



Interview with Sheryl St. Germain, author of *50 Miles*

You write in *50 Miles* that to heal from loss, “we need stories and poetry” and that you need “lyricism to feed [your] own spiritual need.” Can you share a little about your process: how do you make space for lyricism? How do you find music when writing about loss? What has writing lyric essays afforded you?

While straightforward journalism and reporting are absolutely necessary, we need narratives and poems (and art) for consolation, insight and inspiration when tragedy strikes. Many of us who’ve lost someone they loved have had a friend send us a poem or literary quote they loved and which had helped them through a tough time. We don’t send scientific reports to those grieving, at least not right away. It’s our heart, our spirit, that needs succor. As I write in “It’s Come Undone,” one of essays from *50 Miles*, I first turned to writing poems to find a vessel for the chaos of the family into which I was born. The act of writing lyrically was both calming and transformative.

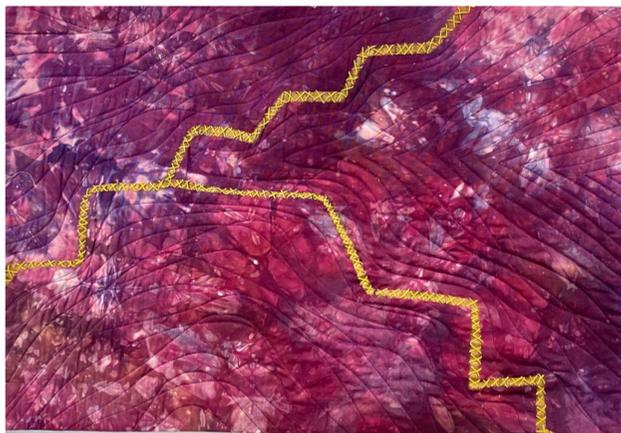
I could have written truthfully but flatly that during the troubles with my son the craft of crocheting was a form that helped me to get through those times, but instead I write “I crochet hope, I crochet sorrow, desire, rhythm, beauty. I weave in the ends, trust it won’t come undone, and gift it, this talisman, this charm, this scar, beautiful, of catastrophe.” The repetition, the insistent rhythm of these sentences, their reach for a metaphor of hope rooted in stitching, is a kind of singing that both soothes and excites the imagination. Likewise, instead of writing, without lyricism, that I hope my musician son is playing music in heaven, I write in “Versions of Heaven,” a poem published in another book, *The Small Door of Your Death* (Autumn House) that I like to imagine he’s somewhere “recording the chill sounds of wings fluttering,/ showing the gone ones how to shuffle saints’ voices,/how to scat god’s breath.” In these lines I’m able to make a kind of music that lives under the skin. I will never not think that my son might be “scatting god’s breath.”

One of America’s great musical genres, the Blues, is all about finding music and lyricism in times of loss. Growing up in New Orleans with parents who loved music, I was exposed early on to the Blues from my mother, who would play music that sometimes echoed or gave voice to her own sadness. Lyricism, whether in poetry, the essay or the visual arts, allows space for a need to find something beautiful in tragedy, and to share it. Instead of that loss dragging you down, the ability to make it into a gift that might encourage a reader to enter their own losses gives me hope.

The role of art in recovery and reflections on the pandemic: What is the role of art? What are the powers and possibilities when we engage with art? Any new insights, as we move to this stage of the pandemic and the addiction crisis?

Art inspires and moves us. That is one of its most important roles, especially during times of crisis such as we have been experiencing these last few years. But it can, and often should, disturb. Dostoevsky wrote that a book should “wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skulls,” that it “must be the ax for the frozen sea within us.” This is the writing and art that moves me most, the kind of writing that feels essential, and I hope that my writing and art cause gasps and rendings that might move the reader or viewer in some way toward more mindful thinking or action. That’s not to say that art does not have a nurturing or consoling or of course aesthetic role, which of course it does. But it can’t only console.

We’ve been focused so much on Covid these last couple of years there hasn’t been much coverage, until recently, of the equally disturbing drug epidemic. 107,000 Americans died of overdoses in 2021, according to the CDC, which calls it a “staggering” record, up from 23-34% from the year before depending on which drug you’re talking about. One overdose death in every five minutes. Art of any kind may not save us in a literal sense (although I believe fiercely that my ability to make art out of tragedy has literally saved me), but it certainly has a role in harm reduction and recovery. I taught creative writing for many years to women in recovery, some in jail, some in rehabilitation centers, as I write in “The Ink That Binds: Creative Writing and Addiction,” the final essay of *50 Miles*. Not all of them survived, but the ones that did count their writing as an essential part of their journey to recovery. Creating art out of painful experiences—many of these women were victims of rape, incest and abusive parenting—having the courage to write about those experiences, as well as their own poor choices, to make a poem or essay out of those experiences to share with someone, gave them insight into their lives.



“Cracked,” hand-dyed and hand stitched, 2021.

I’ve always journaled or made poems in times of crisis and after. It was a way of capturing, corralling, on a page and in my spirit, something that seemed uncapturable. To find a metaphor or a kind of singing that suggested something deeper and more complex than the flat, literal truth was always satisfying. Although I’ve worked with words all my life, in the last few years I’ve also been making fiber art, quilts that won’t keep you warm in your bed, but that you might be able to put on your wall and find a warmth of some sort. To acknowledge, to document, to remember, these are things that both writing and art can do.

I think one of the most beautiful elements of *50 Miles* is how you’ve organized the essays. There’s a layering effect at work, one that invites a kind of recursive reading (in the way poetry invites this kind of reading). You discuss the format of the memoir and reasons for the shifts and sections. Can you share more about how you approached assembling the manuscript?

As I write in the introduction, I thought long and hard about why I wanted this book to be a collection of essays rather than one unbroken narrative. It seemed to me a dangerous falsehood, one in which many publishers and writers of memoirs participate, to suggest that one overarching narrative can tell a true story of a life. Our lives more often move in fits and starts, and there are many narratives, prisms of narratives, poems of narratives, if you will, that might capture our lives.

The pieces in *50 Miles* span a time period of maybe 12 years, with the earliest being “Do No Harm,” the essay about my son’s ADHD diagnosis, which was written when he was around 18, to the essay “50 Miles,” which was written some months after he died at age 30. There are both lyric essays and prose poems in the book. I love having a mix of genres like that. Although I wanted a reader to be able to pick up the book and open it anywhere to start reading, I knew there were smaller narratives that could also undergird the movement of the pieces, so the first half of the book deals roughly with the lead up to my son’s death as well as my own developing substance abuse, while the second half deals generally with the aftermath of his death and my own healing and recovery from it, although several of the pieces from the latter half of the book revisit issues from the past. The story of my own drug use is told in most detail as part of “50 Miles,” the essay roughly in the middle of the book, although that use obviously occurred many years before Gray was born. I knew I wanted to end with “The Ink That Binds,” the piece about teaching creative writing and addiction because that essay represented a larger call to action with some suggestions for things those of us who teach writing for a living might do. I wanted to make sure there was variety, so I tried to make sure shorter pieces were interspersed with longer ones.

I like what you say about layering, and the recursiveness of the book. I hope that the individual pieces possess that layering and an invitation to reread. One of the things I like best about the lyric essay is that it slows you down and invites you to a space of slowness and meditation. You are not always rushing ahead as with traditional narrative but being invited to stop and look back.

Fiber art and ekphrasis: How does your art respond to and continue the conversations found in your books? How has your art shaped your recent writing projects?



I’m currently working on a collection of fiber art pieces that I’ve paired with recent writings. In some cases I’ve responded to an idea or feeling in an essay that I wanted to press more viscerally than I had in the essay.

For example, in the essay “Do No Harm,” I focused on the role of our culture in drugging young boys diagnosed with ADHD, but I also wanted to say something about the personal agony and separation that diagnosis and subsequent drugging caused between son and mother. You can see how I addressed that in this breakdown screen printing I call “Mother and Child.”

Sometimes, in short pieces like “The Amaryllis Bud,” I wanted to echo and deepen the feeling of a grief, like a vigorously blooming flower might, which is what this piece, “Hibiscus,” suggests.



Sometimes it’s a question of pairing something I made without thinking of a particular poem or essay and then finding ways to make a bridge of connection. In the show I’m currently working on, I connect this piece, “Trying to Speak,” with the titular essay of *50 Miles*.

The fabric for this piece was screen-printed hand-painted, then cut up and sewn together in an improvisational manner. There are two dominant colors in it that suggest the two paths articulated in “50 Miles,” and I would hope a viewer who reads the essay would feel invited to enter into this space as well. Maybe it offers another entryway, another doorway into grief and recovery.

Overall, I’d say that this artform gives me a way to interact physically with the medium, which I like, and offers a new kind of intelligence to bring to the written piece.

My new writing project is also a kind of ekphrasis. I’m writing poems to respond to abstract pieces of fiber art. What I like about this project is that it forces me to respond to something outside of myself; even if I’m writing in response to a work I’ve created, I’m looking at formal elements, shape, line and texture, for example, to guide my writing.