



NEIL YOUNG WITH BIRDS, OR HOW I WRITE

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Wonder-struck, sandwich in hand, I found myself rooted to the sidewalk on 5th Avenue and Olive. In the pink sky heralding nightfall, a circus troupe of smallish birds wove ribbons among the blocks of concrete and glass. As if of one mind, they gracefully looped into two separate swirling spheres, circling each other, before pulling back into a single column, a flowing ellipsis of feathers. They performed this routine in near silence, uninterrupted by my rapt attention or the flashing lights and whistling brakes of downtown traffic. It was one bird, one moment, one single existence. I watched for an hour, little crunched-up bits of peanut butter clinging to the roof of my mouth, until the darkness finally swallowed the birds.

This is part of how I write: I *notice*. My Scorpio moon and Virgo sun have endowed me with a deep-drilling curiosity that is unsatisfied with *the way things appear to be* (often passed off as *the ways things are*) and a sometimes merciless penchant for detail. But really what I mean to say is: I AM IN LOVE WITH LIVING. I write because I want to squeeze out every ounce of nectar and blood, and I want to be able to capture the ephemera of moments.

My best writing happens in my journals with black gel ink. Each journal has a title, signifying whatever I think that chapter of my life should be called, and I fill one up about every three months. Right now I'm living the "Faery Emergence" chapter. For a while I wrote in made-in-India embroidered journals with linen-like pages. There was my too expensive phase of leatherbound journals. Then the famous Moleskine journals, which I loved for the texture of the page, the pocket in the back, and the elastic band that kept it all together, since I will often stuff loose things into the pages like postcards and photos and movie ticket stubs. Wherever I am, there is a journal with me. It's partially my way of abating the fear that something brilliant and monumental will occur, and having no way to capture it, the moment will fly away into the ether, forever lost to me. I am that dramatic about it.

It might be an outgrowth of gluttony, my need to taste and digest, taste and digest these littlest (biggest) tiptoeings of living without end. Writing is for me about freezing time and unwinding all

the tendrils of whole, packaged moments so that each small plucking of the strings can be heard again and again and again. I want to

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the whole band down, like Neil Young (a Scorpio, incidentally) urging Crosby, Stills and Nash to deepen and ponder, to decrease the tempo so that my full-bodied emotions can swell up from the depths of abstraction, so that I can sculpt them into solid things to stroke and marvel at, as if they were birds.

So my process involves *feeling*. It's visceral. When I want to write about something, I do this centering, coming fully into my body, breathing and picturing the moment, inviting the sensations and feelings to flood me. Then I start letting words drip from my fingers. I like to do stream-of-consciousness writing, which I may or may not revise. I like to fuck with grammar and syntax and make up new words. I like to use underlining and italics and caps even when my first college writing teacher scoffed as it and called it purple prose—as if there's anything shameful about purple!

It probably sounds like I'm just describing the little pen-scratches of my journal, but is my process with *all* kinds of writing. With academic writing, I go backwards. I defy convention. Instead of identifying my thesis and then building a case around it, I start at the bottom of the pond. I let the water lilies bloom from the mud of my subconscious instead of forcing the pointed sword of predetermined outcome to dictate what unfolds. And this is what I mean: if I'm writing a critical essay about a book I've read, my first step is to sit down and let the impressions of the book begin to creep up. From the murky depths of feelings, they start to preen and take wind, and I just capture those little word-birds on the page. No matter the grammar or where I think it's going, I watch the train and mark the passing of the cars, but I don't try to shove it sideways in its path. Writing is not about forced detours; it's about following and listening to the nonlinear voice that pushes its way out of me when I create the invitation. I like how one of my really smart teachers, instead of giving us assignments, presented us with invitations to write. Invitation, like:

Join Us! An invitation to the self. An invitation to speak and be heard.

So once I've captured my general impressions of the book, it usually looks like a big block of run-on text, and this is where the treasure hunt begins. Sometimes I might leave it and come back to it. With fresh eyes I start to find the power surges, the patterns, the circles. This is where the thesis makes itself known to me. Which way is the arrow pointing? Which ideas have some jet fuel behind them? What takes shape on its own?

Because anything I write well has to be driven by the Voice. The writing writes *me*. For me, writing is sometimes more about listening than speaking. Even in critical analysis, something has to propel it. My gut does a much better job propelling than my brain. My brain second-guesses itself, seeks to please, draws conclusions from thin air. My gut has roots to pull from the deep nutrition of my own visceral response, my experience, my intuition. In this way, writing an academic paper becomes an adventure, rather than form dictating form, which feels so dang contrived anyway.

I like to let a piece of writing flower organically and then go in with the priners. The formula I've been taught—Introduction, Thesis, Three Paragraphs of Evidence, and Conclusion—gets applied afterward. It's not in charge of generating the writing. My Voice is the hidden engine. And my Voice doesn't want to come out if I have a sword pointed at it. It wants gentle coaxing and encouragement. Soft rain. Sunshrine. Rest. Patience. Love.

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These creamy pages are thirsty for my ink. My pen gliding, gliding like birds, like the pigeons I just made the acquaintance of. It feels good to write. Good morning, healing earth! Good morning, Love!

I am on the bus on the way to school, and when we pulled up to the Starbucks at 23rd and Jackson, and all the white middle school kids with their musical instrument cases piled off, little snowflakes were falling and I had the familiar sadness of knowing it wouldn't last, that the rain would come and wash away the snow before any snow-people could be formed. Looking out the window, I gazed down upon the top of a battered newspaper machine, upon which someone had left a brown loaf of wheat bran, had baked up this treat and upended it like a gourmet dish for the pigeons busily picking away at it. As I watched, thinking what a beautiful image I should capture this, I should write about, one of the grayish mottled birds rose before me, ascending in slow motion, a flurry of flapping wings, the sound like the whispered shuffling of a deck of cards. She seemed to float before me, wings outstretched, heart thrust out, glorying in the goodness of flight. Maybe she was dancing with gratitude.