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# Storytelling as Inquiry: Creative Nonfiction & the Art of Narrative

Lee Martin | March/April 2017



### NOTES

Often what brings us to the page is the fact that something is unsettled, something isn't all right.

There's an old joke about a little boy who for the first seven years of his life didn't speak. Then one evening at the dinner table, he said, "These mashed potatoes are lumpy." His parents were amazed. "You can talk," the father said. "Son," said the mother, "all this time, how come you haven't said anything?" The boy shrugged. "Up till now," he said, "everything was all right."

The moral of the story for those of us who write creative nonfiction? Often what brings us to the page is the fact that something is unsettled, something isn't all right. We write from a need to know; we want to figure out what we think, what we feel, what something means. Sometimes we work with narrative; at other times we rely on a lyric form, one that features fragmentation, association, contemplation,

juxtaposition, wordplay. These days, it often seems to me that the latter mode has eclipsed the former in popularity, thanks, in part, to the work of many essayists, whose talents I admire. Some, such as David Shields, have been quite vocal about narrative's inadequacies. Its insistence on cause and effect and the logical progression of events doesn't, according to essayists like Shields, represent the way our contemporary world actually works. That world, they argue, comes at us in fragments. "Story seems to say that everything happens for a reason," Shields says in his manifesto, *Reality Hunger*, "and I want to say, No, it doesn't."<sup>1</sup> Narrative, then, is now considered suspect, a tyrannical form that needs to be broken down or obliterated altogether. I jokingly told one of my former MFA students who loved working with the lyric essay, that I was going to get her a tee-shirt with the word, "Narrative," on it. Without missing a beat, she said, "I'd take scissors and cut holes in it."

While I admire the lyric, the experimental, and all the forms that we continue to create in this extremely elastic genre, I still encourage young writers not to be so quick to dismiss narrative because narrative has much to teach us about the line of inquiry we take into our material even if we're not interested in telling stories. From narrative, we learn about the treatment of characters, including our own; the contemplation of detail; the route to the often contradictory sensibility of the essayist; the pathway to the essays that call us urgently to the page; the means by which we consider the plurality of the lived life. Narrative gives us the foundation from which to diverge when the material, or our own personal aesthetics, require it.

A teacher of mine used to say that a good short story led to a moment of surprise, which he defined as more truth than we think we have a right to expect. The same holds true for a good piece of nonfiction. As we read, we participate in the writer's attempt to find what he or she didn't know when first coming to the page. The study of narrative teaches us how to dramatize, explore, question, illuminate, or sometimes how to open up new questions to be explored, new aspects of the subject matter to investigate. Either way, the techniques of narrative move the essayist farther along the trail of what he or she has come to the page to explore. What's more, we can use strategies derived from what we know about narrative to give our non-narrative essays more resonance.

### **Writing from Ignorance: The Art of the Question**

We hear so often the old advice that writers should write what they know. When it comes to essays, I think we're money ahead if we write from what we don't know. A death knell occurs for the essay if the writer thinks that she or he knows everything before the writing begins.

Charles Baxter, in his excellent book of essays about the craft of fiction, *Burning Down the House*, talks about the importance of writers not making up their minds too quickly about their characters. When we think we understand too much too soon, we become fixated upon a single, predetermined truth. "The writer has decided what her story is about too early," Baxter says, "and has concentrated too fixedly on that one truth."<sup>2</sup> The problem? How to find those leaps and turns and surprises that capture the complications of our worlds and make our writing memorable.

As we read, we participate in the writer's attempt to find what he or she didn't know when first coming to the page.

I see so many young writers in my creative nonfiction workshops who make up their minds about what they know before they begin to write, and then the essays become only a means of supporting the truths already determined, closing off, then, the opportunity for discovery and surprise and those additional layers of truth no one knew they would eventually find. It's more important to know the right questions

to ask in an essay than it is to know the answers right away, or even ever in some cases. Narrative can lead us to those questions.

Consider, for example, the brief narrative essay, Lori Jakiela's, "You'll Love the Way We Fly," that tells a story from the perspective of our flight attendant author, a story of the day an elderly man, frail and sick with a wet cough, boards the airplane and the writer tries to ignore him. She can't help from reaching out to him, though, offering him a glass of water. He asks for coffee instead, and, when she brings it to him, he expresses his gratitude.

Toward the end of the essay, the writer, from her perspective as spectator of her own actions, draws this conclusion: "I haven't really been kind. I've just done my job, against what I wanted, despite my own disgust. I am paid to smile, to talk to strangers about the latest issue of *People* magazine, to bring coffee and water, to make people comfortable."<sup>3</sup> We see here the point of conflict from which she speaks, the simultaneous disgust and duty she feels, an ambivalence that deepens as the essay ends: "He's dying, I'm sure. Emphysema or lung cancer, probably, like my father."<sup>4</sup> At this point, a reaction we couldn't have predicted rises in the essayist, a surprising, and yet, given the circumstances of her father, an inevitable response that has the resonance of genuine and hard-earned truth. We see the sympathy that the essayist feels, and though she tries to avoid giving into it completely—when the plane lands and the man gets up to leave, she keeps her head down and focuses on her chores of stocking more tea bags, stir sticks, Band-Aids, first-aid cream, peanuts—she finally does. "I try not to think," she says, "but I can't help it."<sup>5</sup> Then she closes the essay with a list of questions that carry the expression of all she hasn't known when first encountering the man: "Who will be there in the airport to meet him? What is his home like? Who brings him coffee the way he likes it? Who is not afraid to touch him?"<sup>6</sup> Despite her self-indictment in that last question, she also discovers her compassion and empathy. Because she doesn't overdetermine her response to the man, she's able to arrive at a place more complicated and resonant than would have been possible if she had made up her mind about that response at the outset of the essay. It's also interesting to note that at the end of the essay she allows the series of questions to convey the making of meaning that the telling of the story has made possible.

We see this same strategy at work in essays that are less interested in narrative and more interested in contemplation. David Masello's "My Friend Lodovico," for example, uses the properly placed question to propel the essay along its line of inquiry. This personal essay explores Masello's long-term relationship with the portrait of Lodovico Capponi, painted in the 1550s and hanging now in the Frick Collection on Fifth Avenue in New York City. Masello tells us that he's been visiting Lodovico at the Frick for twenty-three years and coming to him for approval and reassurance after ending a relationship and also seeking him out after 9/11. The author feels a kinship with Lodovico, stemming from the fact that they both have a lazy, wandering eye. Notice how the author poses a question as a way of establishing the reason for writing: "I have known Lodovico for twenty-three years, as long as I have lived in New York. And after all these years, I keep asking myself the same question: Why do I continue to visit this mute, overdressed, imperious young man?"<sup>7</sup> Questions demand attempts at answers and those attempts usually come from the different parts of the self, thereby creating a multilayered, often conflicted, line of inquiry. The essay, as in the case of "My Friend, Lodovico," becomes an exploration of that inquiry, one that attempts answers from this perspective and that—from the perspective of the young man with a lazy eye, for example, or the discomfort of a young man new to the city and with few friends, or the older man, secure in his career and his personal relationships. We hear from all these perspectives during the course of the essay, and in the process, we find ourselves eavesdropping on this conversation between these different identities of the author until we finally arrive at the making of meaning, the truth the author couldn't have predicted when he began to speak: "Lodovico is my Dorian

Gray. Because he will never age or fade, neither will my memories of life in New York in my early twenties, when Lodovico was one of the first figures I came to know.”<sup>8</sup> The changing aspects of the author’s identity achieve a certain synthesis through the permanence of Lodovico’s portrait. And yet, the author uses another question at the very end of the essay when he worries about the increasing gulf in their ages as he grows older and, of course, Lodovico remains the age he is in the portrait: “Will his youth eventually intimidate me?”<sup>9</sup> At this point, the essay closes down and opens up at the same time, presenting a resolution to the question that began the inquiry while posing another question that points toward the future.

Even in essays that rely on fragmented forms to interrogate a subject—essays such as “The Pain Scale” by Eula Biss—the unknown is often deepened and made more knowable, and yet at the same time, strangely enough, more unknowable, through techniques associated with narrative.

The essay focuses on the author’s difficulty responding to doctors who ask her to rate the degree of her pain on a scale from 0–10. Biss, through the art of association, keeps expanding the personal leaps into larger questions of human suffering. The first questions in the essay appear in its fifth section and read as follows: “If no pain is possible, then, another question—is no pain desirable? Does the absence of pain equal the absence of everything?”<sup>10</sup> These two questions are preceded by sections that state the problematic concepts of Christ and zero and the difficulty of believing that either is substantial or effectual, along with a brief section that begins, “I am sitting in the exam room of a hospital entertaining the idea that absolutely no pain is not possible.”<sup>11</sup> Granted, this isn’t what we’d call narrative, but it does have the bare bones of story: a specific someone is in a specific place, doing something, even if that something is only the act of thinking. It leads to the observation, “All our sins are for zero.”<sup>12</sup> Naturally, I can’t help but hear the unstated parallel observation, the line that I provide because of the accretion of fragments: “Is our suffering for nothing?” The fourth section consists of a single line, “Aristotle, for one, did not believe in Zero.”<sup>13</sup> Again, this line has the shadow of a story, the story of Aristotle and his belief that zero, like infinity, was an idea and not an actual number. It’s this thought that propels Biss to the section in which she questions whether no pain is possible. It’s this shadow of a story, when added to the contemplations that have come before it, that leads to the question of whether living in no pain equals not living at all. The central inquiry of the essay arrives with the help of these hints of narrative.

At the end of the essay, Biss quotes from statements from patients that the American Pain Foundation have gathered: “constant muscle aches, spasms, sleeplessness, pain, can’t focus... must be depression... two suicide attempts later, electroshock therapy and locked down wards....”<sup>14</sup> The longer narratives that these quotes suggest—these stories of people’s suffering—lead Biss to the penultimate section: “The description of hurricane-force winds on the Beaufort scale is simply ‘devastation occurs.’”<sup>15</sup> This fact takes us to the last section, one that reads, “Bringing us, of course, back to zero.”<sup>16</sup> I would argue that narrative, in its scantest form, has helped make possible the associations and meditations, thereby expanding the inquiry into the nature and value of pain.

Narrative offers the essayist more than just the opportunity to tell stories.

It’s more important to know the right questions to ask in an essay than it is to know the answers right away, or even ever in some cases.

### **Writing from Our Contradictions: The Art of Plurality**

Our attempts at understanding often find expression in what narrative teaches us about characterization.

We are all made up of contradictions, and, as a result, we are all somewhat unknowable. We are capable of surprise precisely because of this fact. No one escapes, not Gatsby or Daisy or Tom, to borrow a well known example from fiction, and surely not our narrator, Nick Carraway, whom we might consider the equivalent of the essayist who stands at the center of an essay and must look clearly at his own contradictory nature.

We see this careful examination of one's own character in Ted Kooser's essay, "Small Rooms in Time," an essay that contains elements of narrative, yes, but that is ultimately more interested in the juxtaposition of image and incident as Kooser writes his way toward connection. The essay opens with him reporting the news of a murder that happened in a house where he and his wife used to live and how hearing about that murder affected him:

It's taken me a long time to try to set down my feelings about this incident. At the time, it felt as if somebody had punched me in the stomach, and in ways it has taken me until now to get my breath back. I'm ashamed to say that it wasn't the boy's death that so disturbed me, but the fact that it happened in a place where my family and I had once been safe.<sup>17</sup>

Although the initial focus is on the story of the crime, Kooser quickly inserts himself into the opening, and in a way that sets up the dichotomy that the rest of the essay will explore, the tensions between the cruelty of people and the desire for love, protection, family, and home.

The second sentence of the essay specifies the location where the boy died, and we learn it was at the top of a staircase leading down to the cellar where Kooser used to set up his easel and paint. The image of the painter at the easel in the cellar of his home portrays a man doing something he loves in a place where he feels content. This feeling of contentment is reinforced by the more directly stated sentiment of the second paragraph where Kooser confesses how deeply the news of the murder has affected him and how long it's taken for him to figure out why. The opening of the essay, with its attention cast upon the fact of the murder and its violation of the place where Kooser once felt safe with his family, sets in motion the dual threads of comfort and disturbance that the essay then explores through the writer's memories of the time he and his family spent in that house before his marriage ended and he traveled forward into another life. Late in the essay, he writes down the full address of that house "as if to fasten it down with stakes and ropes against the violence of time."<sup>18</sup> The violence, we can infer, of love ending, families coming apart, people aging. The violence of ends. Of the address, Kooser says, "I hadn't thought about it often, maybe a few times a year. But it was our house again the minute I opened the paper that morning and saw its picture and the faces of the people who had struck it with terrible violence."<sup>19</sup> Still later he goes further with his thinking:

For thirty years I had put it all firmly behind me, but like a perfect miniature it had waited in a corner of my heart, its rooms packed with memories. The murder brought it forward and made me hold it under the light again. Of course I hadn't really forgotten, nor could I ever forget how it feels to be a young father, frightened by the enormous and threatening world, wondering what might become of him, what might become of his wife and son.<sup>20</sup>

Because Kooser is willing to think in terms of opposites from the get-go, his essay has the dynamism of movement similar to the forward momentum of narrative, and it allows him, with its simultaneous nod toward violence and safety, to move back and forth over his subject matter as he presents a multilayered exploration of the truth of how the news of that murder in that house settled in him, and the goodness he can recall but never fully reclaim. The basic instinct of narrative is the exploration of the complicated

human condition, and we can see in essays such as Kooser's that instinct made real in an approach that is more centered on the careful arrangement of detail and image and language.

### **Writing from Our Obsessions: The Art of Urgency**

The particulars of narrative often bring us to our essay material, that material that resonates with us because we find it impossible to disengage from it emotionally and/or intellectually, and, therefore, we must, as Kooser says, "hold it under the light." We all have material that chooses us, material that just won't let us go. Eve Shelnutt, in her book *The Writing Room*, says, "No word we write is without its reverberations in memory."<sup>21</sup> Such is clearly the case with the essays by Jekiela, Massello, Biss, and Kooser. They come from what Shelnutt would call "the urgency of the radical self."<sup>22</sup> I take this to mean the part of the writer that connects so strongly to the material that he or she can't help but write about it. This radical self is shaped each time something challenges one's sense of identity, those times when, as Shelnutt says, "we feel something different and especially significant has occurred."<sup>23</sup> We write, then, from such moments, and creative nonfiction especially relies on them.

We write from a need to know; we want to figure out what we think, what we feel, what something means.

The radical self is most nakedly apparent in memoir and the personal essay, and perhaps less so in the sub forms that appear to stand more distant from the self. In literary journalism, for example, the stakes for the writer may often be less obvious. I'd suggest, though, that even in a piece of literary journalism such as Daniel Bergner's *God of the Rodeo: The Search for Hope, Faith, and a Six-Second Ride in Louisiana's Angola Prison*, the author, through selection, tone, and emphasis, indicates that the material matters profoundly to him or her, though we may never know, as we do in some of the other forms, exactly how it connects to memory. Here are the opening lines of Bergner's book:

When he had finished work—building fence or penning cattle or castrating bull calves with a knife supplied by his boss on the prison farm—Johnny Brooks lingered in the saddle shed. The small cinder-block building is near the heart of Angola, Louisiana's maximum security state penitentiary. Alone there, Brooks placed his saddle on the wooden rack in the middle of the room, leapt onto it, and imagined himself riding in the inmate rodeo coming up in October.<sup>24</sup>

We might note, first, that the same sort of duality that we looked at in the opening of the Kooser essay is also present here even though the focus is on a character and not the writer. The prisoner, Johnny Brooks, lives a dual existence, one part of him tied to the work on the prison farm, and another part of him living in his dreams of participating in the inmate rodeo come October. Philip Gerard in his discussion of this passage rightly points out that the writer, though not present through the upright pronoun, is indeed very much present in tone, which, as Gerard points out, is "nothing more or less than the attitude of the author, expressed in the words he chooses, the selection and ordering of events, and the rhythms of language."<sup>25</sup> I would add that the author is present in his emotional attachment to the story of Johnny Brooks. Of course, it would be presumptuous of me to assume exactly why this material connects with the writer, but my guess is there's something about the combination of being imprisoned and dreaming an escape that comes from some memory that the writer may not even be aware of, some radical event contained in the story of Johnny Brooks.

The reverberations of memory to which Shelnutt alludes are easily retrievable and can be put to use in the service of our essays. So often a small concrete detail, plucked from the memory of something that

happened—a story—can contain those radical events that shook us in one way or another. What would happen, for example, if I asked you to recall pairs of shoes from your childhoods and then to choose a pair that elicits an emotional response from you and to begin a freewrite with the words, “I was wearing them the day...” Wouldn’t it be fairly simple to let those shoes take you back to a specific memory, perhaps one of your radical moments that has stayed with you over the years because it’s somehow complicated, mysterious, perhaps, and unresolved?

Here’s how the “I was wearing them the day” exercise worked for me. When I was in grade school, I wore a pair of P.F. Flyers tennis shoes. They were white and guaranteed, at least the advertisement claimed, to make me “run faster and jump higher.” I was wearing them the day that a classmate, David, kicked me in the shin. David was a new boy in our rural two-room school. He came from a poor family who rented a farmhouse going to ruin. I remember how he always smelled of hot cooking grease, and how the buttons were missing from his shirt cuffs, and how his nose ran and he wiped it on his sleeve. He was “everything none of us wanted to be.”<sup>26</sup> I was a timid boy who lived with my timid mother and my father who often lost control of his temper and whipped me with his belt, a yardstick, or a switch cut from a persimmon tree. When I was a little over a year old, he lost both his hands in a farming accident and wore prosthetic “hooks” the rest of his life. It took me years to understand the way his life changed irrevocably because of his accident and the rage that filled him and often spilled out onto me.

My teacher that year had instituted an Old Testament eye-for-an-eye rule in our classroom. Whatever someone did to us, we would repay in kind. So when David kicked me, my teacher brought both of us to the front of the room where I was expected to kick him in the leg. I know it sounds horribly barbaric from our more gentle 21<sup>st</sup>-century time, but at the time I’m recalling—the early 1960s—in that part of the world, corporal punishment was more common in our schools. David had kicked me, and I was expected to return that kick; that was the fact.

The reporting of facts, though, rarely contains the whole truth. I say this because facts involve people and people are made up of contradictions. The reporting of what happened rarely includes the more important question of what the story means to the people who stand at its center.

As I stood at the front of that classroom, I was, like a well-developed character in a piece of nonfiction, conflicted. I wanted to kick David because he had hurt me and because it was what my friends expected and even my teacher; I was a well-behaved child who was eager to please. At the same time, I didn’t want to kick him because I felt sorry for him. I knew that, like me, he had been hurt plenty in his life. So there I was, torn in different directions, having to make a choice. To obey my teacher and to save face with my friends, I gave him a timid kick. I thought he would recognize that I’d done him a kindness, but all he did was laugh at me. That moment has always stayed with me because I felt so many contradictory emotions. I felt angry, humiliated, foolish, stupid. I didn’t know it at the time, but that moment taught me something about writing; characters and their events are memorable when they hinge on contradiction and irony. If a character feels more than one thing at the same time, and if his or her actions produce results that are the opposite of what they intend, we’re left with resonant, enduring scenes. We write from our obsessions, and often they involve memories of incidents and people that we’ve never quite been able to resolve in any sort of satisfactory way. These moments linger like the pea under the mattress that disturbed the princess’s sleep, or the splinter under the skin that’s sore when we touch it.

“Don’t start writing about the summer your father took you to live with him and his mistress,” I once told a student, who feared that material would be too uncomfortable for her. “Write about something smaller.”

“The mango trees,” my student said. “My father’s mistress had mango trees in her back yard, and the mangoes tasted nasty.”

“Write about the mango trees,” I said. “The rest will follow.”

### **Staying in the Moment: Tension and Its Pacing**

I know no better piece of nonfiction to illustrate the urgency of the radical self and the means by which to establish and maintain tension than Barry’s Lopez’s “Murder,” from his book, *About This Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory*. In the opening of the essay, we encounter the author in June of 1964 as he drives from Santa Fe to Wyoming to work on a friend’s ranch. He’s eager to get to Salt Lake City where his girlfriend lives, and he’s driving along at a good rate, taking pleasure in covering the miles quickly. Immediately, then, we know the position from which he writes, and we know what he desires. We know the important things about the character that Lopez is making of himself on the page. He’s young—a mere twenty—and he’s free for the summer and looking forward to time with his girlfriend, with whom he says he’s innocently in love as one can perhaps only be at that age. The element of innocent love will stand at the heart of what the essay has come to explore. As the narrative continues, we immerse ourselves in the pleasurable feeling of travel toward a much-anticipated end.

Questions demand attempts at answers and those attempts usually come from the different parts of the self, thereby creating a multilayered, often conflicted, line of inquiry.

The central action of the essay takes place at an A & W Root Beer stand in Moab, Utah. Lopez takes his dog on a leash to a patch of dry grass and weeds at the edge of the parking lot, and he notices two women and a young child in a Thunderbird. He makes eye contact with the women, and he smiles. He’s back in his car, eating his lunch, when he hears the door of the Thunderbird close. One of the women, obviously pregnant, is walking toward his car. She opens the door and gets in.

Well, there’s something that doesn’t happen every day. How many times could any of us eat lunch at an A & W drive-in and not have a woman we don’t know get into our car? As writers, we have to earn our scenes, and Lopez is well on his way because he recognizes that scenes are moments out of the ordinary, moments that put pressure on us as characters and cause us to step into a world removed from our ordinary lives.

Now look at how he paces the dialogue that follows, breaking it into distinct units, or beats, if you will. The first one goes as follows:

“Hi,” I said, conscious of being very casual.  
“You live around here?” she asked.  
“No. I’m coming from Indiana, from school there.”  
“Where’re you going?”  
“Wyoming.”<sup>27</sup>

The facts established, we come to the moment where the woman wants to say exactly what she’s come to say, but Lopez knows that there must be a slowing of time, a gathering of breath, before she summons up the courage to say it. So he throws in some stage business and description: “She stared in silence. I remember seeing the sweat beaded up on her small hands, her stout fingers, the maternity blouse billowing in a pink-and-white pattern over her lap.”<sup>28</sup> We see the woman staring, and we catalog the sweat on her small hands, her stout fingers, which speaks of her nervousness. We see the pink and white



maternity blouse that could be a sweet image if not for what soon comes from the woman's lips in the second beat of the scene:

“What do you think you might do for a woman?”

“What's that?”

“For a woman that might be in trouble, might have lots of trouble.”<sup>29</sup>

This beat amps of the intensity of the scene as the woman begins to speak from her desire. She wants Lopez to do something for her, but at this point he and we don't know what. He pauses the narrative again, letting the intensity from the unknowing build: “In the cool air under the metal awning, out of the glaring desert light, her language seemed dreary, detached.”<sup>30</sup> This one line of description not only continues to set the physical scene, it also peels back another layer of the woman's character. She's in trouble, and yet her speech is dreary, detached, an indication that she speaks from an acceptance of the sort of woman she's soon to reveal herself to be in the third beat of the scene:

“What kind of trouble is that?”

“Family trouble.”

“You need money?”

“Would you kill my husband?”<sup>31</sup>

Notice how each beat builds in intensity. We're traveling up a line of tension, and we've certainly reached a high point with the woman's request. Notice, too, how in this beat, the most intense one so far, Lopez doesn't muddy things up with dialogue tags or stage business or description. He wants this beat to move quickly through the dialogue alone, to that stunning question, “Would you kill my husband?” Once we reach that question, Lopez skillfully lets it hang in the air. A question requires an answer, but not just yet. This question is, of course, too big for an immediate answer. “The ebb of my nonchalance in this conversation was now complete,” Lopez writes, stepping back from his role as a participant in the scene to his role as spectator and interpreter. “I sensed a border I did not know.”<sup>32</sup> The piece that began as a journey through geographical space, a journey undertaken by carefree twenty-year-old innocently in love with a girl he's traveling to see, suddenly takes a turn into a darkness he couldn't have imagined.

Notice now, as the scene comes to an end, how Lopez lets each subsequent speech from the woman stand alone without response from him. It portrays how desperate the woman is to keep pushing her request forward to a stranger who is obviously stunned by what she wants him to do:

“I've got a gun over there in that car. He's in a garage outside of town, working on his car.

All you have to do is walk in there, walk right up to him, and shoot him. He won't know you. There's no one else there. No one would hear.”

I stared at her, her pallid cheeks, her full breasts.

“I'm not a liar. He's there. And I want to kill him.”

She turned halfway to me, for the first time no longer speaking to the windshield. Her milky blue eyes were both desperate and distant.

“He's working on his car. He doesn't care.” She inclined her head. “That woman over there? Her sister's gonna have his kid too. I'd kill him myself, but I can't. I'd screw up. He'd beat me up so bad, I'd lose the baby.”

I was afraid to say anything, make any movement. Her voiced edged on hysteria, on laughter.

After a few moments of my silence, her hand went to the door handle. “If you want to do it,

no one would know. You could throw the gun away. I wouldn't say anything. I don't even know your name."

When the stillness hung on, she said, "Well forget it. Just forget it. Forget I even got in here." She got out, closed the door firmly and walked away, reaching across to her right temple with her left hand in a prolonged, deliberate movement to sweep her blonde hair off her face, a movement that carried her across the sunlit lot to the Thunderbird. She sat there, sullen and tight-lipped. When the boy came to her from the backseat, she shoved him away, as if he were a younger brother she had to baby-sit.<sup>33</sup>

Each speech the woman makes constitutes another beat in the scene, and Lopez gives each emphasis by using description, stage business, and his own thoughts to pause the narrative. The second half of the scene, once the request has been made, takes its urgency from the question of what Lopez will do in response to the woman's question. As the woman speaks, we come to feel her desperation more intensely, and we sit in that car with Lopez feeling his uncomfortable situation as well. He never answers, and the woman finally realizes that his silence is his answer. The scene has its resolution. No, Lopez will not agree to kill the woman's husband.

Something remains to be resolved, though, and in nonfiction this is the most important thing, the way the scene comes to settle inside the writer who lived through it. At the end of the piece, we see Lopez driving out of town, only now his driving gives him little pleasure. He's bumped up against the ugliness a life can contain, and he feels it in his movement: "The peculiar tone of muscle in my young body, the quickness of my hand reflexes that made driving seem so natural, so complete a skill, was gone."<sup>34</sup> He drives under the speed limit for more than an hour. He passes a couple of buildings that could be garages, but he sees no sign of life. Finally, he pulls over and lets the dog out to bound with exuberance through the sage, and to look back at him as he leans against his car smoking a cigarette, and then, suddenly filled with impatience, his thoughts of being with his girlfriend that night, he whistles for the dog with exasperation. Although Lopez never directly states this, the dramatization of the scene and its aftermath make clear the fact that, though he strives to maintain faith in the love he feels for his girlfriend, a measure of innocence has slipped away from him and the rest of the journey will not be pleasurable, will be merely the dogged elimination of highway miles as he puts distance between him and the girl in Moab and the ugliness he encountered there. His effort to forget, though, isn't successful; we can safely assume that because we have the essay as proof of how the woman and that scene has stayed with him over the years.

The lyric essay also makes room for these beats and this progression of emotional and/or intellectual tension. It does so by borrowing from what writers such as Lopez have to teach us about pacing and how to stay in a particular narrative moment, or a specific thought, long enough to see how many layers we can find. To return to Eula Biss's "The Pain Scale" for a moment, we can pick out the most narrative sections of the essay—the story of applying ice to her pain at night, the story of she and her mother hanging chickens on the barn door so they can slit their necks, the physical therapist raising Biss's arm above her head and asking her, "Any pain with this?"<sup>35</sup> a memory of her mother driving a metal pipe into frozen ground with a pick axe—and we can see how each one of them personifies pain with increasing intensity until we arrive at the most painful section of the essay, the one that leads us to devastation and destruction, those quoted sections from the American Pain Foundation about patients who suffered aches, spasms, and sleeplessness, who attempted suicide, underwent electroshock, and found themselves in locked-down wards. The more meditative sections of the essay, then, become the equivalent of Lopez's stage business and description, promising and then delaying resolution as we travel through layers of association and leaps toward the climactic moment of devastation.

An understanding of narrative, no matter how minimal and fragmented that narrative may be, becomes necessary to the work of the essayist, even if that work comes from a very non-narrative impulse, even if the writer's desire is to cut holes into a storyline, or to make it disappear entirely. I'm not sure that's possible. It continues to exist in the carefully observed action, image, thought. It exists in the way we question and speculate, the way we characterize, the way we make associations, the way we arrange detail and image, the way we find and explore complexity, the way we find our urgent voices, the way we create and maintain tension, the way we...

Please forgive me if I pause before ending. Imagine that you have to turn the page to read my final words. Imagine the well-placed break at the end of a line of poetry. Imagine the spaces around segments of a fragmented essay. Imagine, the white space that separates the penultimate section of Biss's essay and the last, the space that hovers between the final image of devastation and the return to zero. That pause, that breath, that chasm we have to traverse to get to the end: that, even that, is narrative. It makes us wait to see what comes next.

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## Notes

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