

Like Water for Fish

Patricia Wild



Nick Cave's Soundsuits, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, TN. Photo by Patricia Wild

Circling, circling Nick Cave's soundsuits, I marveled how this African-American artist had transformed his rage, his fears, his searing pain into fabric and sequins, into cast-aside made sculpture, into crocheted body suits; into beauty. Horrified by Rodney King's brutal assault by Los Angeles police in 1991, Cave created armor, costumes,

disguises, performance pieces, each wearable sculpture inviting us to try on what it means for a man of color to walk down an American sidewalk.

Back home, still awed by what I'd seen in Nashville, I considered Cave's pain-to-transcendence process. How does such breathtaking transformation happen? On meditative walks on the icy, snowy sidewalks of Somerville and Cambridge, at meeting for worship, and noodling in my journal, I've wondered what I, a Quaker writer, might learn about my own process by reflecting on Cave's astonishing work?

His rage as impetus? This genesis I understand. Often my writing projects have originated from the white-hot anger felt during meeting for worship! Held, sustained in deep, collective silence, I have dared to truly examine what lies heavy on my heart. When, for example, my homeless students, women I'd taught in greater Boston family shelters, shared with me their stories of childhood sexual abuse, I brought my horror and fury into worship. *What am I asked to do?* I prayed. Over many months, my novel, *Swimming In It*, was born. Yes, I know how negative emotions can inspire!

But those soundsuits' not-to-be-ignored sequins, their thousands of hand-sewn buttons, those bolts of gaudy fabric and tin instruments! Surely such voluminous, undeniable *stuff* could teach me something about transformation?

Cave, himself, answered my question during an April, 2013, interview with Artspace.com's editor-in-chief, Andrew Goldstein:

"So the first soundsuit was constructed entirely out of twigs. I was making a sculpture first—I didn't even think I could physically put this on—but once it was developed I physically put it on and moved around in it, and it made sound. And when I made that sound, it moved me into a role of protest. In order to be heard you have to speak louder. So that was something that was of interest to me, and it kept unfolding and really becoming much more versatile in that sense, and it made me think more, again, about my role and civic responsibility as an artist."

In my ears. Cave's ownership of his artistic agency is a variation of *What am I asked to do?* But that serendipitous moment when those twigs asserted their twiggy-ness and Cave's process shifted? This unfolding intrigues me—and invites me to look at my own "twigs."

What are my twigs? Not words or my thumb-worn thesaurus, certainly, not pen to paper nor a blank computer screen; these are implements, tools like Cave's needle and

thread. What asserts its essence, its Truth, its possibility to me? Against what do my inchoate thoughts interact with, bump up against? What shapes my ideas? What is *mutable*—yet instructive?

It's November 23, 1960; Opening Night of my first high school play: For three months the (all-white) cast of that musty favorite, "Seventeen," has rehearsed in our Lynchburg, Virginia high school's chilly, cavernous auditorium, its fifteen-hundred seats empty save Miss Virginia Wiley, doyenne of E.C. Glass's English Department and our fierce director, seated in the middle seat of the third row. Now, nervously waiting backstage, I hear muffled—and welcomed—laughter from many rows, I hear rustling, coughing; crossing stage right, the auditorium's warmth so startles me I almost trip. So balmy, so charged, so pulsing, so expectant has the auditorium air become, I long to stare past the footlights to catch a glimpse of that multi-headed, breathing organism out there. Instead I say my first line.

It's September, 1966: After we graduated in June, my college roommate joined the Peace Corps; I'm teaching fourth grade in Brooklyn, N.Y. I send her a letter complaining about the city's pollution, a major topic among my new, Big Apple friends, Park Slope neighbors, P. S. 120 colleagues. "Air?" she writes back from El Salvador. "You're writing about air?"

It's 2005: I'm writing a book about the two African-American students who desegregated E.C. Glass High School in 1962 and, today, every word is a struggle. *You're getting cobwebs!*" I inwardly hear my mother shout from the kitchen, just like she did when I was eight and made the same stupid mistake over and over while practicing the piano. *"Go outside and get some fresh air!"*

I've spent so long inhabiting Lynchburg's civil rights history today that, walking along Somerville Avenue, when a gritty March wind stings my face, I need to remind myself of where I am. What year this is. And why I was led to write this book.

Exposed to traffic-fetid air, my inchoate ideas shift. And way opens.



Vintage Philco Console Radio, Public Domain

It's January 21, 2017 and everyone I know is at a Women's March somewhere. Not me. I'm in a recording studio in Union Square's Somerville Media Center, headphones on, podcasts' script in hand. My script. I wrote these words. I honed them for years, since 1999, draft after draft. And now, sometimes tentatively, with a southern accent, as if a thirty-five-year old Lynchburg-born woman who's only just now figuring it out, sometimes rasping and growling and dropping my Rs as if a working-class old man from Somerville, sometimes myself, the author, I speak my words into a microphone, Stuart, my sound engineer, at my side. And although I can imagine Miss Virginia Wiley's

multiple charm bracelets jangling as she furiously scribbles a note lambasting my performance, nevertheless, I persist.

I love emergent Jewell, I love crippled Rocco, I love their love story, an agape love story. I love this self-made opportunity to praise Unconditional Love—on a website! I’m loving these in-the-moment openings as I revise, improve my script as I say my lines. My love comes through in my voice; I hear it in my headphones.

When, three years before, I’d first conceived of creating WellingUp.net to share my Quaker-based novel, *Welling Up* online, podcasts had seemed another techie bell or whistle at my disposal. Now, surrounded by recording equipment, hearing what’s coming through my voice, I acknowledge and celebrate my airtime. For I remember, pre-television, the four, five-year-old me, alone, transported, legs crossed, and seated on the rug in front of my family’s radio console as I listened—and trusted—Don McNeill’s gentle, flat, Midwestern voice.ⁱⁱ Which, at the speed of light, beamed from downtown Chicago to our fusty, upstate New York living room every morning from nine to ten. “*Each in his own words, each in his own way, for a world united in peace, bow your heads and pray,*” he’d suggest every morning. And I did.

It’s First Day. Perhaps there’s a fireplace fire; a heavy log shifts, thuds. Perhaps a restless branch pops. Perhaps there’s been another school massacre; another horror each of us carried with us into Friends Meeting at Cambridge’s spacious meetinghouse this morning. Whatever has happened, it is here. It is present. We hundred or so worshippers swim in it. Our shoulders droop under its collective weight. I listen to my breathing. My heart races. *What am I asked to do?* Should I stand to name our shared outrage? For I have experienced—and written about—how such naming can sometimes be a balm. *What am I asked to do?* Should I break the silence? As if wetting my index finger and lifting it into the wind, I test the air. It is agitated, hornets-nest stirred up. *You can’t fix this, always-responsible-oldest-sister,* I counsel myself. And remain seated.

.... It’s First Day. Slowly, an older woman rises to speak: “It seems to me,” she begins, “that meeting for worship is like a radio? When we come into worship, when we sit

quietly and wait, it's like we're turning the radio on. We're saying we're ready to listen.
To what is all around us."

In us, too, I silently amend.

Inspired by this exploration of Cave's pain-to-transformation process, an important question still remains: what of Beauty? Nick Cave's glorious process began in sorrow and ends in glorious, wondrous, transcendent beauty. What is my writerly final destination? And am reminded of a poem quoted at meeting for worship years ago and, apparently, still guiding me:

The Poet Speaks of Praisingⁱⁱⁱ

by Rainer Maria Rilke

Oh speak, poet, what do you do?

--I praise.

But the monstrosities and the murderous days,
how do you endure them, how do you take them?

--I praise.

But the anonymous, the nameless grays,
how, poet, do you still invoke them?

--I praise.

What right have you, in all displays,
in very mask, to be genuine?

--I praise.

And that the stillness and the turbulent sprays
know you like star and storm?

:--because I praise.

Hallelujah!

ⁱ [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vintage_Philco_Console_Radio,](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vintage_Philco_Console_Radio,_Model_389K,_Broadcast_%26_Short_Wave_Bands,_6_Tubes,_Made_In_USA,_Circa_1937_-_1938_(19939175400).jpg)

[Model 389K, Broadcast %26 Short Wave Bands, 6 Tubes, Made In USA, Circa 1937 -
1938 \(19939175400\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vintage_Philco_Console_Radio,_Model_389K,_Broadcast_%26_Short_Wave_Bands,_6_Tubes,_Made_In_USA,_Circa_1937_-_1938_(19939175400).jpg)

ⁱⁱ “Don McNeill’s Breakfast Club” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_McNeill%27s_Breakfast_Club

ⁱⁱⁱ from *Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties*, ed. and trans. by John J. L. Mood, Norton, 1975