

flat-footed truths

TELLING BLACK WOMEN'S LIVES



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WRITING SURVIVAL

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Suicide is such a simple, even sweet-sounding, word, the way its easy rhythm curls the lips, its syllables falling almost hypnotic. *Suicide*. I have come to hate the word and the idea it conjures up of some romantic notion of noble human drama. There is nothing simple or sweet or even remotely romantic or noble about a person's decision to kill themselves. For those left behind, the word itself takes on an aching, overwhelming power and becomes a poisoned legacy. Terri L. Jewell committed suicide in November 1995, and I am still struggling to understand it, still wrestling with a grief. How do I begin to talk about her decision to put a gun to her head and pull the trigger? As a writer, I know I have to find the words, have to figure out some way to talk about the rage/silence her death has covered me with. This search is not just about words. This is about survival.

It feels so impossible, so difficult to explain. How to write through this grief? How to say what the language seems inade-

quate to express? How to remember Terri, remember Phyllis and countless others whose faces and names I do not know? How to admit the despair, the fear, the anger? How do I write about pain, the struggle to heal? What will keep me alive?

Terri had been dead for more than a month before I found out. We were writing buddies. We'd met only once, at the Audre Lorde CeleConference in Boston in October 1990. She had an idea for a newsletter to keep the "sisterspirit" we (about thirty to forty Black women who'd come together in a session there) had created among ourselves. She had talked about the joy she felt at our gathering and how isolated she was living in Michigan. She talked about us needing to keep in touch with each other. I suggested that she write letters and promised that if she wrote me, I'd write back. I don't remember if we even hugged then. It all feels so long ago.

Terri's death shook my soul to its core and threatened everything I'd learned to believe in. It caused me to stop writing. Yet here I am doing the work that I know is necessary, praying that my words are coherent, that my writing will somehow honor Terri's life and the love she brought into mine. I have to do this, because writing is what I do. It is how I survive. I write, and watch the sky. And every day I listen to the music of Sweet Honey in the Rock, and to the birds and plants when I walk. At night I try to gather stars and place them in a child's dream. I tell the stories I know, while the world sleeps.

Terri was my friend. We shared so many words, letters, between us. It was our love of writing letters that bound us together, made us sisters. We discovered page by page there were so many things we had in common. Our favorite color was purple. We both loved nature, the calmness of water, saw such beauty in the clouds. She told me about a "favorite place" of hers where she often went to write. I told her about "my" lake.

We vented to each other about our no-good-for-our-spirit jobs and helped each other maintain sanity in the craziness that surrounded us. We were both Black women poets who believed in the writing, in the power of words, our words, to make a difference, *or so I thought*. We both adored Audre Lorde, quoted her to each other. I remember Terri's trepidation and courage when she decided to go dread. She was concerned, too, about how we Black sisters survive in this country. So *why didn't she survive?*

She knew I was straight. I knew she was lesbian. It didn't matter. Between us, we wrote about what was important in our lives, the loves and the fears. She shared a good deal of her "madness" (as she called it) with me. I wrote her about my own struggles. Through our words, it seemed we could get deeper clarity about almost anything. I thought we both understood the power in our words. Terri wrote a lot about feeling isolated, even as she acknowledged the "life-saving power" in our letters. Over the course of our five-year conversation, she told me how she was getting along with her therapist, about her "coping" strategies and the prescribed drugs. She trusted me enough to share the source of a lot of her problems, the abuse she had suffered as a child, and she wrote me when she'd been diagnosed as manic-depressive. She wrote of her hospital stays, how they were necessary periods of renewal for her. And she was there for me to write out my own "madness." It is ironic, but it was Terri who most helped me get past the death of another friend.

The pain comes over me in waves, sometimes, still shakes me like the ocean smacking against the sand. Each time I remember something she said or I hear an ignorant comment about Black people and suicide, it's like a hammer upside my head and I want to scream.

I cannot talk about Terri's death without talking about Lorraine's. Their deaths are now intertwined in my heart. Lorraine was also my friend, but I'd walked away from her because she would not leave her abusive husband. Her death knocked down the walls of secrecy I'd spent many years building. None of my current friends knew Lorraine. I'd never talked about her. How could I talk about Lorraine and not admit my own abusive marriage, which I'd never talked about, either? Lorraine and I were connected in a past time that I feel ashamed of. When she died of a cocaine overdose in November 1994, I was overcome by both guilt and grief. I had not been there for her. I couldn't help but think that she'd chosen death as the only escape she could imagine from a situation she felt powerless to change—a kind of subtle suicide.

Terri was there for me while I grieved for Lorraine and began to confront my own still buried fears. In her letters, Terri wrote that I had to name the hurt, to speak it. She urged me to write down the pain and send it to her. She even convinced me to go see a therapist. The sister believed in "getting help for yourself, in doing whatever it takes" to get and be well. *I don't understand how she could not hear what she made me believe.*

Terri helped me begin to write about Lorraine and my own abuse. Writing *LPs (Recordings)*, the sixty-four poems that poured out about Lorraine, was a hard and demanding task. But it was also healing. Still, I was reluctant to share the work. Terri said the writing of it saved my life. She told me this was how we "poets" had to do it. She kept after me to "do the work" and kept nudging me to share it with her.

She never got a chance to see what she had helped me put on paper. She understood my fear about sharing the poems and was willing to wait. She seemed to understand everything. She wrote me a long letter sharing the suicides and painful circumstances

of others she had known and lost. She told me what she did to survive. At the top of the list was Audre Lorde's solution. Terri summarized, "Write it down, girl. Tell everyone how much it hurts. Sharing will make it easier to bear." *It doesn't make sense how she showed me a way to survive and then she didn't.*

On January 2 I went to the post office to pick up my mail and was surprised to see that the package I'd sent her had been returned. I asked the clerk about it. I could not see the handwritten message: "Deceased 1288 12/26/96." The clerk must have thought I was dense. In her harried state, she pointed—"Here. It says 'Deceased.' She's gone"—and thrust the package back into my hands. I stood there, wanting to tell the clerk, "No. You don't understand. This package is important. Terri needs to get this mail," but no words came out. Inside there was a letter, a Sweet Honey tape, a couple of postcards, a spirit rock (the spider, symbolizing creativity), and the now twenty-six-poem manuscript about Lorraine, *LPs (Recordings)*.

I don't remember how I made it home that evening, but I do know that I called up several friends, told them what had happened, asked how I could find out for sure whether or not she was dead. My mind kept making up excuses. I thought maybe she went to see her parents, or maybe she was in the hospital again, or perhaps she forgot to tell me that she was going "on tour" promoting her books. *What did the clerk know?*

The next day I ran away. I had picked up *Sula* to read on the way downtown. I wasn't sure where I was going, I just needed to go, get out of the house, walk, be out of my life for a while. I didn't want to have to think about Terri, wonder what was going on with her, where she was, or have to talk to any of my friends about her. On the metro, trying to use *Sula* to distract myself, I came upon Morrison's character Shadrock, celebrating his unique holiday, "National Suicide Day." It stunned me

when I realized that “today is January 3,” and I knew then that Terri was dead. I closed the book, got off the metro, and just walked.

I walked the mall for a long time in the cold. My mind was muddled, frozen. After a couple of hours, I needed to get warm. I found myself at the only museum open that day, in line for tickets to an exhibition of Vermeer’s paintings. There was a long line and wait. Even after getting my ticket, I had to wait a couple more hours before I was scheduled to go in. Unable to keep still, I returned to the blustering winds and walked some more. Finding myself near the library, thinking (or perhaps *not* thinking) I could find out something about Terri, I spent about an hour searching through Michigan newspapers, looking/not looking through obituaries.

That night I called several friends, expressing my uncertainty and denial. My heart told me she was dead, but I could not listen, didn’t want to believe what I knew was true. I reread her chapbook, stopping at the “Missing Hymen” poem with the lines “. . . I hugged death / like a thick, blue blanket / its borders embroidered / with shiny new bullets / saved for the time / I could choose passage out . . .” and then I remembered that we had made an antisuicide pact. I reread all her letters to me to confirm this. She could *not* be dead!

A few days later, a journalist friend was able to contact the newspaper in Lansing and confirm what I knew. I did not know for sure how she had died, but I felt it was suicide. I stopped writing that day, though, thank God, I continued to talk to my friends and family. I knew I could not keep Terri’s death inside me and live.

Her last letter to me was dated 11/10/95 and was full of the downside. She talked about her new medication, about how she missed her “manic” side, but was trying to trust that her

therapist knew what she was doing. She was determined not to go into the hospital that year. For the last three years Terri had gone to the psychiatric ward of some hospital. Something about the fall, especially Thanksgiving, brought out the worst depressions in her. I'd send encouraging postcards and "Hey, where the hell are you?" notes until she got out and could write that she was okay and was all excited about the next project she wanted to work on.

Terri always seemed to have something she was working on. My God, did this woman work! Her chapbook *Succulent Heretics* had just come out in 1994. She'd edited a wonderful anthology of Black women's sayings, *Black Women's Gumbo Ya Ya*, which came out in 1993. She was in the midst of two important projects, one a Black lesbians engagement/calendar book, the other an anthology of personal accounts of why sisters go dread. She was so full of life and spirit, so energetic. But she was also struggling. In that last letter, she just asked me to listen. It was part of our pact, to put down the pain on the page.

Sometimes I still get so angry with her, find myself asking a door, an empty chair, or just staring out the window, "Why?" Sometimes I want to shake her or to slap the shit out of her, just to make her leave me alone. Sometimes I want to choke her to death, *but she is already dead. Her eyes invade my dreams, staring, wanting . . . what? She had agreed, "Yes, we could be sisters," and wrote that my letters were keeping her alive. She had promised me she wouldn't commit suicide, and then she broke that promise. And I can't ever tell her how awful that makes me feel.*

They say she died sometime after Thanksgiving. They don't have an exact date. She was found in her car on November 28. They are not sure how long her body had been there. Found her in her car, which was full of blood. Said she shot herself in the head in what sounded like that "most favorite" place she had

described to me. But even before learning all the details, I knew it had been a violent death. Blood soaked my dreams. I would get up from the bed, not rested, and wonder how to make it through the rest of the night, another morning. Sometimes I would sit at the computer, or over my journal, and simply stare. My hands would shake. My whole body would shake. It felt as if my head were exploding.

What had always sustained me, had always been there, through everything else, what was most important to me as a poet—my words—had dissipated into thin air and were replaced by a sadness and a rage/silence that accompanied me everywhere. When Terri died, all my poetry vanished. How can I now explain the horror I felt when all the sounds, the images and their rhythms, just disappeared? The “screaming/silence” (how else can I name the noises that were so hollow echoing inside my skull) terrorized me. I still hear echoes some days, some nights. How do I articulate that nothingness that can still trample down my bones?

Over and over I pleaded with my friends, “Please . . . I cannot stand another sister dying.” When I knew that Terri was gone, reaching out to my friends, all of them, helped me to survive. I even convinced myself that I was really doing okay. Terri had taught me that not talking about the pain was wrong. Unlike Lorraine’s death, I did not keep Terri’s death a secret. My friends and family were my strength, and I leaned heavily on them. I called up everyone, told them that I was grieving for Terri, told many of them about Lorraine for the first time. With their help and support, I figured I had everything covered and thought that I was going to be all right. But I was not hearing any poetry in my heart.

One month later I wrote an essay about my daughter turning twenty-one. I was ecstatic to have the writing return. I was

"acknowledging the sad," as another friend told me I needed to. But I was not writing poetry, and I was feeling terribly distracted, unbalanced, inside. I knew something was wrong, but I ignored it. I kept thinking of what Terri would have encouraged me to do. She would have written, "Go and see somebody. Get yourself some help." Then I kept thinking of how she had been seeing somebody for years and how, obviously, that hadn't saved her.

When the panic attacks came and insomnia carried me through three days and nights, I felt myself moving toward the path Terri had chosen. I was mouthing to all my friends how I could not understand how Terri could do what she did, that I did not understand her desperation. But, inside, the despair was so loud, I could not hear the ache of my own heart. When her suicide started to make too much sense to me, I had to make a choice. With the encouragement of a good friend, I went to the doctor and asked for help. In the waiting room I made another conscious decision that I was not going to go out like Terri did. This became my mantra. I still chant it, sometimes, to calm a rising panic that slips up.

The antidepressants prescribed by the doctor got me up in the morning. The other medication helped me sleep and stopped the anxiety/panic. They were all I needed. Therapy was not going to kill me, like . . . I suffered through debilitating nightmares and days of insomnia. In daylight hours there were sightings of the dead around my door. Gray days settled even with the sun. I watched a lot of TV, reread old *Star Trek* novels, and couldn't stop eating. That was pretty much my life for the next couple of months—make it up in the mornings, take my medication, make it to work/through a day, watch TV, talk to my friends. I hungered for the poetry I'd always known, but I could hear no words, no melodies.

A lot of my friends encouraged me to apply to Cave Canem, a workshop/retreat for Black poets. One girlfriend even wrote my cover letter. But how could I be among poets when I was not sure I could call myself one anymore? In the end, I sent off the letter and required poems only because I did not want to disappoint my friends. I waited to be rejected.

But I was *invited* to be among them, one of twenty-seven Black poets. There, at Cave Canem, I rediscovered my voice. I heard it sung from the lips of several sister word-weavers and recognized it in the sudden wail of a brother poet. There I was, so sad, so disheartened, among so many beautiful, singing voices. Something within opened that week, and I could hear my own voice again and not be repulsed or ashamed. I heard my own voice as part of a necessary choir. I cannot describe what hearing the words re-form inside me felt like, but I felt them reentering my soul in the morning, on the songs of the birds, heard them echoed in the Hudson River rushing past. There, a deer looked me straight in the eye, and the stars spilled out of the sky like firecrackers in my heart. There I learned a new way of sharing my work, and it loosened my own choked-backed words.

At Cave Canem I thought of Terri often, of how she should have heard what I was hearing, how she should have waited for the chance to “sing” her own “songs” there. I read her poems to the fields and the river. I don’t know where Terri is buried, but I visited the graveyard of priests and made a kind of peace with her spirit there.

I know my grieving for Terri is not done. There are sudden, bold moments that grab me, that I cannot control, but Cave Canem taught me that I could survive, that I must survive. The experience reminded me to always trust the words, to write down the pain. There, I learned how to recapture joy. It

became so clear to me that if my words ever stopped coming, if the emptiness swells again, I have the hearts and the words of my brother and sister poets. Cave Canem gave me a community to feel safe in, where I could start letting go of some of the sadness. It taught me how to remember laughter and love. I think of Terri, think she would have survived, had she been there. She should have waited.

I have to believe that what I write is necessary healing and is not just about me and my pain, but will be useful to others. I don't want to hear about another friend, another Black woman or man, killing themselves. I struggle to accept Terri's and Lorraine's deaths even though I know they are both ancestor-spirits now. I know Terri will not write me any more letters. She did not believe in our words, their power, but I do. The universe lost a beautiful sister-poet. I lost a friend. But I am writing again, hearing poetry fill my soul. I want everyone to know that it is possible to get past any sorrow, and that it is worth it to *live*.