



Letter to Jim: Four Poems of Water and Soul

Katrina Hays

This letter to the author's Jungian therapist discusses the process by which therapy and the practice of writing align in a mysterious connection between upwelling unconscious and the divine interaction with human creativity. The attendant four poems investigate the haunted spaces of the psyche where self-hatred and physical harm jostle with the insistences of soul.

The frame of depth work, a writing practice, and thousands of hours spent physically engaged with the world's waters were combined to create a wide and ongoing inquiry into the nature of the writer's inner life and the invisible archetypal pressures that bear down on awareness.

The resulting letter and poetry show a developed sense of the mysterious connection of things seen and unseen, and relatedness with an invisible, instructive framework that allows the writer to live within body, and express via word.

The final judgment is that the author writes herself into being each day; that practice keeps her wide and sensitive, supple and alive.

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Dear Jim,

When we are together we are lifted and spun in a current of words—whether in the physical room of your office or lately in the imaginary room of our pandemic-forced phone calls. Ten years into our relationship and still you say: *Slow down*. And: *Write every day*.

Writing brings me into being. That particular practice of creation makes me wider, more present, better able to attend and be in service to myself and to the other that is more than myself. More often than not, the metaphors that surface in my writing are of water. Unsurprising, considering how much time I spend around or immersed in the stuff, how much of my body is delicious liquid.

When I pull it apart, the process of writing is a funny thing.

I sit, silver fountain pen poised over the pages of a black Moleskine journal. Thoughts rise and ink spools blue lines across the page, left to right, in an untidy scrawl comprised of characters we call written language: that admixture of agreed-upon letters and characters that convey specific meaning. The sound of language is also agreed-upon in terms of comprehension. It is interesting to note this quality of mutuality and consent held within our English argot.

I often have the image of all those blue words uncoiling into a long fishing line I cast out repeatedly in an attempt to capture what lies behind or below or beyond thought. During the first part of the operation I'm sort of flinging lures out into the etheric space of imagination, hoping to land some intangible fragment of dream or idea. The line is gossamer, yet I hope to pull forth a solid expression of the ineffable. Eventually, if I'm lucky, the cast lines bring back something from the deep. Then the lines reform to more or to different words and begin to take the shape of a written object (poem, story, essay) that is itself a piece of ephemera. When you consider it, a poem-story-essay is nothing but idea wedged (sometimes uncomfortably) into sound via a really odd sort of synesthesia. Imagine how a poem in particular elicits sound or music when read aloud. When read silently with our eyes, we nonetheless "hear" the sound internally. And a good poem can bring the physical world into the mind—torn basil, champagne bubbles, ripped-off toenail—and thereby be an external object that gives life to specific inner feeling and brings attendant recognition in the reader or listener. It's a remarkable process.

The poem itself has no weight or substance, save that which the mind brings to it. I'm saying this badly, but really . . . The poem is an idea of an idea. The poem is a written icon, if you will, a representative of what the poet is trying to capture, much like the fifteenth century icons used as devotionals that represented holy figures in early Christianity.

There is no way to absolutely capture the presence I call the divine. Artists strain for mere approximation; humans have been striving to show the ineffable physically for as long as there have been humans. I am not a visual artist; my *métier* is writing, so my wrestling with this problem happens alongside the river of language. (*Métier* is a lovely word that goes back to the Old French *mestier*: "divine service, function, duty, craft, profession.")

I cannot write my soul's impulses specifically but poetry offers space for expressing the inexpressible, much like the room we have spent so much time in during our therapy sessions.

That room is physical: it has four walls, a door and window, a couch and desk; it is lined with books on two walls. There is a faded red Turkish rug underfoot. The physical room holds a decade of spoken words that strained to give voice to and understanding of the unseen pressures and drives of my psyche. Those tumbled words have no weight or physical reality (what a hefty mess it would be if they did!), yet over time they slowly coalesced into chunks of understanding in my brain, body, and heart. Our words and the silences between them have worked to reveal the black beliefs that underpinned my pain. From the deep waters of the unconscious came new ideas that gradually allowed me to reform and reframe my raging shadow and develop an inner reality where I live safely—and happily. Our words, over time, captured the light that danced just beyond the bounds of awareness; light that called me to come into balance and enter something close to peace.

The process of writing is similar. The words come, often in a chaotic tumble. I am forced to slow my galloping mind by the limitations of hand on pen on paper. The slowness gradually allows an inner quiet where the divine has room to speak. I believe the divine must cross an enormous barrier of understanding and only sometimes can I expand wide enough or be slow enough to host the most infinitesimal portion of its voice. (See how I strain to use words to describe this process? I am icon-ing all over the page!)

When the idea is received via internal image or phrase, then I go to work, laying down word after word after word in combinations I hope will make eventual sense. Over time, the form of the poem reveals itself. Free verse, villanelle, sonnet. If it is free verse, it tells me how it would best look on the page: as couplets, or a solid block of text, or stanzas of multiple lines. The poem really takes on a life of its own. It is made by my brain but somehow separate from me; informed by something other than myself.

As we go along I cut and reshape the object—I am a sculptor of words. Once I am reasonably certain the shape is right and will hold, then I become a word-potter, placing the work in a kiln of time to dry enough to share with others. The poem itself will dance—or not. It will shine and sing—or not. It will work as an object, an icon, something that gives physical life to that ineffable creating body—or it will somehow fail. I live with close-enough; perfection is the prerogative of the gods.

Each bit of writing is of me—and of something beyond me. Each finished object is a part of the story I am and was and will be, and part of the larger story happening beyond my physical body.

What I find most remarkable in this process is how I must both remove myself from the process and remain present enough to do the work. I must take action, capture, create, and refine while simultaneously staying out of the way of the impulse driving the creation of the object. It's a crazy split. Somehow, within the split is where the light resides most brightly. That odd, curious opening is exactly what my poems most often strain to discuss, and what I hope to show when I share them with you and others.

I look forward to talking again next week. Someday soon I hope to meet again in person, to experience the satisfaction of physical contact and the comfort and joy and challenge of mutual inspiration.

(*Inspiration*: “a divine influence or action on a person, believed to qualify her or him to receive and communicate sacred revelation,” and “the action or power of moving the intellect or emotions.” From Latin *in* + *spirare*: to breathe.)

Love,
Katrina

Begin

When I died
there was ringing

Then sound resolved
into the throb of a sea bell

When I died
I did not know I was dead

I did not know the body
would clamber upright again

When I died the stone sank
Ripples rushed out into a circle dance

Across the sea
the big bell rings

Familiar

You are not here
when I am born into body.
I birth you later.
You crawl from my forehead,

an idea complete
with sword and helm

to fend off the fear
that snagged my family song.

I fold you into soft places;
armor spleen, liver, heart.

Now, you tear at my entrails.
You spread me on stone and peck out my eyes.

You blind and hallow
with a fierce logic.

I cannot be hurt
if I am dead.

Graves

The wind wakes me at dawn.
I walk out the door and stumble
across the oldest grave,
its headstone canted
atop cracked concrete.

Underneath lies the kicked dog.
And the girl.
And the father.
The clay soil is silent.
It is silent.

I lift the girl's leg bone, let the wind
rise me down the hill
to a mound where tall grass
supplicates heavy oat heads
over a fisted hand.

The punched mare
lifts her head,
spooks
into a flag-tail rush
across spring fields.

I pull out the arm and this wind
pushes me to a different grave
where I pry out a child's skull,
then another to collect a cracked tailbone,
and another to claim the unborn fetus.

At dawn the wind coils me
outside the old house
to graves where I gather bones.
Such strange resurrection,
to be risen in deed.

Horizon

Today clouds rush the water,
close the daily dialogue
of land-sea-sky. Then vanishes
the future, just a margin line left
where liquid rubs vapor.

The horizon not only obscured
but changed; the familiar
threshold of below and above
softened as ending
and beginning edge together.

Between silence and word is the place
where is and not-is meet, where time
jostles with eternity and the body
vanishes and the soul
stretches forth, unbowed.

For Dr. James Soliday (1941–2022).

Thank you for the room and the years of words that eddy around those walls.
Thank you for the silence and space, the reflected listening, and the deep care. I am
so grateful.



Jim Soliday - Photograph by Steven McBurnett.

Katrina Hays' writing has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Apalachee Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *The Hollins Critic*, *Hubbub*, *Plainsongs*, *Psychological Perspectives*, *Sky Island Journal*, *and* *Tahoma Literary Review*, *among many others*. *She is a regional editor for* *Fireweed: Poetry of Oregon*, *and lives in Bend, Oregon.* www.katrinahays.com