choose a position against silence. I believe I share a sense of priority about this with Anya—I believe that both she and I as writers want ownership of our writing, as an extension of ourselves. What I want as well, and where we seem to begin to split, is an anti-silence. As a writer, I can make my own opportunities to speak—my voice will click, whirl back into place, clatter into full—but I cannot make my own opportunities to be heard. The dead words inside rattle and shake and screech and tear away as they are chopped open, to be flayed anew as I drive them from their quaking home, the body (my body, I keep being told). I want the raw stink of hate that I have been told and made to bottle within to leave me. Writing as fumigation, so to speak. I want my fingers to be the right size, my voice to not be a quivering mess of pitches that contradict what I try to project—that I am not woman, but neither am I man. I desire a state of violent flux, a ruptured system that leaves behind the solidness of a common ground in language for a more sensitive hum. I am speaking because there is this needed crackle in my body that comes from the sparks, the friction, the nonstop grinding and pulsing of a world and words that cannot, will not cease to rub. me. out.

Because language is the medium where my pain is most distinct, most sharp, it is both where I must communicate my hurt and where my hurt is spoken to me. We are leftover twitches of this shaping

that shot us into birth, shot us into the violence of the real—this cannot be a space for healing, yet there are still burnt ashes in the labored wounds. What, then, am I generating as a writer (someone who uses language regularly), if not more context for violence on myself?

*anti-silence. i engage in my violence because i am a boiler plate who sizzes pops stings but with a brick on top. even with my pale skin i'm never meant to go off, but sit to wait to sting and corrode with my pale voice instead. my proposal is simple: rip out the trick, the vocal cords, the nervous tic of those who cannot stop speaking can be quite quiet, it seems, after all. i enact the violence that creates me as a writer, as a body, as a person, rather than erase the same. i engage in action to maintain the space of participation. i make choices that keep me alive as a writer.*

## TUTOR

But I am not only a writer, no more than I am only oppressed. My body is a queer body, is a trans body, but—I am privileged. There is already a place in the conversation for me. I am white; I am middle class; I have read and written well since the age of five. And now, after returning to the Writing Center as a precocious eighteen-year-old wanting the job, I am a tutor at twenty, one who carries these privileges and erasures with them always.

I have to ask, given the circumstances of violence and silence that Albers and I convey (differently), what can we do? What are we to do as tutors? That is, what choices do I make, where am I responsible for affecting other people's voices?

I think the answer lies somewhere within how and what I can be responsible for affecting in myself. If I am not the arbiter of my own inability to speak, whom do I serve that purpose for? We all have a finger ready to click on the mute button, to control conversation for convention and comfort. We are purveyors of ourselves, but also all mediators in the collective sense of voices, and some violently jockey to remove all but their own.

I know the sense of “sensibility” to this, the authority that my voice can be given when I remain invisible. The “white straight male” becomes the default category, the unspoken wallpaper to my essay that I cannot achieve. My fear in writing this is that if I don't emphasize my own identity and experiences I will be subsumed. That you as a reader hold the ability to erase my experiences is both terrifying and telling. It reveals how I can work better as a tutor to confront, empathetically, these fears.

We have to confront the place where refusal in language happens and address the dynamics and fears of mediating a writer's experience. We, tutors at the Writing Center, seek to create a writing space that prioritizes and centers authors' voices and gives room for them to work through the fears around them. I think, in this context of violence and silence, the most important work that we can do is to stay clear; we should stand aside.

As a tutor, I hold the quixotic goal of asking myself unnecessary, undoing the work of mediating a writer, of withholding and silence them. It's not that tutors need stand by and passively do nothing rather we have the work of actively countering that which we, and so many others, carelessly strew in the path of an earnest writer—language, literacy, grammar, the body, personhood—we have the impossible task of removing ourselves and the power given to us as literate participants in the conversation.

Perhaps an embracing of our death drives as tutors is in order. Rather than erase the mark of another for the countless time, we must begin to erase ourselves, begin to conceptualize what the death of managerial tutoring (where the tutor is a necessary intervention between the writer and the writing), and the process of healing, can look like.

I am still a foolish seventeen-year-old kid. I didn't exit that part of myself by writing this anymore than I did not bury down other parts of myself for years. I can't write this to undo past mistakes and errors, from me or against me. I will still hurt those around me, and for their benefit I need to learn when to remove myself and my ability to cause pain. If we have to reach for a collaborative process towards undoing hurt, in writing, in education, in life, it requires stepping down and negating the roles that we have used to oppress each other.

And I am eleven and I sing and I enjoy it, the reverberating sounds from chest going outward. *I've chosen to do this*, I think to myself, *I've chosen to be part of a choir*. And the sounds of us join towards our stirring sixth-grade rendition of "Sleigh Bells." The emphasis is, understandably, on participation. And I am happy, that I hear myself best among many, and that our sound is of a collective beauty, our voices still our own.