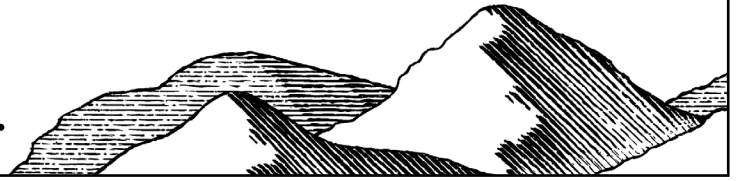


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WRITING FROM THE WELL

CHALEN KELLY

If each day falls / inside each night, / there exists a well / where clarity is imprisoned. / We need to sit on the rim / of the well of darkness / and fish for fallen light / with patience.

- Pablo Neruda, *The Sea and The Bells*
Translated by William O'Daley

Standing above the well, balancing between night and dark water, with a real moon above and a reflected moon below, I too am real above, reflected below. Insignificant against the backdrop of stars, yet magnified in the water, I am both distorted and beautiful. My toes clutch concrete and loose stones, stones fall. Ripples disperse stars and fragment me, water crashes against itself. I am crashing against myself within a universe crashing against itself, this well reveals confusion and repetition. I come to this ledge to participate in these collisions. At this well I break the silence to hear the collision. Sometimes collision sounds like invitation, this time collision sounds like an invitation to cease writing.

Submit. In the face of existence, choose silent appreciation or mute despair. Making meaning from chaos is equal to carrying water in the immemorial sieve. Don't write; nothing will come of it. Forests don't appreciate novels. Bookstores are thinly veiled parking lots. Nobody listens, less reads, and it wouldn't matter if they did. Let go, your descriptions fumble at the garter belt of mystery. Your writing displays inadequacy. Don't write unless you are ready to acknowledge yourself a fool, unless you are willing to hope your deity of choice prefers comedy.

Defying the urge to slip into the well, I choose levity. I choose to play the fool and write to induce laughter. At the well I name things, assign meaning. I come to the well, stand on a ledge, maintain balance.

I listen and remain standing.

I write.

Watching collisions, I observe relationships between night, stars, and self. I notice how the relationship I maintain with writing matters. Water calms, stars settle in place, my fragmented body begins to coalesce. I observe that circumstance and context matter, relearn how writing must be different things at different times. Though I prefer writing as an approach to mystery, I respect the beauty of writing when it is work, a plow horse breaking soil.

Writing is never what I envision it to be. In youth I learned not to draw with pencil because my love of erasers eroded my work. I wanted to capture images like water captures images. From this desire to capture my visions, I learned to paint. I came to love paint because in paint there is no going back, one moves forward in layers. When I write, the delete key beckons.

When I write I face the difference between desire and possibility. I peer at stars and my face distorted in dark water, I remember mirrors cannot contain the things they reflect. The page offers a similar distortion, writing deceives, leaves things out, misdirects, has limited capacity. Audiences expect truth from writing, thus these limits challenge writers. The act of courting an audience requires the writer to choose which part of their voice to share. Writing approaches truth, but truth is elusive. In the writer's chase there are many moments where self is lost then found in transition between one truth and another.

In adolescence, I exchanged journals with a friend. We both wrote prolifically, we exchanged our work to help one another. I expected truth, what I found in his journal broke me. Afterwards I could not write for a year. Reading his journal I fell into our differences. I fell into the well. I thought I would drown there, swimming in his words. All the names of things were different. The stars were from another hemisphere, they composed unfamiliar constellations. Understanding seemed impossible. It was a loss of innocence, we were not alike yet neither of us was unique. He read my words, and they did not mean what I wanted them to mean. He listened but could not hear me. In my adolescence I learned how writing fractures faith.

But when friends keep writing to one another, alchemy sets in. I climbed back up to my ledge. I focused on our differences, I learned how to make writing cross the empty space between us. By doing this work I learned to deepen conversations, assist memory, savor details, notice subtlety, and offer praise. I learned to question. My faith expanded to make room for misunderstanding. I began to see how best to represent myself; I stopped thinking it was unnecessary. I learned to vary my writing because the different ways in which one writes create different ways to be human.

I now embrace the versatility writing offers, because I desire multiple ways of responding to questions posed by community, family, and politics. I continue my attempt to make connection and I continue falling into the well, but with each successive fall I increase my familiarity with the strength it takes to return. When I fall, I often wish to go numb, to remain in the well. But each time a terrible hope entices me. It compels me to crawl up the wall, remain alive, and stay vulnerable. I cannot stop; I am too deeply in love with possibility.

Writing, like giving birth, involves sacrifice. It is a process that does not guarantee happiness. The changes writing invokes are not simple. Writing involves seeing, acknowledging, and accepting

responsibility for your life. It involves sharing yourself with others. Writing as a chosen journey requires feeling and thinking. When I choose to write I choose to throw a stone in the well, I choose to risk the possibility that ripples will erode all the things I have grown accustomed to. I choose to induce collisions, to change myself and the world I am a part of. I stand at my ledge, gather my strength, and reach to pick up the next stone. I choose to shatter again.

Writing is hope and a sort of prayer. Writing is me, it isn't me, it is the easiest and hardest thing I do, it is the most reliable and the most terrifying conversation I participate in. I investigate the nature of writing here to offer a mirror, to invite others to stand at the well, to see themselves, and to develop their own relationship with writing.