

Timotheos Firestone

This year I joined the Writer's Rendezvous, a local writer's group that meets in Dayboro. There's some really lovely, thoughtful and creative people there, both aspiring and published authors. Each month, they set a creative writing exercise to help us practice the flow of writing. I've really enjoyed them, because they are so achievable and focussed on a particular element of writing.

This month's writing task is different, though. With a daring glint in her eye, Vicki asked us what, for each of us as writers, would push us out of our comfort zone? What do we find the most difficult to write about?

Of course, I know what it is for me. I knew what it was as soon as she asked the question. I've refused to acknowledge it, to tell anyone, to let it out. It's my most shameful topic. I know what I have to write about, precisely because everything in my psychology is telling me not to.

It's me.

The real me, not what I let myself show people. The buried me. The raw me. The human me.

Often, I do start to write about something close to me, but I twist it a little, add a magical or fantastical element, and suddenly I'm no longer writing about me. I won't do that, this time.

I fear scrutiny. I fear being seen for what I am sometimes: afraid, weak, shameful. I'm afraid of my own unfiltered story. I hide behind so many layers of thought and self-judgement, I constantly trip over the too-high bar that I set for myself, and I find it difficult to bond with a lot of people.

But the truth is, I have a story, and it's meaningful and it's mine. I have scars, too, ones that I put there myself a long time ago. Nowadays my scars are deeper than skin, but I'm also stronger.

I was always sensitive. That's a good thing, but it makes it hard growing up in a callous world. I don't think I found my feet when I changed schools, moving from Victoria to Queensland at age 10, and I never felt 'at home', at home. As a teenager, I would find respite in escapism, community in online games, creativity in digital art, and freedom in writing – most of these in the middle of the night so I could hide from my parents who didn't approve of my computer use. I tried to ask God for help in the darkness, but he was silent, and I turned my back on Christianity at 15.

Then I found Anita, who shared so much of my depths, interests, and pain. I was in love with her, and for years we were genuinely happy. I had direction, I had a plan, and a life ahead of me. We talked about everything. I worked on being a games programmer, like I'd always wanted. We had names planned out for our future children. I got my dream job, but was made

redundant, applied to another one, failed their programming test - shame that I feel to this day, well over a decade later, even though I know rationally that the tests were pointlessly specific about C syntax instead of general programming concepts. I got the next job, we moved out, together, in Taringa. It took me a while to tell my parents even that.

I defined myself by that relationship, and we were going to combine last names when we were married. We did get married, but never combined last names. We got busy with change-making, sustainability, community groups and democracy, and then, well, she wanted to start seeing other people. So, we started a journey together into polyamory.

That's how I met Kaya, who became my partner at the same time. We shared a lot as well, and it was a beautiful, passionate and creative relationship. She was an alternative vegan programmer with vibrant hair, who trained free-flight parrots, did gymnastic fitness, and wanted to create video games together. I was in love with her, too, and I had committed to her in my heart, just as much as to Anita. For a couple of years, I was so happy that this would be my life direction.

Eventually, I realised we had differences in personality that I'd made assumptions about, and her personality slowly changed after starting a night job as a stripper. Her job made me jealous and uncomfortable, and I never really talked about that honestly with her. I was too afraid of being in the wrong. I tried to constantly be helpful, working on her house renovations, minding her birds, building her aviaries, helping around her property, without any boundaries to my own limits or well-being. I was also working full-time and sharing house chores equally with Anita, who I lived with. As I was increasingly tired and stressed, communication degraded, and everything spiralled downwards for me. I put everything into trying to do the best I could for my partners, but increasingly felt inadequate and unwanted. I put myself under so much stress that my body became constantly sick. My hair greyed prematurely, at 28. I truly believed I was dying. My reaction, instead of doing something about it, was to buy life insurance because I wanted to be worth something to my partners when I died.

Ultimately, the relationship with Kaya ended, and my relationship with Anita didn't last much longer, as I had completely burnt out and they both sought out newer relationships instead of working on their existing, damaged love. That is the heartbreaking downside of open polyamory.

Love that I thought would last forever, died. I failed. My commitment had been a core part of my identity.

I was left alone, on the property I'd bought to become community land, which I'd dreamed both of them would be part of.

For a while, I built myself up there, learning to stand on my own, learning to live alone, and I really made progress and started to enjoy it. It was just the beginning of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and I had time alone in nature, working from home, which was most restorative.

Then I met Grace, like a cataclysm, and we connected deeper and more intimately than I'd previously thought possible. She cared so much about making social change, including networks of households and sustainable communities that provided food for the disadvantaged. She had cascading brown wavy hair to her tailbone, with a joyful and commanding, yet childlike, exuberance. She was so deeply beautiful and also wounded. When we first met, she could not look a person directly in the eye. Every time I think of her, I feel a deep shot of pain, for she was an angel whose wings had been sawn off by the heartless men who abused her. She would not let herself be defined by any of this, and she determined her own life, and devoted it to helping others. Together, we fell in love, in secret, and healed each other with tender touch and bleeding hearts. Slowly, with safe love and intention, she grew her wings back, even while she continued to fundamentally change. In the end, she changed her goals. She joined the religion I'd left behind at 15, and that angel flew away. I know we were incompatible, and we talked about that, at length, but her leaving was so abrupt, cold and permanent that it annihilated my confidence and hopes.

That was a year ago. I've learnt so much. I still struggle.

I stay up late because I'm scared to go to bed without accomplishing something, I wake up tired and repeat the cycle. Sometimes I'm trapped in my own thoughts, I isolate from friends, I forget to eat, skip meals, get foggy and tired, feel I can't ask for help and can't be a burden.

I feel like I haven't achieved what I want with my life and I worry that I don't even know what I want anymore. What if it changes again? Like the relationships I've had, each which I thought would last a lifetime? Each person holds in their heart a part of me.

Yet, through all of this, I can write about me. Because I'm learning my value. My scars have value. My life has value. It's hard to be seen, especially hard to feel, but I am starting to believe in my own humanity.

Why should I share this? There's always a message of hope. I can own my shame and vulnerability, rather than fearing it being taken away from me.

That is why I go to the Writer's Rendezvous in the first place, to pour my heart into my writing, because I have something that needs to be said.