



Dirty River, A Queer Femme of Color Dreaming Her Way Home (Part Two)

by Sossity Chiricuzio, PQ Monthly

June, 2016

This memoir by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, a Lambda Literary Award finalist, is full of beauty, sorrow, complicated intimacies, and bone jarring revelations—it took longer to read than any book in my life. I found myself lingering over paragraphs, going over the same chapter multiple times and taking breaks to cry and rock and laugh and breathe; searching backwards for similar landmarks, stepping into the changing river again and again, learning more every time.

PQ: *The ways you speak to living with chronic pain, how it changes your options and reality, all the places where you had to push through for sake of survival were so powerful. How do you maintain your artist life while doing self care?*

Leah: It's not as simple as this but, if I wasn't chronically ill, I wouldn't be able to be as productive as I am as a writer. I've never worked at one full time 9-5 job because I can't do it physically. I figured out ways of making money in short amounts of time through gigs like teaching the pelvic exam, which I

was mentored in by other disabled writers. That has meant a lot of hustle and being poor or low income or precariously paid and times of fear, but it has bought me time to write. It's hard enough to write when you're able bodied and working all the time- being home in bed a lot, well, there's more time and room to pull out a notebook. I also want to own that, unlike some friends of mine with chronic illness who have maybe one spoon a day, I have times of relative energy, so things like teaching online or going on gigs is more possible for me. But yeah- a lot of times I get asked this question, especially by able bodied audience members, and I tell them that I'm writing in bed on a heating pad and Advil and weed balm while some lentils cook- that I have a disabled writing practice- and I can tell they don't get it. But my disabled writing practice is a gift.

***PQ:** I was struck by the empathy and honesty in your descriptions of your ex, your mother, and those relationships. How did you find the balance between exploring the damage and abuse, holding space for them as fellow survivors and humans, and not falling into the role of buffering and protecting queer masculinity and/or your parent?*

Leah: Oh I dunno. Ten years. Thinking, learning, re-writing, re writing again. I re wrote sections a LOT in the summer of 2015, in the last edits before publication, because i was really agonizing over how to hit that balance. But I was committed to telling an accurate story- and for me, it is not just my experience but the experience of so many survivors I know that the folks who harm us are also people we have loved. Some abusers are 1000% monsters, but most are people we care deeply for, who are themselves survivors of trauma. If that wasn't true, it'd be a lot easier. I also just came back to wanting to tell the truth. And my story is of my mom being someone I deeply loved, whose loved saved my life growing up, who also did shit that almost killed me. My relationship with my ex both saved my life and got violent as hell. There are very few survivor books out there telling stories like that, but they are most of the survivor stories I know. Keeping in mind why I was doing this helped a lot.

***PQ:** So many people have this idea of art being a solitary climb towards fame, but as your acknowledgments show so well, getting your book written and published was a collective effort. What suggestions would you make to other unconventional writers hoping to share their stories?*

Leah: I don't know any writer who is queer and/or BIPOC and/or disabled who has performed or gotten published as a writer in that solitary, A Star Is Born kind of way. We succeed when we help each other out, dialogue with each other, argue with each other, give each other twenty bucks. I would say, please fight the push that says being a writer is about being gaymous or a star, and think about it as you being a cultural worker in an interdependent community of other cultural workers, offering things that are beautiful and complicated and useful. I came up in a QTPOC arts community in Toronto where, for me anyway, it felt like we were all coming from working class or poor backgrounds and encouraging each other's work and hustle. We didn't want to be the one star, we wanted to be a big galaxy. (Side note: this was partially possible due to some really concrete money and class structural things arts grants in Canada are a lot more accessible than in the U.S.) in Toronto, we were able to access city, provincial and federal grants that were simpler like, hey, here's \$2,000 so you can take two months off your job (this was in the 90s and early 2000s and I was living off of around \$900 a month) and just write. Giving us all smaller and larger amounts of money helped build our confidence in our writing, that we mattered, and bought us the concrete thing we needed- time and money. It's not perfect, but it helped me a lot. So on a bigger level, I do understand why folks sometimes go for a more individualistic model of being an artist, because when the systemic things that would help level the playing field and pay us for our labor aren't there, what else are you going to do? So some of what needs to happen is actually figuring out how to pay people for their work, and there are some great models of that, like The Loft in Minneapolis' POC artist grant program.

To add to that - I would say, think about reaching for the community based QT/POC arts institutions that are out there, like VONA, Cave Canem and Kundiman. Learn from them and participate in them and support them. Think about starting your own performance nights and writing workshops in your kitchens and collectives and tours and community organizations, if there's a need out there that's not being served. Support each other's fundraisers and review each other's books and edit and publish and tour with each other. It's not utopia, there's going to be conflict, but you can learn from it and fix it. The mainstream literary world will tell you all that matters is getting in the New Yorker, but there are huge, vibrant QT/POC literary worlds out there that you can join by just jumping in, and they're increasingly making the New Yorker, or even white cis feminism, irrelevant.

Sossity Chircuzio is a writer and columnist based out of Portland, Oregon. She is a regular contributor for PQ Monthly and focuses on social justice, communication, community, and changing the world. You can follow her adventures online @sossitywrites and find more at sossitywrites.com.