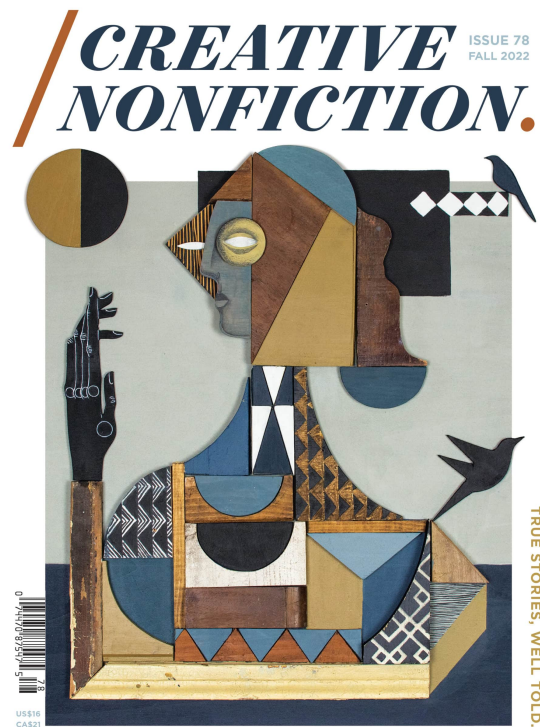


Dismantling the Patriarchy by Reclaiming Her Voice

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Elissa Bassist reflects on how women’s voices get silenced & reborn, the eleven years it took to write her memoir, and how she wrote like a mother#^@%*&

In 2010, Elissa Bassist, then age twenty-six, wrote to Cheryl Strayed, a.k.a. Sugar from the *Rumpus* advice column Dear Sugar. She asked, “How do I reach the page when I can’t lift my face off the bed? . . . How does a woman get up and become the writer she wishes she’d be?” Part of Sugar’s advice would turn up on coffee mugs and journal covers: “Write, Elissa Bassist. Not like a girl. Not like a boy. Write like a motherfucker.” (In 2013, Bassist interviewed Strayed for this magazine.)

Now, twelve years after her letter to Sugar—in which she confessed that she wanted to jump out a window because she couldn’t write a book—Bassist’s memoir, *Hysterical*, has been published by Hachette. A personal narrative packed with footnotes and put-it-to-use-today advice, the book is about how, as a girl, Bassist developed her voice amid cultural expectations to keep quiet rather than be “too emotional” or “opinionated.” After being silenced in her twenties by boyfriends, bosses, and internet trolls and after getting sick in her mid-thirties, she reclaimed her voice thanks to talking cures like therapy and the epiphany that silence was more dangerous than speaking. Bassist chronicles age-old yet still shocking instances of women being told their pain or joy or rage or elation wasn’t real, interweaving these stories with her own. She opens chapters with statements like, “Historically, expression

itself has been called ‘illness’ in women, and women who spoke or laughed or wept in public, women who couldn’t keep their words or feelings to themselves, were mocked as sick and/or mad.” A paragraph later, she follows with, “Not to be dramatic, but after every breakup I was prescribed antidepressants.”

Hysterical—which might be called a manifesto or a call to action or revolution—invites readers to rethink sexist constructs and other social biases, and to consider how we all uphold them through our actions (and inactions). With her signature blend of humor, cutting prose, and research (like the medical-historical basis for a diagnosis of “hysteria”), Bassist urges us to speak up for ourselves even when it seems impossible.

Reading, I found myself at first nodding with recognition and then, more than once, shouting yes as Bassist launched into another enlightening polemic about how women are called emotional or insane or vindictive or hormonal “until ‘vocal’ is a symptom” of illness in women (but a virtue when applied to men). But Bassist doesn’t let us go long without a release valve. If on one page I needed a box of tissues, by the next she caught me off guard with jokes about dance crews, well-placed references to *Grey’s Anatomy*, and drafts of her own eulogy. For both aspiring and seasoned writers, *Hysterical* is as much a craft lesson as it is a wake-up call.

—NIKKI CAMPO

CAMPO: *A theme that runs through Hysterical is the power of labeling; you talk a lot about how labels can be used to silence women and normalize ignoring them and their needs. I have a friend who often says, “I’m just hormonal.” I’d assumed she said it while experiencing premenstrual changes, but thanks to Hysterical, now I suspect that a man once told her she was hormonal, dismissing her, and now she uses the label on herself as a public apology. Why do you think that we adopt the labels that other people give us?*

BASSIST: We wear labels like name tags because we too often believe what others believe about us. Thanks to socialization, so much of a woman’s identity and “worth” depends on dads, boyfriends, crushes, husbands, et al. telling us who we are and should and shouldn’t be, and we may feel empty without their constant feedback and judgment.

Then there’s the flip side, when your own life becomes a point you’re trying to make. Which is how someone can grow attached to their labels; they become something to cling to and crusade against, to prove otherwise and to avoid as a survival tactic. I can’t help but wonder: if we weren’t ride-or-die for male approval and affection, then who would and could we be? What would our conversations and our lives look like?

You argue that one way women lose their authentic voice is by trying to mirror men (also known as “fawn response,” a stress response, which you write about in the book). You also write that a National Public Radio cohost told you “about several radio women who take voice-lowering lessons and how producers tweak women’s timbre and enhance their bass on air—all due to listeners’ complaints.” You confess to having tuned your voice to appeal to men, even if it meant turning it off. Then your silence and the voice that wasn’t yours made you sick. Your memoir takes us on two journeys: first, through a series of unexplained (and sometimes disregarded) illnesses, and second, from being silenced by dads, boyfriends, crushes, et al. to slowly, finally reclaiming your voice in conversation and on the page. How did you stop saying what men wanted to hear?

I wouldn’t say I’ve stopped. Not yet, not totally. Stopping totally would imply I hadn’t been socialized, hadn’t internalized dictates about how to interact and respond, hadn’t come of age and lived my life in what my mom calls “a man’s world.”

Gloria Steinem said, “The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn.” This came through my daily inspirational quotation email today. So maybe a better question is: How can we, given the forces at work against us, use our voices to “unrelax” when people dismiss us as hormonal or hysterical?

Go to therapy. Therapy has helped me rewire my survival instincts and has taught me to risk. As in, risk rudeness and risk letting my actual thoughts and feelings come out of my mouth and risk the potential fallout and risk sounding or being wrong and risk an “ugly” voice and risk making my own life easier and risk joking and risk sadness (and depression and talking about it and asking for help) and risk being sick and saying so and risk not relaxing and not being relaxed. What’s so great about “relaxing” anyway? Why must I relax just because someone told me to—to make it easier on them? And what’s relaxing about violence, overturned human rights, record-breaking maternal mortality rates?

“You’re being hysterical,” people have told women, for years, decades, centuries, for fearing for our rights and our safety, and for fearing correctly. Abortion, they said, as one example, won’t go back in time. “Relax.” NO. “Bitch is the new black,” Tina Fey said on *Saturday Night Live* while endorsing Hillary Clinton for president; now, hysterical is the new black.

In Hysterical, you show how people who aren’t men are damned if we do speak and damned if we don’t speak.

Or feel feelings! Like Amber Heard, who cried too much and also didn’t cry enough, so she’s a meme now.



Illustration by [anna Hall](#)

Yes! How do we flip the cultural script: that men talk and women are supposed to shut up and cry without crying?

NO ONE KNOWS. The script is inherently bad. According to the script, “truth-telling” about abuse becomes the focal point, and then that’s the subject of a debate or a trial, rather than the abuse itself. According to the script, women should talk the “right” amount, make ourselves as small as possible, and not report our own heart attacks because no one believes us anyway, etc. And if we break character, then the consequences range from death and assault to mental and metaphysical pain to leaving unsaid what we most want to say. Speaking out—about anything, and about sexism and abuse especially—is “ugly,” and people don’t want us to get away with it.

So, we don’t need to flip so much as dismantle or delete the script.

Except! For our every effort or achievement, the backlash works overtime to codify the script and to take away more “lines” from us and to rename our objections, demands, and opinions as “just feelings,” as if feelings are criminal and our thoughts are nonexistent.

In hopeless moments I reread the emergency Post-it on my desk: “We can’t bring down” the powers that be, but “we can show them that they don’t own us,” spoken by the vampire-with-a-soul Angel on the show *Angel* (created by alleged verbal abuser Joss Whedon). We show

them that they don't own us by not shutting up, and by crying when we want to cry.

You write in Hysterical about teaching and gender dynamics, and you observe that if women do speak up in class, it is often to disclaim themselves. In the workshops I've been in and in feedback exchanges with writer friends, there are always disclaimers. "I'm tired/brain-dead/not good at this/terrible at writing." Is this why, in your classes (I've taken several of them), your number one rule is No Disclaiming?

Yes. No self-shit-talk, and if anyone disclaims anything, I swear to god I will lose my shit (and hug them later). For a few reasons:

1. Women specifically and writers who are women especially are too used to speaking in apologies and in self-deprecation, and it gets in the way of writing and talking.
2. Workshop is designed to help writers share their writing/soul with other writers and to talk about what readers thought and felt as we read—it's not designed to judge writing/souls on a scale of zero to ten.
3. When I lived in San Francisco and performed in shows, I liked to complain to everyone afterward, "I did a bad job, didn't I?" so they'd say no and compliment me. I tried that in New York, but when I said "I did a bad job, didn't I?" people would say "yes, it was bad" and then they'd talk to someone else. This taught me that
 - no one knows what they're talking about, and most people will take your lead on your opinion of yourself;
 - no one is paying attention to you like you are;
 - no one would notice what was being disclaimed if it weren't disclaimed.

Without disclaimers, we save so much time, energy, and face.

Speaking of saving time and energy, let's talk about social media, which is something you talk about in chapter 5, "Girls vs. Boys in Conversation." You write: "The attention economy will forever run on emotional reactions that outsize circumstances and will forever turn molehills into mountains and will forever appear to ease the hysteria it agitates." How do you really feel about social media? And how do you stay off when you "need" social media to promote your work?

Social media is a useful way to brag about what I've published and to promote others and to be entertained by others and to compare myself to others and to promote more of myself again and to feel like shit about myself and my career. I tell my students to succumb to some kind of social media presence for fans to follow them and their work—but then I tell them the truth: That it's OK to not strive for followers or likes or virality. That if you're looking for an

excuse to not write, now or ever again, then do social media, because social media is noise, designed to draw you away from hard work and to incite panic attacks. That it's unknown how useful social media is, actually, to a writing career, for all writers.

I do know that you should “make your art” before you “build your brand,” and ask yourself at every turn, does this serve my work? And if it doesn't, then get back to work.

OK, that's nice, but do you have any practical tips?

Practically, my first agent told me that “social media can only help,” so if you're good at social media and/or like it, then post, but if not, then do something else. Another debut author told me that her editor told her to “just look alive” on social media. My therapist told me, regarding social media, “prioritize your mental health,” and Walt Whitman told someone “dismiss whatever insults your own soul.”

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George Saunders, whom you talk about in every class, said in a recent newsletter, “Here's something we aren't taught in school, generally . . . : ‘joy’ and ‘art’ are inextricably linked. It's hard to do anything beautiful without some joy going on.” How have you achieved joy through art when you're writing through such painful topics?

A lot of writers say “I hate to write, but I love having written.” I could not have agreed more, until I heard Lorrie Moore say “your writing should amuse you.” So, writing is hard, but it shouldn't give you a mental illness—it should amuse you? In grad school (for an MFA in creative nonfiction writing, thank you), my writing did not amuse me; it bummed me out. (I wrote about depression/suicide, rape culture, and that's it.) After two semesters of being a humorless asshole taking herself too seriously, I signed up for improv for a break from myself and my sob stories. During each class, I'd think, “This [learning how to be in a scene and make strong choices and not be precious] would help my writing.” Not only improve it, but lighten it. From then on, instead of “write a bestseller,” I tried to make strong choices and write sentences and scenes that made me laugh or feel something, anything.

Now, I teach a class called “Tragedy + Time” in which students learn how DJ jokes can revive the darkest stories, because writers and readers and tragedies need release valves and levity and to make fun of deejaying.

I leave your classes tentatively confident in my abilities thanks to your insistence I can and should speak/write. I once wrote to you after class to thank you for encouraging me to write about weird/distasteful/real things like unwanted facial hair.

You replied, “A woman’s mustache is now holy. You made it so.” If a woman’s mustache can be made holy, are any topics off limits?

Literally none.

I wrote just to write, without purpose or goal, because I wanted to, which is how one gets better at writing: by writing (and reading, and living) for years and years and years.

You had fancy early bylines and jobs. You did most of those things before you were twenty-five. How in the world did you do that? Will you tell early career writers why they should keep writing even if it takes them a very long time to write anything good?

Keep writing *because* it takes a very long time to write something good. “Failure? I don’t know her,” was something I said in my very early twenties. I had a work ethic left over from high school and college that I then lost overnight, the second I turned twenty-six. (People in their early twenties can have a blind and reckless confidence that they spend the rest of their twenties recovering from and mourning the inexplicable yet permanent loss of.) I’d shot my every shot and experienced beginners’ luck—but then . . . Then I got one (1) rejection, and then more after that, and still more, and wow, the rejections did not end. What was happening? And why? And how? I thought I should be successful because I had been successful.

I sense you want to talk about F. Scott Fitzgerald now . . .

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote the perfect essay, “Early Success,” about how “premature success gives one an almost mystical conception of destiny as opposed to will power. . . . The man [of course it’s a man] who arrives young believes that he exercises his will because his star is shining,” while the man at thirty “has a balanced idea of what will power and fate have each contributed” and the man at forty “is liable to put the emphasis on will alone. This comes out when the storms strike your craft.”

Did the storms strike your craft?

The storms struck my craft! Destiny had dumped me and my god-given talent had dried up, I was sure, along with inspiration. And motivation. All I had left was the ability to sit in a chair and type. All I had left was work, actual work, which I didn’t want to do. But I couldn’t stop writing, since I liked writing. What I did not like was publishing. So I wrote just to write, without purpose or goal, because I wanted to, which is how one gets better at writing: by writing (and reading—and living, I guess) for years and years and years, just typing like a motherfucker and feeling literally everything, even finally feeling inspired and motivated and good at writing. I think it takes years to develop a writing practice, even more years to develop writing skills and will power, and still more years to develop a self, and then a self who writes, and then the wisdom to know the difference.

As a teacher, you talk a lot about rejection. You told me via email, “I wrote my Oscar speech for Best Adapted Screenplay before I wrote my book, and it ruined me. SUCCESS is what gets in the way of writing! To quote the male author Beckett, ‘Fail better.’” How do we, as writers, learn to fail better rather than silence ourselves?

Can we just, like, destigmatize rejection? Because rejection is required, and one rejection isn't enough. My first writing teacher said the professional writer's first goal should be to amass a hundred rejections. “I love my rejection slips,” Sylvia Plath said, “they show me I try,” and if Sylvia Plath can have this attitude, then . . .

Like success, publishing gets in the way of writing. Writing isn't publishing, and our job isn't to publish. (Okay, literally our job is to publish, but I adopt this mindset from *Friday Night Lights*: success is a byproduct. And from George Saunders: transcendence is in the effort.) No one can control publication, but anyone can control showing up and shooting their shot.

Besides brutal, I've learned to see rejection as many things—as a teacher, and as an opportunity to revise and resubmit. (Speaking of resubmitting, another humor editor once told me a secret: he found that generally, once rejected, men submit again immediately while women never submit again.)

And as an editor, I know rejection isn't personal. Of all the reasons writing isn't accepted, only a few pertain to the actual writing because publication is about fit, so often a rejection means the writing doesn't work *for this one publication* or *for this one editor*.

But rejection sucks and will suck always. Beyoncé has said that she's never not nervous before a show—she's just gotten better at working through her nervousness. Let us all be like Beyoncé about rejection. Because rejection isn't (or shouldn't be) devastating. Quitting is devastating. The successful writers I know, all they did was not quit for at least ten years (or rather, they kept quitting but kept coming back after quitting).

After seeing more than twenty medical professionals, you saw an acupuncturist who suggested bottled-up anger might be causing your physical pain. She encouraged you to express that anger so that you might find relief—and yourself. Cheryl Strayed had made a similar suggestion. Can you tell us about that evolution from silence / bottled-up anger to expression, and from not writing like a MF to writing like one?

Getting sick helped. When I was sick my aspirations went from “become a celebrity” to “put on pants” to “reach the next inhale.” Sugar/Cheryl had written that “it goes without saying that your life is more important than your writing,” and to me it had not gone without saying. But then I got sick and had to prioritize being a person and to get help, and only after that could I begin to write like a motherfucker. Also, I found out about the Pomodoro Technique, internet blocker apps like Freedom and SelfControl, and—once more, with feeling—therapy.

Cheryl had asked rhetorically in her reply to my letter if I knew what this was, “to be humble.” As an award-deserving artist, nope, I did not. What Cheryl wrote that resonated with me the most, more than “write like a motherfucker,” was “I’d finally reached a point where the prospect of not writing a book was more awful than the one of writing a book that sucked.” I had to let my writing suck and to set my expectations low and then even lower than that, from “famous” to “sat down, wrote one good sentence, and survived the day.” And after thousands of survived days and six Taylor Swift album releases, I had thousands of sentences, half that sucked and half that didn’t but all written like a motherfucker.