

1994

Why I Write

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Recommended Citation

Van Herk, Aritha, *Why I Write*, *Kunapipi*, 16(1), 1994.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/74>

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Why I Write

Abstract

In a lifetime of composing excuses and their alternatives, I have algebraized many such excuses for my writing. Rage, frustration, the trepidation of answering the ancient litany of the repetitive male voice declaring itself agent, keeper, and writer of all valid and valued experience. Fear of failure, the containment of patriclinous inheritance, infects my joy, my pleasure in language. Fear and joy wrestle to control the addictive and crazy tenacity of my yearning to language Joan of Arc's burning and statutory rape, to language endive and gouda cheese and the bakery in Camrose that sold brownies, to language the tough-rooted buffalo beans that bloomed in the ditches of my childhood. Tenacity, for its own sake, clinging to words, and the joy I fear that keeps words rooted, like those tough-stemmed wildflowers that signalled the arousal of spring in my Canadian prairie. We could not pick them - they refused to succumb to jam jars or vases; but we could pluck a labial blossom and suck, from its thin stamen, a tinge of incipient honey. Waiting for the rotund school bus that would carry us into town, we stood at the end of the lane and suckled wild sugar, that invitation to the bees, from buffalo beans. And for a moment, our sadness would evaporate.



Aritha van Herk was born in 1954 in the parkland region of central Alberta, to parents who immigrated to Canada from Holland in 1949. She attended the University of Alberta in Edmonton.

Her first novel, *Judith*, won the \$50,000 Seal First Novel Award in 1978, and, following the publication of her second novel, *The Tent Peg*, in 1981, she was selected as one of Canada's ten most promising young writers in the 45 Below competition. *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey* confirmed her international reputation. It won her a nomination for the Governor General's Award for Fiction for 1986; and was awarded the Howard O'Hagan Prize for the best Alberta novel. In 1990 she published an experimental geografictione, *Places Far From Ellesmere*. Her collected crypto-fictions, hidden or secret messages ignited by the rubbing together of criticism and fiction, are published in the recent volume *In Visible Ink*. Aritha van Herk is also an editor and critic and she has contributed to such collections as *The Road Home* and *Alberta Bound*. Dangaroo Press has recently published *A Frozen Tongue*, a collection of her essays.

She is currently teaching at the University of Calgary.

ARITHA VAN HERK

Why I Write

In a lifetime of composing excuses and their alternatives, I have algebraized many such excuses for my writing. Rage, frustration, the trepidation of answering the ancient litany of the repetitive male voice declaring itself agent, keeper, and writer of all valid and valued experience. Fear of failure, the containment of patriclinous inheritance, infects my joy, my pleasure in language. Fear and joy wrestle to control the addictive and crazy tenacity of my yearning to *language* Joan of Arc's burning and statutory rape, to *language* endive and gouda cheese and the bakery in Camrose that sold brownies, to *language* the tough-rooted buffalo beans that bloomed in the ditches of my childhood. Tenacity, for its own sake, clinging to words, and the joy/fear that keeps words rooted, like those tough-stemmed wildflowers that signalled the arousal of spring in my Canadian prairie. We could not pick them – they refused to succumb to jam jars or vases; but we could pluck a labial blossom and suck, from its thin stamen, a tinge of incipient honey. Waiting for the rotund school bus that would carry us into town, we stood at the end of the lane and suckled wild sugar, that invitation to the bees, from buffalo beans. And for a moment, our sadness would evaporate.

I have learned (the hard way) that writing is unwise. But wisdom has an interesting way of retreating to a time when it will combine with age and discretion. For now, tenacity will have to do. There is labour tied to that tenacity, hard and unremitting labour that fights its own transfusions, that insists on the carbuncles of resistance. Writing has never had any ease, any surety, for me. I cannot say, like Flannery O'Connor, that I write because I am good at it, because in my heart of hearts I do not believe I am good at it, even when others tell me that I am. I believe only that writing is my expiation, my gesture of defiance and rupture, my subversion of authority, and me the author about to be dismembered by the explosion I am planting. Writing, I feel again and again as if it is my own constructedness that I explode, my own safety that I must expose. Fearful, anxious, full of grief, I try to touch the page with the variations on pain and joy that I believe it is so essential to record, wanting to leave a thumb or fingerprint, however faint.

There is an abstractedness to talk *about* writing that is difficult to transcend. The writing act demands a strange immunity from the concrete world at the same time as it requires a tremulous complicity with that

exactly mundane concrete world. Writing is speech, but silent speech, speech that requires a reader to unlock its door, to open its knowledge. I was never much interested in being a pale and oppressed poet, grateful to be obscure and unread; instead, I long, with every passionate longing possible, for the reader/lover, to complete my language act, to comfort me in my grief, and me in hers.

Tenacious, I write on, despite a continuing inarticulacy, the inarticulacy of someone whose early world was without privilege or the luxury of self-awareness. Survival was the mill that ground my childhood, heel-trodden shoes and boiled potatoes and patched clothes; it became what I wanted to escape, but escaping, ran toward. The survival that transcends physical well-being was the survival of my imagination, and escaping became its primary object. But there is always a cost, a ransom. The scutage I pay is risk, over and over again risk and its consequences, its strange habits of bereavement. From scraps I patch my stories and their declarations; I have lost my dictionary of saints and I seek in vain for a patron of women writers, writers like me, who are pushed to their knees and yet stagger up again and again.

So why do I write? To escape? To declare? To express grief and loss? Saint Agatha's breasts she carries on an offering platter, the king's reward for her refusal to marry him a sword through her flesh. This is the threat the woman writing faces. If she declares: 'No, I will not speak the king's story, live out his scenario, bear his literary children,' Io, she holds her words, her shapely shapes, bleeding on a platter.

In Egypt, at the temple of Isis on the island of Philae, the goddesses prowl and recline; they figure in graceful profile, full of pride and power. They bestow words, that much is clear from their upraised hands, from the gestures of their flexed thighs. At Philae, recovered now from the mouth of the Nile, the muddy waters that submerged the island, the temple is re-preserved, re-intacted. It is possible to visit Isis and her votaries there, to see the oldest of the old, the goddesses from whom all becoming arose.

Yes, her images are carved into the stone walls of the temple, have been there for thousands of years. Beautiful, terrible, she knows the mysteries of the stars, could, with a sweep of her arms, lay waste, or save. Scorpions are her servants. She personifies female creative power. The subsequent text of Roman and Christian oppression undid her mysteries. Her temple was flooded, her votaries killed; male gods overthrew her and took precedence over her. But stories are written over stories and that story too is inscribed on the temple.

Imagine this.

A Copt, a Christian, full of fanatical zeal, determined to eradicate Isis and her power, standing on a rickety branch ladder with a hammer and a chisel. How do you deface a goddess? You deface her. All her stone configurations, her particular femaleness, the turn of her powerful ankles,

and the straight edge of her nose, have been defaced. Her nose, her breasts, her toes, chipped and chipped and chipped from their stone speech, the millions of chisel marks resisting her power as *the one who is all*. Stone effigies worked at for hundreds of years, marking her down. If the woman is erased she will be forgotten, no one will believe in her, pray to her, take refuge in her winged arms. The temple usurped, Isis and her images undone, disinscribed.

It was 1981. I was in Egypt. I was afraid, afraid, as always, of writing. I stood in the courtyard of that temple, and saw centuries of male hands with their furious chisels, trying to efface her feet, her breasts, her nose. The draperies of her clothing swung as richly as ever, her back was as straight, the throne, her horned crown, were there, untouched. Only her femaleness chipped away, relentlessly edited. Grief fell over my soul like a shadow, a grief I could not explain, relentlessly Calvinist myself, baptized and christened and raised up to believe in god the father, why should I grieve for the passing of a now eccentric Egyptian goddess?

There was courtyard within courtyard, all beautifully configured women, chipped into submission. I followed through, the enclosures of the temple smaller and smaller, until there was only one room left, the inner sanctuary, perhaps eight feet by ten, a dirt-packed floor, a thick wedge carved into the stone as a door, and within, total darkness. Dark darkness. Heavy and redolent, the kind of darkness that sends missionaries scurrying for bibles and cholera shots.

I lit a match.

There, within the sacred precincts, they must have felt that she was harmless if unseeable, for her images were untouched. No zealous convert had been conscripted to deface her woman's features. She paces the room, imperious, her woman's eyes and mouth seeing and speaking, etched as clearly as when she ruled over heaven and earth.

The match went out. I fell to my knees. She did not speak; there was no beam of light. But the deep sadness, the river of grief and fear, was, for a moment, lifted from my heart. And although the walls around me wrote tenacity, a fanatic determination to erase, they wrote more deeply the tenacity of resistance, patience, survival, and risk.

Why do I write? To stave off grief? To carve enchantments? To mourn the dead and injured? To taste again, for one fleeting moment, the exquisite and unbelievably erotic suggestion of honey before it becomes honey, savoured by a scab-kneed child in a ditch by the side of a gravel road. To celebrate the tough-stemmed signal of buffalo beans.