Slaying Angels: Notes on Writing

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"You have only got to figure yourself as a girl in a bedroom with a pen in her hand. She had only to move that pen from left to right–from ten o'clock to one."

It was then that Virginia Woolf became a writer.

Was it really that easy?

If we just consider those two lines, Virginia Woolf and I had it all. I was a girl. Check. I've had a bedroom since I was born. Double check.

I had multiple pens, too. Even better, I had a computer; so, unlike Woolf, I didn't even have to drag my wrist from left to right. Although I lacked the dexterity of a typist, and my laptop lacked the cardio required to keep up with my incessant edits and typos, I could, theoretically, place characters as I pleased.

When Virginia Woolf dropped her first piece of journalism into a red box at the corner and was rewarded with "one pound ten shillings and a sixpence cheque," she went out and purchased a beautiful Persian cat —a warm and fluffy reminder of her success.

I have two cats. Granted, they aren't purebred Persians, but it was still something that Woolf and I shared.

I should have had everything I needed. I didn't really even have to "figure myself." The most figuring I would have to do, in any case, would be to imagine myself not wherever I am, but in my bedroom, (in the off-chance I'm not already in there) probably watching Amazon Prime Video or Netflix instead of trying to become important and successful.

But despite all this luck and these flimsy obstacles, the metaphorical pen just wouldn't budge. What was the problem here?

The truth was, I had been stuck under this spell for years. But it wasn't always this way. I didn't always inhabit this nothingness, a space as white and empty as the dormant page.

I used to grow stories out of the ground.

Before anyone handed me pen or paper, I was already stringing stories together across synaptic twine, a grandiose movie-trailer voice booming in the background. When I went to write my stories down, they would spring out of my head fully formed like little Athenas, alive before they even hit the page. Imagination came gushing out of a healthy, unburdened heart.

At some point though, all of that ran dry. No longer did the words in my head leap out with confidence. They came out a little confused, a little too saturated in shame. They weren't tiny syntactical Athenas; they were the Eves of my page—disobedient little creations that had betrayed me and now knew fear.

And so, it was then that I knew I had entered the doldrums, even though I didn't know how. I started to write notes instead of melodies. Inspiration, like light, came creeping in through a faraway window, but it never truly entered the room. It only cast shadows over what once was, taunting me by illuminating what I had lost.

I wasn't necessarily searching for an anecdote when I read Virginia Woolf's essay "Professions for Women" for a sophomore English literature class; but, after I had, that "girl" Woolf asks her audience to figure themselves as just wouldn't leave my mind. Who was she?

She is mentioned at least five times, give or take, throughout the eight paragraphs of the paper. Often, she is a girl, but sometimes she is referred to as a young woman. Woolf herself was around forty-nine when she delivered this speech to a branch of the National Society for Women's Service in London. She wasn't exactly what one would consider a young woman and definitely not what one would consider a girl. Neither was her audience, former suffragettes that were now championing employment equality.

Embody the girl, not the woman—the message that echoes throughout the speech.

Why was Woolf speaking to her audience in this way? Was this supposed to be the essence of Woolf's encouragement?

I, for one, believe it was.

I believe that Woolf was imploring the women in the crowd to figure themselves in a position more significant than a profession outside of the homestead: not just as the writer, or the journalist, or the young professional, but the girl they once were, a challenge far greater than inhabiting an occupation.

But why ask them to do so? Why does Woolf, ninety-three years later, implore me, too, to become the girl I once was?

To answer this, let's reflect on that girl in her bedroom.

When I was a little girl, all I wanted to do was write. One of my most clear and distinct memories is coming home from school after being taught about Microsoft Word and opening my first .docx on the family computer.

I inserted some obnoxious ombré bubble text that clung awkwardly to one side of the page, typed my parents' phone number underneath it, inserted a stock photo of a cartoon tiger with a watermark crisscrossed all over it, and sent it to the printer for publication. It was my magnum opus.

After that, my house became not one for living but for publishing. I opened a library in the dining room, fully stocked with self-illustrated copy paper and Crayola novellas that I would sell to my family on one promise: that they would love what I had written just as much as I had enjoyed writing it. My younger brothers were often both my unwilling employees and my unwilling customers. And my parents, my most dedicated patrons, would buy my books, flip through them, and then slip them into a big return stack so they could be up for sale again the next morning. I made so many of these copy paper creations that my store often operated at a surplus, so I ran sales all the time: fifty percent off one if you buy two, special glitter-pen autographed copies, a free pipe cleaner bookmark with your purchase. Most importantly, fear was nowhere to be found.

It was upon reflecting on these memories that I realized the truth about Woolf's sentiment and about writing at large: the journey to becoming a writer is an orbit: a big elliptical, not a stair-step journey upwards. It's not a departure, but a return. It's also not an hourglass, where sand flows from one bulb to the other. Sand moves too quickly for writing—it's never that easy. Instead, it's a tube of viscous liquid that seeps slowly, slowly, *slooooowly* back to its resting position, back to who you once were.

I knew that I had been a writer once; the real journey would be to become one again. And to do that, I would have to return to that girl in the bedroom.

But how could I stretch back and inward to reach her? As I continued to age away from my passion, I asked myself if I should've preserved that girl while I had the chance, packed ice and salt around her in the hopes she'd last. How could I ask her to come home? If I found her again, would she be the same? Or would she be permanently warped and freezer-burned?

All these are questions I had to consider. But I believe that just as Woolf revealed the truth, she also showed me the way to go back. For she knew that before you become a writer, you must first become a phantom-slayer.

Virginia Woolf tells me that before she can sit down and write a review, she "should need to do battle with a certain phantom." This phantom was The Angel in the House. Woolf's nemesis was a product of her time, a devotion to Victorian domesticity. She was sweet, "intensely sympathetic," and submissive—a vulture that attempted to swoop down and eat the heart out of all of her literary reviews. They had to do battle every time she would write, or her writing would lose all its substance and cease to be at all.

My Angel in the House is no angel. Like Woolf's, she is charmingly cunning; I'll give her that much. But she doesn't tell me that I should use my feminine empathy or childbearing accessories to delicately bolster men or promote domesticity. She detests kindness, especially the kind directed inward. She commands my teeth to tug and chew at the inside of my mouth, fingers to release and slam the laptop shut. An Angel born of both society and my genetic material, she is a taker, clipping the wings off my copy paper stories and displaying them in a gallery of failure.

Woolf finally dashed a rock against her Angel's head and killed her, but my Angel dies slowly. She's left her invisible feathers all over this work, all over my chest as it pangs with each new imperfect sentence. I hold her down on the floor long enough to write a mandatory paper or two, but she always breaks loose when it's over, jamming the connection between my fingers and my brain.

I still can't tell you when or how it started—when my makeshift publication house became a pressure chamber. I liked report cards that started with the first letter of my name; I liked swimming butterfly; I liked to win. I hated whistling and kickball and synchronized dance numbers and breaststroke because I could never master the way you're supposed to get your limbs to be perfectly frog-legged when you kick the water outwards. Being myself was a performance that ran every second, no intermission. I started to tear off whatever didn't come easily, whatever felt uncomfortable against my skin. When I wasn't afflicted, writing came so easy, so uninhibited and wild. The strangest piece of all of this is, I can still feel that cellular urge to write. I guess you could say that writing still comes naturally, but it is as natural as pain.

"Women are born with pain built in." —Amazon original *Fleabag*, not Virginia Woolf.

Maybe that's the plight of not only me, but of every woman writer. Maybe in killing the Angel in the House, she also overcomes that phantom pain—whether it be fueled by perfection, society, biology—so that her imagination can leap unbounded.

Unfortunately, though, according to Woolf, a woman is still not free even if she kills the Angel. Even if the Angel in the House is dead, the woman writer "has still many ghosts to fight." She is in constant battle between the phantom and its spawn.

How would I kill those phantoms? How many ghosts would I have to melt down before I reached the girl in her bedroom? Even if I tried to stomp out the Angel, who is to say that all her little devil children wouldn't run out from under my foot?

Would they cling to me forever?

When I imagine my future, it's a Frankenstein of possibility. I imagine different versions of myself—theoretical, hypothetical Me's—who had all chosen different paths. The one who chose this life, the writing life, the life of landmines, was tried and convicted for her inferiority. Every barren night, she lies back down on a sheetless bed in her brown apartment—flayed like an animal—watching a much more successful prototype on the square-shaped television as she thinks about how she should have listened to her family and gone into logistics instead. She has a lot of phantoms.

My recent mind builds walls and wells, not worlds. Whenever something begins to take shape, it emerges futile, too easy a prey for the Angel. She rips it apart, and it screams its inadequacies while it dies of its own self-hatred. How can a sentence hate itself? They're precocious and often verbose and always insecure. They are pale imitations of British literature, of heroes like Woolf, and of much more talented essayists whose methods keep slipping out of my grasp. They are mere regurgitations of the much more talented, swan songs of a flailing passion.

Somehow, though, despite all this, they still have the ability to raise me from the water. Some resurrectionary antidote is embedded within them, and just as they have the power to silence, they have the power to animate. When they aren't corpses, they are warm bodies that fill both a lonely page and a lonely mind. They are talismans and blasphemies, "screw you's!" to the Angel and all her ridiculous, perfect children. They are things with feathers that know nothing of failure when they do fly.

They emanate my pride, my core, my volume, my voice. And it feels like there is so much wind in the air and uncontested blood in my veins when the Angel or my phantoms aren't there to stop me from letting them spill out onto the vast whiteness. I think Woolf and every writer, female or not, feels it too.

There must be something in there, way back in the depths of my childhood bedroom that still calls out to me in the present. I can feel it. It's in the way all my mandatory papers end up climbing so far beyond the word count that I can only be pulled away to write an extension request. It's in the momentary inhale of inspiration that causes the imaginary secretary in my brain who is already up to her nose in unfinished paperwork to yell at me to write it down. It's in the quotes that I birth, pieces of me, populating my scripts and my stories. Yes, it must be some sort of birth.

Here's the way Woolf describes the process of a woman writing: "She was letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depths of our unconscious being."

A sentiment like that makes me want to break the laws of this phantom universe, cast off my inertia, and just go write.

And maybe that is how I continue to wear my Angel down, by pushing back against what she has sewn into me, until the seams burst one by one.

"So, now you've got a new job. And it is a ruthless one, and I mean ruthless. You don't have time to waste second-guessing how you feel about it. You just have to do it the best that you can, and know that that's the best you can do." —Netflix Original *BoJack Horseman*; again, not Virginia Woolf.

Writing may never cease to be ruthless, but it doesn't have to be impossible. So, I now turn to you in the audience, much like Woolf did all those years ago. After all, "Professions for Women" was originally delivered as a speech.

You've got to figure yourself, or at least learn how to figure yourself, as a girl with a pen, or a computer, or a napkin, or your Notes App—a girl with an insatiable imagination. Start trying again, and again, and again until you can let the weight of the world, and thus the weight of your words, shed like skin. You must continue thrashing against time and perfection and standards until you become loose enough to slip out. And when She pulls you back down under, because She will, you'll know how to come up and fight for air, because that girl taught you how to swim. You were born for these waters. We are amphibians, now.

The imaginary word count looms ahead again. And so, I leave you alone with Virginia Woolf for the final moment: "My time is up; and I must cease."

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