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The inner voice

After recently turning 89, a French-American writer reflects back, sharing her regrets and her advice.

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Writing motivation

Feeling stuck in your writing? Maybe bogged down in the middle of your novel and feeling lackluster and enervated? Here are 20 research-backed tools to help you re-energize and get back into action.

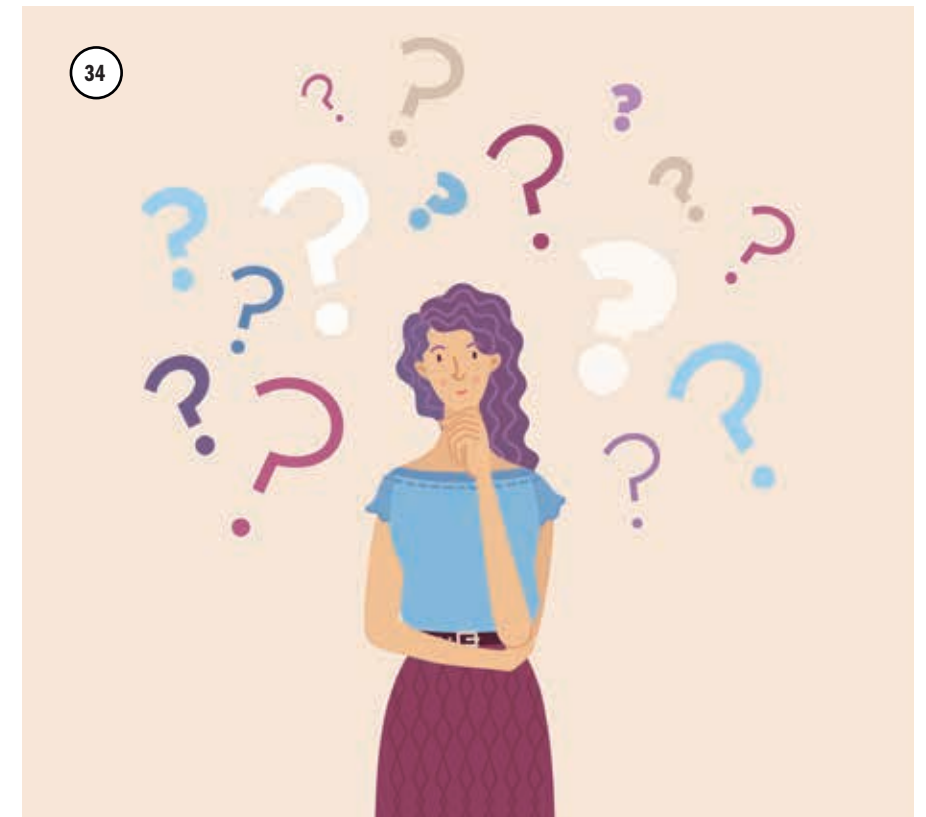
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Why are writers so prone to self-doubt?

There is much that is out of our control when it comes to writing and publishing, and even those who have enjoyed great publishing success are still prone to feelings of self-doubt and/or insecurity. This is why it's important to get clear about what your definition of "success as a writer" is.

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Meet the Writer



Xueyan

Xueyan is the author of a new collection of poetry, *Time Peels All to Original White: Xueyan Poems*.

Xueyan (雪雁), also known as “Snow Goose”, is a poet born on a Chinese festival called Liqiu (立秋) — which translates to “The Beginning of Autumn.” She explained to *Authority Magazine* this “symbolizes the fruitful season that is approaching.”

The best introduction to Xueyan is her own words. We’ve included an essay about her journey into poetry and a brief interview, with questions she liked to answer with her poetry.

Her collection, *Time Peels All to Original White: Xueyan Poems*, is published by Fernwood Press. For more about Xueyan and her work, visit xueyanpoetry.com.



ESSAY:

Buck Teeth Were My Weakness. They Now Are My Strength

By Xueyan

I WAS DESPONDENT ABOUT MY BUCK teeth, but now I am proud of them.

Growing up, I gradually came to realize that my front teeth were different than the front teeth of others around me. Whenever I looked into the mirror and smiled, a pair of outstanding white bright front teeth leapt into my sight, just like two juicy fresh white turnips jumping out of the ground.

One day my mother sat me down to talk; her tone was unusually solemn: “Xueyan, you should learn to smile with your mouth closed, without revealing your front teeth, because they are buck teeth — you will look more like a ‘fair lady’ with your mouth closed.”

I was mortified, shocked; I knew the term “buck teeth” but I didn’t think it would ever apply to me. After the conversation, I looked into the mirror and felt sad; my knees weakened: I was born like this, there was nothing I could do about it. I faced a dilemma, traumatic for a child: Which should I choose: the repressed “beauty smile” or my free true smile?

I considered getting my buck teeth fixed surgically, but I didn’t want to endure the pain inflicted by the procedure. In the end I told myself: “I was born like this; this is my fate and I am going to accept it.”

To acquiesce to my mother’s wish that I should look like a “fair lady,” I started smiling with my mouth closed, without

revealing my teeth. I felt awkward and uncomfortable, but I was overcome with worry about being called “buck teeth” by people around me — so I forced myself to adapt to the repressed “beauty smile” mode. Progressively more disheartened, I talked less and less, and gradually I walked away from the crowd.

Years passed. One day an old friend asked me why I didn’t smile, like she remembered when I was a child. I hesitated a bit, then told her my “buck teeth story.” She seemed surprised; her tone became serious.

“Xueyan, I need to tell you something that you must understand: your buck teeth don’t make your smile sorry. On the contrary, they make your smile sunny. I think your smile is really beautiful in a distinctive way, and the key to its beauty is because you have buck teeth.”

I was astounded; it indeed encouraged me, but I was also skeptical. However, she did influence my self-sense and my behavior and I tried to smile with my mouth half-closed. Little by little, I regained my classic one hundred percent smile, and now I can feel some kind of power released from my heart when I smile wholly and wholeheartedly.

Another day, another friend told me: “Xueyan, your smile is so healing. Whenever I see your smile, my heart fills with joy!”

No doubt, I love that comment, but even though I appreciate those kind

words about my smile, I have come to find that I don’t care much anymore about what other people think or say about my smile. I feel empowered whenever I smile. I smile simply because I like smiling: if other people like it, that is great; if they don’t like it, that is fine too. I don’t care.

I thought buck teeth were my weakness. They have turned out to be my strength.

In my poetry collection *Time Peels All to Original White*, there is a poem titled “Existence.”



**Existence
Glass broken
Silence born**

Here is its meaning. We are not aware of the existence of silence until a glass is broken; when all returns to silence, we now notice it. Similarly, we are not aware of the wellness of our skin until it stings; when it heals, we notice it.

My poem resonates with my buck teeth experience. Before I was intimidated into smiling with my mouth closed, I took smiling freely for granted and I never appreciated the joy of smiling freely.

After living the depressing experience of “beauty smile” mode, I finally understand how wonderful it is to smile freely. I like to compare my buck teeth to two shining, bright moons emerging from the dark sky instead of two white turnips jumping out of the ground. Turnips can fill our stomachs, but the moon can free our spirits.

The Persian poet Rumi writes: The wound is the place where the Light enters you. His concise yet deeply spiritual line has inspired me.

Buck teeth were my weakness. They

now are my strength.

Why do I consider my buck teeth as my strength? It is not only because they make my smile sunny and perhaps healing to some, but most importantly, because they empower me with plentitude of freedom.

To those who are frustrated by their own “weaknesses,” I want to say:

**YOU ARE BEAUTY.
YOU ARE PERFECT JUST AS YOU
ARE.**

**YOU ARE THE MASTER OF
YOUR OWN FREE SOUL. ☯**

AN INTERVIEW WITH XUEYAN

Question: In your essay, you share the story of your friend saying, “Xueyan, I need to tell you something that you must understand: your buck teeth don’t make your smile sorry. On the contrary, they make your smile sunny. I think your smile is really beautiful in a distinctive way, and the key to its beauty is because you have buck teeth.” Reading this part of your story reminds me of the power we have in recognizing beauty in one another. That voicing words of appreciation may seem trivial but that it’s not — that it may even change a life. I don’t want to assume that this is what happened for you...but was it something like this for you when your friend talked to you about your smile?

Xueyan: Though I appreciated my friend’s kind words, what happened was actually beyond recognizing beauty in another; what really moved me to the core was less the encouragement and more the long-hidden yearning for smiling freely trapped deep within my heart...

Yearning for smile freedom is like wood piling up gradually in the cellar, and the encouragement is like a spark that suddenly falls in and ignites the wood. If there’s a big pile of wood, it will take only a tiny spark to start a huge fire.

What mattered most was my longing for smiling freely; if my friend hadn’t said those nice words, then perhaps one day I may have gotten my “spark” elsewhere: maybe from a poem or a song, or from a bird which soars against the sunlight freely in the endless blue sky...

To put it in a romantic way, if

someday you love a person with all the burning passion that you have never before encountered, that is because the yearning for true love has piled up in the depth of your soul for a very long time; one day you meet your special ‘spark’ and then everything burns wildly...

How did your childhood journey help draw you into poetry? Or was poetry a source of energy and courage for your journey?

If traveling the river that leads to the destination of freedom and empowerment is the journey, then Poetry is my boat and Passion is my paddle.

Will I ever get to that destination? I don’t know. Maybe arriving is not that important...

With the firm belief that I am the master of my own free and powerful soul, I am becoming the “destination” in the journey...

I am Freedom and Empowerment.

In reading your poetry and interviews that you have given, I can sense your belief in your poems and your belief in yourself as a poet. As you responded in an interview:

Being a poet brings me Soul
Completion:
I know who I am.
What I am doing.
Where I am going.

Can you describe the moment when you first felt this way? When you knew you were a poet?

I am a believer in predestination. I believe everything happened and happening is predestined. There is a Chinese traditional idiom called “**尽人事听天命**”, meaning “do one’s best and leave the rest to God”. Holding true to this belief, I think I am always tranquil to what fate brings me.

I wrote a Chinese poem on my 18th birthday, the title is **天命** (*The Destiny of Heaven*):

天命

静如渊海凤隐羽，凤邀九霄相和鸣。
凄神寒骨归玉京，仙乐飞飘诗雪情。

The Destiny of Heaven

As silent as the sea of abyss, the phoenix hides its feathers

One day the phoenix soars to the highest and invites the celestial heaven to sing together

The phoenix’s spirit is solitarily divine and its bones cold as jade, she



returns to *the pantheon of stars at the end of her journey*

The holy music is entwining with the gentle snow; their secret love song of everlasting sorrow is a poem of beauty.

I hadn't made up my mind that I was going to become a poet when I was 18, but somehow I knew I was going to be one when I wrote this poem.

My Soul Knows The Path.

My becoming a poet is like a seed becoming a flower: a little seed doesn't know she is going to be a flower, but she keeps struggling through the soil nevertheless, and one day she finally breaks the soil and stretches her limbs; she knows she is a lovely flower when the sunlight embraces her wholly and warmly.

The awakening moment of the little flower is like the awakening moment when I knew 'I am a poet'. The light of poetry coils around me; every inch of my soul blossoms with crystal clarity.

Were you afraid when you first started writing poems? What was it like working through any fears you may have had in sharing them with others?

When I first started writing poems, it is like throwing the first stone into a river. When I hold the stone in my palm, the stone is heated by my excitement and nervousness, and perhaps, by my fear, because I don't know where the stone goes and I don't know what is beneath the seemingly calm river. Is there boundless light or just endless darkness?

But my desire for adventure overcomes my stormy emotions, and I throw the stone into the river. The stone is swallowed and disappears immediately.

Even though I cannot see the stone anymore, the ripples it causes serenely expand, expand, expand...

The marvelous experience of writing

poems is like "ripples expanding." My soul is the river, the stone is the first stroke of writing.

As the ripples expand, I feel the spiritual awakening of my soul.

You've talked about how important it is to take action — to just start writing poems, even if the first line is "The sky is blue." What first sparked you to take a first action in poetry?

"The sky is blue" actually is a powerful and beautiful line. The greatest truths always lie in simplicity.

I write a new love poem; the first line is "The sky is blue."

The Color of Love

The sky is blue

The sun is red

And the mountain is green

I ask God, what is the color of love?

God smiles, remains silent

And then we meet

Your hand is soft as green grass

Your lips are aromatic as red rose

Your tears are pure as blue river shining in crystal light

I still cannot tell the color of love

But I know

Everything reveals their colors only through you

Without you

I am forever blind

What first sparked me to take my first act of poetry? I think it was my mother's white hair: her hair grows whiter and whiter as the years go on and on relentlessly.

Time peels all to original white. No matter the colors of our hair, they all go white as life ebbs. No matter our differences in borders, cultures, races, and beliefs, the color of our bones is white. The simple truth of great nature reveals that every soul is born equal.

And is being a poet linked to "I am the abyss" as you write in your poem, The Real Abyss?

It is beyond being a poet; I am being "I".

In the journey of my eternal soul, "I" am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

When I immerse in the abyss, the abyss is no longer abyss, because, when compared to me, the abyss is too shallow.

"I" am the Real Abyss.

You dedicate your collection to "beautiful souls swallowed by darkness." It seems what drives you to write is to help readers see how (as you note Rumi says) "The wound is the place where the Light enters you." Can you speak about this drive?

I want to share a poem in my poetry collection, *Time Peels All to Original White*, which reflects the dedication:

Why Are Saints in This Sinful World

The night sky is dark

So the stars can shine

Recall the history of the whole world: so many evil deeds go unpunished; however, I believe there is a judgment for all.

The good people are like stars; however, they can shine only in the endless dark sky because stars are not seen in the sky full of light.

The wicked become the dark sky, and the stars shine through the dark. With no darkness as contrast, there will be no light. A beautiful soul is swallowed by darkness, then its light sparkles, never extinguishes.

If you want to be a star and shine for eternity, you must walk into the darkness with courage and love. ❧

