Writing From The Body: Memoirs By Women

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Reneé E. D'Aoust, *Body of a Dancer*

WILKES-BARRE, PA: ETRUSCAN PRESS, 2011. 167 PAGES, PAPER, $15.00.

Cheryl Strayed, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*

NEW YORK: KNOPF, 2012. 338 PAGES, HARDCOVER, $25.95.

Lidia Yuknavitch, *The Chronology of Water: A Memoir*

PORTLAND, OR: HAWTHORNE BOOKS, 2011. 293 PAGES, PAPER, $15.95.

In the mid-twentieth century, Beryl Markham wrote a harrowing account of flying solo across the Atlantic, Isak Dinesen (a.k.a Karen Blixen) recalled the perils of life in the Kenyan wilderness, and Martha Gellhorn reported from war zones. In the past few decades, memoirs by women, including Mary Karr, Lucy Grealy, and Audre Lorde, have tended to feature more intimate and psychological dangers: abuse, addiction, and illness. With the phenomenal success of Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, and the recent publication of two other excellent memoirs by a dancer and a competitive swimmer, perhaps a new subgenre is emerging: narratives in which women explore their physical as well as their emotional power.

Like *Wild*, Reneé E. D'Aoust's *Body of a Dancer* and Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Chronology of Water* are, at their cores, accounts of how their authors became

This work originally appeared in Fourth Genre, 15:1, Spring 2013, published by Michigan State University Press.

writers. In each case, the physical challenge the woman sets for herself serves as a metaphor for the writing process. But it's not only a metaphor. These books detail mangled toenails, damaged spines, chlorine-burned hair—and sex. Their strength lies in the fact that they never stray far from the body.

Wild has already received much well-deserved attention, including in *Fourth Genre*, so just a brief mention here: Grieving her mother's death and her broken marriage, lacking outdoor skills, adequate fitness, and enough money, Strayed undertakes an 1,100-mile trek on the Pacific Crest Trail. Along the way, she endures chafed skin, sore muscles, horniness, and insane thirst. She comes to understand that the sensory intensity of the hike is inseparable from its meaning, from the story she will one day write about it. Fittingly, she has this revelation at trail's end, while licking a gigantic ice cream cone.

D'Aoust's *Body of a Dancer*, also ends with an epiphany about writing, and sugar. D'Aoust, who'd dreamed from childhood of being a dancer, eats *pain au chocolat* in Paris after a pilgrimage to Isadora Duncan's grave. Duncan, who died in 1927, was the founder of modern dance, in which D'Aoust had hoped, but ultimately failed, to find an artistic home. Eating the pastry represents neither D'Aoust's resignation to her aging and widening body nor defiance against the years of self-denial that dance demanded of her. Rather, it's a pleasure she savors in the moment and alone—the kind of pleasure more accessible to a writer than to a dancer.

D'Aoust, now a memoirist, dance critic, and writing teacher, leaves tell-alls about the dark side of dancing—anorexia, drug abuse, backstabbing prima donnas—to others (including Gelsey Kirkland, in *Dancing on My Grave*). Instead, *Body of a Dancer* is a fascinating and original account of how D'Aoust makes sense, through writing, of the labyrinth of ironies with which dance presents her: joy achieved through pain, passion experienced by denying sexuality, expression though voicelessness.

D'Aoust moved from Montana to New York City in 1993, hoping to earn a place in the Martha Graham Company. Trained from age eight as a ballerina, by 25 she's tired of ballet's rigidity, its demands for impossible thinness, the injury it inflicts on young bodies. Still, she loves "to jump. To leap. To fly to the sky and never land." The looser style espoused by Graham—the flowing hair and bare feet, the tolerance for fuller breasts and thicker thighs—seems to promise D'Aoust a freer expression of her passion for movement. She

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heads to what was still known, two years after its founder's death, as "Martha's House of Pelvic Truth."

But the truth D'Aoust finds is disappointing. It turns out that the Graham style is not as loose as it was in its namesake's prime, and that modern dance can be as punishing as ballet. D'Aoust recalls, of her first days at the company's school:

> As my spine straightened, my heart became buried deeper inside my body and desire began to reverse, curling in and around, twisting a love of movement into dedicated self-loathing. . . . I ingested four Aleve tablets a day. I took TUMS. I placed Chinese plasters over my lower back, rubbed Tiger Balm Extra Strength on my hips, took an Epsom salt bath every night, massaged my feet without oil—you want tough, hard skin—and wore sweatpants to bed even in summer.

The source of D'Aoust's self-loathing is her failure to meet Graham's nearly impossible ideal: to fully inhabit the body while also being abstracted from it. During class, teachers at the Graham school try to extract better performances by screaming "Have an orgasm!" at dancers, most of whom are too weary and too emaciated to ever actually have sex. Only a very few, whom D'Aoust calls "athletes of the gods," manage both art and ardor. She explains what she calls "the necessarily complicated relationship" between a dancer and her body: It's as "if a flute player needed to clean and oil her flute and live in it all at the same time."

D'Aoust is tormented by Martha Graham's motto: *The body never lies* [italics hers]. "My body lied all the time," she recalls dolefully. By "lying" she means that she doesn't tell anyone about her hip pain, her back spasms, or the brace she wears under a baggy sweatshirt during rehearsals to hold her sacrum together. In other words, it's D'Aoust, and not her body, that dissembles. When D'Aoust turns from dance to writing she finally understands that these "lies" are, in fact, her own body's truths.

Body of a Dancer is arranged in 12 "acts," rather than chapters, each a set piece. Two of them, plus an appended "Coda," have been selected as notables in *The Best American Essays* series. The most intriguing, and wittiest, are those that take on clichés about dancing. In "Attending a Wedding: NYC," D'Aoust confronts the shibboleth that female dancers must choose between

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marriage and art—the premise of the film *The Turning Point*—and suffer regret either way. Working as a ladies' room attendant at a fancy wedding, one of many odd jobs she takes to support her dancing, she's an outsider, a Cinderella at the matrimonial ball. The twist is, the mother of the bride bursts into tears in the toilet where D'Aoust is on duty, certain her daughter has made an unhappy match.

In "Daniela Can Fly," D'Aoust challenges the common perception that dancers are histrionic, prone to suicide attempts, and that such attempts are "cries for help." She suggests, provocatively, the possibility that self-destruction is simply a dance step:

> When Daniela stepped out her fifth-story window and off the ledge, her toes were pointed. Her arches were strong. . . . Daniela merely embodied her favorite role; she embodied the movement she discovered in the studio. When a Firebird leaps, Daniela realized, it flies.

Often memoirs are strongest at the beginning and then lose steam, but D'Aoust's writing becomes more inventive, more playful, as her book progresses. By the time she reaches the "Coda," a hodgepodge of dance gossip, a glossary, and a sly directory ("Two Useful Addresses for the Aspiring Performer"—one is a temp agency), it's as if she's found in writing the freedom of expression, the joy, she never found in dance.

D'Aoust eulogizes a Graham dancer:

> *Her whole life an effort to carve space by shaping the negative air around her.*

She's also describing how a writer crafts memoir from her own amorphous history.

In *The Chronology of Water*, Lidia Yuknavitch offers a different metaphor for writing: rocks. Directly addressing the reader, as she does often in her memoir, Yuknavitch advises:

> I'm going to tell you something that helps. . . . Something you can use in relation to this grand narrativity, this epic status, something you can live with when the time comes.
>
> Collect rocks.

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Why rocks? Because rocks are solid, unlike water which, like life, flows shapelessly and disorientingly around us. Water is everywhere in Yuknavitch's memoir: in swimming pools and tears; in aroused, wet crotches and in oceans; in amniotic fluid, blood, and booze. The miracle of this ferocious and haunting book is that Yuknavitch shapes the chaotic fluidity of her life story without containing it too tightly. She chooses her words—her "rocks"—well.

Yuknavitch has had a tough life: an abusive father, alcohol and drugs, three abortions by the age of 21, a blown college scholarship, a still born daughter, two divorces, jail . . . the c.v. of a victim. Yuknavitch is anything but. Growing up in a home where her maimed and alcoholic mother stands silent while her father attacks Yuknavitch and her sister verbally and physically, she recalls: "Between terror and rage I chose rage." She also chooses competitive swimming—and writing. As a young girl, Yuknavitch keeps a journal in which she records her Olympic dreams. Those dreams are dashed by drugs and alcohol, not to mention the American boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. But the writing continues, through a PhD in English, several works of short fiction, and a book of literary criticism. And water, both as a metaphor and as an actual substance, never ceases to inform it.

Early in the memoir, Yuknavitch confides:

> I thought about starting this book with my childhood, the beginning of my life. But that's not how I remember it. I remember things in retinal flashes. Without order. Your life doesn't happen in any kind of order. . . . It's all a series of fragments and repetitions and pattern formations. Language and water have this in common.

If language is like water, then a writer is like a swimmer, Yuknavitch suggests—stroking through formlessness with perfect form. After her baby daughter dies, Yuknavitch addresses herself:

> You want to climb out, you want to explain how there must be some mistake. You the swimmer after all. And then you see the waves without pattern.

Yuknavitch acknowledges that sometimes shaping the chaos is impossible, that no rocks, no swimmer, no words are up to the task. And Yuknavitch

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expresses this reality by loosening the form of her writing, allowing her words to tumble and flow. Describing a horrific incident in which her father tries to teach her, at age ten, to ride a bike by pushing her down a steep hill, Yuknavitch abandons control of both the bike and of sentence structure:

> I'd crashed my bike into a row of mailboxes.
> I'd ruptured my hymen.
> My father's hands.
> A flashlight.
> Blood.
> Girl.

Later, relating how she loses herself in literature, "swimming in words," she loses punctuation, too:

> In Dickinson and Whitman and Plath and Sexton and Adrienne you want some of this Rich and Ai and Eliot and PoundStoppardBeckettStoppard-DurasFaulknerWoolfJoyce (though he kinda always made me want to piss on his grave) SyngeCortazarBorgesMarquez . . .

Water, or fluidity, permeates every aspect of this memoir, effaces every boundary: between love and hate, straight and gay, body and mind, reader and writer. You come away from the book blown away by its honesty—but it's not only Yuknavitch's unsparing revelations about her abuse or sex or drunk driving that do this. Her honesty lies in her willingness to abide contradiction: She cares tenderly for her father at the end of his life—and then scatters his ashes in water polluted "with river refuse and bird shit and the oil of passing boats"; she finds happiness married to a man, but tells the reader, "And I love women. Sue me"; she has one of her most meaningful encounters with her intellectual mentor, the late Kathy Acker, while swimming laps with her in a hotel pool, followed by—there's no other way to say this than Yuknavitch's—a "pussy-spanking" session.

As Yuknavitch becomes a writer, she stops numbing herself with alcohol and sex: "I didn't want to fuck," she says. "I wanted to read. . . . I didn't want to drink until I dropped. I wanted to write." But as an intellectual, she doesn't become disembodied. In fact, she envisions her writing self as a lover:

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> The two mes? We began to get to know each other. Intellectual me and blood bodied me began to hang out. Brush each other's hair. Take bubble baths and draw soap pictures on each other's back and clink glasses late into the night.

Echoing Martha Graham, Yuknavitch states at the end of *The Chronology of Water*, "The body doesn't lie." Yet, never satisfied to see only one side of things, she adds: "But when we bring language to the body, isn't it always already an act of fiction?"

One final note: Don't read the electronic version of *The Chronology of Water*. Read the beautifully designed paperback. The numberless chapters, the black words strewn across thick, spacious white pages, and the gorgeous cover photograph of a naked female swimmer bursting through the surface of a watery background, all reinforce Yuknavitch's relentless grounding of her story in the world of physical experience, and invite the reader to join her there.

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