

crooked letter 10: Fool of a Milestone

A year ago I wrote my first crooked letter for an audience of four or five people. *Hurricanes are better than Christmas*- a slight, humorous piece- was written at the beginning of a terrible storm season. Florida had not yet been slammed by four hurricanes. The misplaced hopes of millions had not yet been dashed by the November election. I had not yet fully sunk into what would be months of severe depression.

A year ago I set a goal to write 52 essays to be sent out to self-selected souls. In my more artsy moments, I considered these letters part of a performance art piece extended over time and through electronic space for a small but well appreciated audience. I also wanted to sharpen my nonfiction narrative writing. The best way to improve is by writing and writing and writing and writing some more and then just when I think I'm going to throw up words, writing even more. Exhibishopnist that I am, promising to write for an audience means I am more apt to. You must have decided that your inbox was not already too full; that there was room for my wise (or otherwise) pearls.

The slaver driver in me had ambitions. She wanted one essay a week. I tried not to snicker too loudly. The layabout in me cautioned against assigning any time frame for this project. *She* reminded me that thick-paged escapes sing siren song luring me into what my ex-boyfriend calls the land of magic hoo-hah. Perpetual fence sitter that I am, I strive to walk a middle path between the crack of the whip and the swing of the hammock.

With this crooked letter, I've completed eight or nine. New readers should be warned that my numberings are not a reliable guide to how close or far I am to the appointed milestone. I am a little less than a fifth of the way. At this rate, it will take me five years to write 52 crooked letters.

Remember running the mile in P.E.? At my school, you would have to retrace the path 8 or 9 times to make a mile. Each loop, I would con myself that this was the last one. This was necessary since my asthma made running painful and my pride meant I was determined to run it in 8 minutes (or as close as I could). There would be that moment of despair at the end of each loop, when I realized that I had to go around that damn thing yet again. But making the mile tasted so sweet.

At times this project seems more a millstone. A wheezing despair clutches at my chest. There are unfinished essays named and promised that I refuse to give up on, thus the weird numberings. I don't have to do this, but I feel compelled nonetheless. It is not guilt so much as a painful pause- an empty space that longs, oh how it longs, to be filled.

The strength of my desire is to reckoned with. Dressed in the motley of my court fool, artistic ambition clings to my neck like a restless toddler refusing to walk. It squirms and whines and screams. It has to scream.

I have been distracted.

Fragments of distraction. A life.

A computer crashes. A neighbor dies. Four hurricanes blow. Months of despair. Financial crisis at a non-profit. Momma loses her job. Uncle Eddie in the hospital again. A three-year relationship breaks. My cat comes home with a bloody stump of a tail. Rejection not once but twice by NYU. A dear friend moves far away. An estranged friend's life slides down a crack pipe. The deaths of two old dogs and one small, starved kitten. Daddy's panic attack. The deaths of two co-workers at two different jobs in one month. A slow- sometimes graceful, sometimes tedious- recovery from the aforementioned months of despair. A gorgeous, terrible world full of beauty and horror. On top of all the livening and/or tiresome daily needs and deeds.

Fragments of distraction. A life.

I have been distracted.

The strength of my desire is to reckoned with. My foolish ambition to make a wise string of pearls makes itself heard.

Milestone. Millstone. Lodestone.

I set this goal to anchor me to life. Last fall, I sailed toward the edge of the world. I had not intended to go that far. That was not the course I had charted. But accidents befall explorers. Storms turn ships off course. Before I was blinded by the mists of the water roaring over the world's edge, I understood the danger. I hurled this anchor into the air.

Loading the self-imposed task of writing 52 essays with so much meaning is not what drew me back from the edge. I pulled myself back up the rope hand over fist though luck, a tenacious desire to enjoy my weird little life and effective meds played no small part. But the creative task as lodestone satisfies my inner mytho-poetic-romantic.

We imbue stimuli with meaning. We tell stories about our lives. All those stories are true. All those stories are false. We choose to believe. I choose to believe. Ambitious artistic tasks save my life; they make my life. They are my milestones, my millstones, my lodestones.