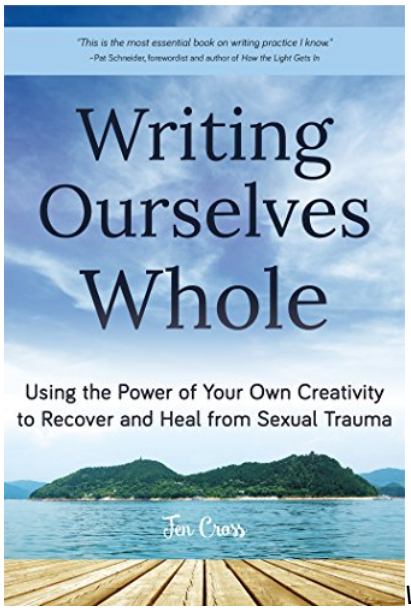
# What Writing About Trauma Can Do [1]

May 7, 2018 Advice [2]
Sex [3]
TW Reading Series [4]

## Book Excerpt by Jen Cross

### From Chapter One of *Writing Ourselves Whole*

***Editor's Note:*** The #MeToo movement has allowed countless women to speak out in public about sexual abuse and harassment. But healing from sexual trauma involves another kind of internal work, too, often for the rest of a woman's life. For that reason, this excerpt from the first chapter of Jen Cross's *Writing Ourselves Whole* (Mango Publishing, 2017) is a powerful addition to the TW Reading Series.




*Writing Ourselves Whole* is a guide to recovering from sexual trauma through writing, including prompts for writer-survivors. But Cross also considers it a collection of essays in which she combines advice with her own freewrites and poetry. The italicized section below is an example. As Cross says in her introduction:

> What I hope for every single person reading this is that you *write:* if not inspired by my words, then by the energy behind them. Writing has saved and changed my life. May it do the same for you.

The following excerpt from the first chapter ("Suturing the Rupture: What Writing About Trauma Can Do") has been reprinted with permission from the author and publisher. For more about *Writing Ourselves Whole*, see the Mango Publishing page [5] and the *Writing Ourselves* organization site [6].

Don't miss "Author Talk: Jen Cross [7]" a video interview with the author by Elizabeth McShane that also appears in TW's Spring 2018 issue.

*But what was the* moment *of trauma? Sometimes you can't ever put your finger on it. There is no warp of scar that separates the Before from the After. Not in this body. There is only the fuzzy and ephemeral, unmappable distance of memory. The way I cannot mark when it started. The way I cannot tell you, It was* here*, when he rubbed my back over my summer tank top. Or, no, it was* here*, when his hands lifted the tank top a week or a month or who could say how long later? And why am I still looking for this line of demarcation, the moment when that brown-haired girl on the couch went from a regular tomboy with a handsy stepdad to someone not exactly* there *anymore at all. But that's how it is with ghosting. Could you say when exactly the Cheshire Cat began to disappear? You simply saw his whole curved self, a ball of striped, grinning fur, tucked up into that tree, and only after he was well into his evaporation did you begin to notice what was missing—by the time that understanding took hold, he was all and only teeth. No obvious moment when you could point and say, Look, his edges have blurred. The blurring comes across gradually. You don't know, when it begins, that some part of you will be blurred, ungraspable, forever. You think it's just going to be for a minute—just until he takes his hands back to himself. Just until your mom says something to him. But then he doesn't take his hands back, and your mom presses her lips together tight, and those edges that thought they were just pretending, just practicing the art of disappearance, shimmer more finely, get harder and harder to feel again; you can't make yourself reappear whenever you want to anymore, like the Cheshire Cat could. You don't know that one day you, too, will be only teeth— and that then those sharp knowings will disappear from your grasp, too.* (2015)

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Many of the folks I've written with over the last decade are survivors of sexual violence, domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault or rape, extreme or ritual abuse. Others have survived or are living with cancer or other life-altering illness. Some have had to live with sexual harassment, neglect, emotional abuse, forced prostitution. Some will never have a name or a clear visual memory of their traumatic experience: instead what they have is a body telling

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them that something terrible happened. Often, these writers without specific memories reach hard for language that can put a name to physical sensations like nausea, nightmares, discomfort in certain situations, discomfort around certain people, depression, hyper-vigilance—that is, want to make sense of these symptoms of PTSD. Despite the DSM's languaging of trauma as an experience that is "exceptional" or "out of the ordinary," trauma is a *common* experience—it's a rare person who has experienced nothing traumatic in their lives.

Trauma lives in us in individual ways; through trauma, our relationship with language is ruptured. What has happened to us makes no sense because we cannot find words, because *there are no right words* to make anyone else truly understand. Our storyline fissures, and we fragment. We experience ourselves as voiceless, sometimes for many years. Trauma shocks us out of alignment; we are removed from our own story, and we have to, each of us, find and even create the language to articulate what we've been through and what we've become. We are left having to rebuild our whole narrative. The story of ourselves is what gets broken. The story of ourselves is what we have to suture together again.

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In 1994, when I was twenty-one, twenty-two years old, you could find me most days holding up a table at a cafe on the edge of my college campus, filling unlined notebook pages with long stretches of writing. I was scared and I was angry and I felt broken open inside and most days I didn't feel like I made any sense at all unless I was writing. On the page, I didn't have to pretend to be "together"; all my brokenness and fragments, questions and desires jumbled together in one place. I was trying to figure out my relationship to words, as much as I was trying to get out of my body and onto the page everything my stepfather had done. In the process of writing, I both discovered and created the story of my life. I met my (new) story and (new) self on the pages of those blank notebooks.

My stepfather attempted to sever me from words. He worked to render words—up to and including the words *yes* and *no*—meaningless. Maybe that's not exactly right. What he wanted was for words to mean only what he wanted them to mean, and as soon as I thought I understood what meaning he wanted me to make, using the words he'd defined, he changed the rules. It was like living inside an Orwellian Newspeak generator. From my stepfather I'd learned that words don't have to do or mean what the dictionary says. I was required to say *Yes* to my stepfather every time he wanted access to my body, even when what lived inside my mouth and skin, and could not be spoken, was *No*. He dismissed the word *No*. I learned that *No* could have no meaning at all.

Having to say one thing while meaning another, over and over again, drives us more than a little crazy, forces us to question how we can possibly communicate. *What do words actually do? What good is language if it can be so easily stripped from its moorings, its connection to the real and lived experiential world?*

Twenty-four years and thousands of pages later, I still don't fully trust that words will do what I ask them to.

An experience of trauma—either long-term or instantaneous—rocks us out of our familiar relationship with words, as it rocks us out of our familiar relationship with everything else in our lives. Part of what makes an experience traumatic is that we are without sufficient language to convey to others what has happened to us. We are at a loss for words. Words fail us. We clutch for clichés, or we clam up and let someone else do the talking. We are a verbal species, we humans, and it is terrifying to be without the words for something important in our lives. Even when we are able to matter-of-factly communicate the violence we've experienced, if the people around us don't respond to our words as we would expect or anticipate, as when a parent gets angry with *us* when we disclose abuse, or pretends the abuse was no big deal, or acts as though we haven't said anything at all, we can feel crazy. At a fundamental level, we wonder if our words have any impact. Are we not saying what we think we are saying? Do people really not care? We may wonder if what *we* are doing when we are speaking is the same thing that other people seem to do when they speak.

We who, as young people or adults, survive sexual or other violence are also taught, paradoxically, that our words are *too* powerful. My stepfather was hurt and disappointed when I resisted his advances—his suffering was my fault. He told me all the ways I would harm my mother if she found out what he was doing to me; her anguish would be my fault for telling, not his fault for sexually abusing me. I learned how dangerous a misspoken word or slip of the tongue could be.

I spent years with a sense of impotence and fear around my speech: *maybe what I say is unhearable, is* actually *incomprehensible; maybe I'm still not working this language thing right.*

When I was finally able to write about my stepfather's violence, just a few months before I would start the process of untangling myself from his web of control, I detailed every damn bullshit threat that he'd made, took it apart, raged at it, questioned it, turned it over to see the impotence on the other side. I wrote down everything he did and forced me to keep silent about or to rename. The actions he called "teaching" or "lovemaking" or "sex" or "help," for instance, I called by their true name: rape. I began to undo his occupation of my very mouth. He had infiltrated even my *words* with his violence, and after he was gone from my physical body and everyday life, I had the distance I needed to roll out my words on the page and risk examining the wounds, and begin to discover how to put myself back together again.

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We want to get back into "right relationship" with our own words—meaning, we want to feel a sense of agency with and through language. Our words *do* have power, though not in the destructive sense that our perpetrators, families, or communities often claim. The story we tell *about* our words also has power. For years, I repeated to myself what my stepfather had trained me to believe (and what society and media reinforced)—*that I didn't* deserve *to speak, that no one would listen to me or care even if they could hear me, that my words didn't matter.* Writing practice is what finally broke into and through those lies. Writing brought me, and so many of the writers I know and have written with, into a different relationship with words, language, stories, and with the words, the language and stories used against us.

So this is what writing practice can help us accomplish: finding right—and even playful—relationship with creativity and language. We are writing about our lives, and while we deserve for our lives to be received seriously, we also deserve laughter, silliness, and play. Through laughter, we find breath. Through play, we reconnect with our intuitive, creative being, what Black lesbian feminist author Audre Lorde describes as the "*yes* within ourselves." We get to have that *yes*, our *yes*, back, as well as our *no*, and have them mean exactly what we want them to this time.

## Exercise: Use Your Pen to Thread the Needle

Give yourself ten minutes. Find somewhere you'll be comfortable writing, whether that's at a quiet kitchen table or noisy cafe. Open your notebook, turn to a new page, and, at the top of the page, write, "This is what I want my words to do...." Complete the sentence with whatever comes up for you, whatever wants to be written. Then write the phrase again, and complete it again. Begin again as many times as it takes, until you find yourself in a flow, and follow your writing wherever it seems to want you to go. If you get stuck, you can always begin again.

**Art Information**

- "Ice" © Kelly DuMar; used by permission.

 Jen Cross is a writer, performer, and writing workshop facilitator based in Oakland, California. Her organization, *Writing Ourselves Whole*, founded in 2003, focuses primarily on sexuality writing workshops and writing with survivors of sexual trauma. Jen's writing appears in more than fifty anthologies and periodicals, including *Sinister Wisdom*, *14 Hills*, *The Healing Art of Writing*, *Nobody Passes*, *Visible: A Femmethology*, *Best Sex Writing 2008*.

She is the author of *Writing Ourselves Whole* (Mango, 2017) and the coeditor of the 2014 anthology *Sex Still Spoken Here* (with Carol Queen and Amy Butcher).

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