# “NEVER TO BE YOURSELF AND YET ALWAYS”: TAKING THE FEMINIST PERSONAL ESSAY FROM CLICKBAIT TO CRAFT

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# ABSTRACT

Through practice-based research, I sought to determine what for me has become an urgent question about the craft of a personal essay. What, I ask, distinguishes the tradition of Montaigne from essays that, as Bennett (2015) puts it, "make a show of maximal divulgence, but are too half-baked and dashed-off to do the work of real introspection"? In ten personal essays, I explore themes of personhood and dehumanization through the lens of living in a particular body (fat, female, infertile, over-forty) in a particular time and place (Trump's America). In the contextualizing exegesis that accompanies my essay collection, I ask where the crucial distinctions between "clickbait" and craft lie, frequently examining my own practice and development in ways that I hope will be useful to other writers.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Here at home, my Chicago writing sisters—Kelly O'Connor McNees, Wendy McClure, Claire Zulkey, and Molly Backes—have been there for me through the fiction thesis, the nonfiction thesis, and the episodes of paralytic self-doubt. Thanks also to Jess Zimmerman for always answering my pettiest texts, and for publishing versions of "Personhood" and "The Rage Syllabus" at *Electric Literature* (electricliterature.com).

Three of the ten essays in *Never to Be Yourself and yet Always* had their origin, in embryonic form, in some of the journalism that I was writing early in my PhD (when I should have been writing my novel). A few others have been published or commissioned, as follows:

"Are Women Persons?" was published in *Nasty Women: Feminism, Resistance, and Revolution in Trump's America*, edited by Samhita Mukhopadhyay and Kate Harding (Picador USA, 2017).

A version of "When Woman-Haters Were Like Gods" was published in *Sylvia Plath in Context*, edited by Tracy Brain (Cambridge University Press,

2019). Thanks to Tracy for offering me that extraordinary opportunity as an emerging scholar.

"Victim (Noun)" is forthcoming in Lizzie Skurnick's anthology on language and identity, *Pretty Bitches* (Seal Press, 2020). "Magic, True or False" won the fall 2018 *Sonora Review* essay prize and appears in Issue 76: *Desire*.

Al Iverson has lived with me in four different cities during the course of this program, offering the financial support, patience, and love I needed to finish it. He also does 95% of the dishes and takes the dog out most mornings, so I can wake up as slowly and grumpily as I prefer. I won't try to put anything else into words, because he knows, and no one else needs to.

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# PREFACE

I've been writing this book my whole life.

That's a lie. I've been writing this book since I was about eleven.

I'm old enough now to have experienced several "life before" and "life after" demarcation points, but that was the first: the year I really learned to be ashamed of myself. Before, I'd been energetic, outdoorsy, and so naturally thin I was once hospitalized for failure to thrive. I was fully able to entertain myself, but cheerful and outgoing around other kids. I was white, blonde, blue-eyed, reasonably symmetrical, upper middle class, bright enough that schoolwork rarely gave me pause. My parents were together. Essentially, I had been assigned to play life on very nearly the lowest difficulty setting, to steal John Scalzi's (2012) perfect metaphor for privilege. Femaleness was a minor hindrance in ways I didn't fully understand yet, but overall, everything felt *easy*. Until it didn't.

In 1986, I was newly fertile and suddenly full of curves that read to me as fat and to my still-angular peers as a threat that none of us knew how to name. My smooth, child's skin had become an angry relief map of an unfamiliar

planet. I graduated from sixth grade with a group of friends and started seventh with none; over the summer, they'd decided together to shun me.

Meanwhile, my dad left his job, which would only have been a positive thing—he was happier and around more—if not for my snobby ex-friends demanding to know why he was out of work, why he drove a disgusting used car, etc., and my snobby mother, who started screaming on the regular that he was not holding up his end of the bargain. It would be many years before I realized that her end of the bargain—cooking, cleaning, and raising children from 1960, when my brother was born, until 1992, when I graduated from high school—was perhaps not what she would have chosen, had she come of age in an era when she had a real choice.

1986 was also the year when school got hard. More than a decade later, I would find out why: Attention Deficit Disorder, non-verbal learning disability, and a mathematics disability. But as I recount in the title essay of this collection, what my teachers and parents understood was that I was smart, and I kept fucking up. The entire list of possible reasons for this set of circumstances was: 1) Laziness.

I saw my first psychologist at sixteen, and when he diagnosed me with depression, he mentioned that he suspected I'd been suffering with it for years. About five years, to be exact, going right back to that year when hormones flooded my bloodstream and my difficulty setting was suddenly cranked way up.

It was still pretty low—still *is* pretty low—I hasten to add. I'm not looking to throw a pity party for a kid who got to move through this world as a

white person with loving parents and enough money, as someone with access to therapy and education and second and third and fourth chances. But I can only say that now, with an adult's perspective and good antidepressants. What I knew in 1986 was that I used to be cute, and now I was ugly. I used to be smart, and now I was stupid. I used to have friends, and now I did not. I used to be unashamed, and now shame was the only emotion I felt. Everything else was numbness.

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"Every work of literature" says Vivian Gornick, "has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say." The story of this essay collection, the thing that I have come to say, again and again, has to do with who in this culture is deemed *worthy*—of time, attention, affection, love, power, personhood—and the ways we dehumanize those who fall short.

The situation is that I live in a particular body—female, fat, absent-minded, now infertile, aging, and once the site of a life-altering act of violence—in a particular society that yokes all of those characteristics to deep shame. To resist that shame is to feel anger at the situation on a nearly constant basis; when your society keeps telling you to hate who you are, you can either obey and gradually rot of it or spend a great deal of emotional energy telling your

society to get bent. I spent my teens and twenties doing the former, and my thirties doing the latter.

From 2008 through 2015, I was a cog in what Laura Bennett calls "The First-Person Industrial Complex": an explosion of intimate, accessible nonfiction written by and for women, which left (female) bodies all over the internet. At one extreme, women confessed to foreign objects doctors found in their vaginas (a tangle of cat hair and a very old tampon, in the two most scarringly memorable examples) with no greater apparent purpose than getting the grotesque memories off their chests. At the other end, my end, feminist activists offered up our rapes, our abusive relationships, our abortions, our miscarriages, our eating disorders, our worst parenting fears—all the things we were meant to be ashamed of—recast as as "hooks" for essays that aimed to explain structural oppression in general, patriarchy in particular, to a mainstream audience. In between were a whole lot of nicely written personal anecdotes with some vague connection to larger cultural themes.

Most of the work, all along that continuum, was bad. That's not a slam on women's confessional nonfiction as a genre; it seems obvious to me that most of *everything* is bad. Most writing, most movies, most music, most fashion, most art. In any given year, a load of new content is hurled at the walls of our culture, and it will be decades before we really know what stuck, what continues to resonate across generations. We make our pronouncements about genius and universality; we make our "Best of the Year" lists; we dole out our awards, but we do so with the knowledge that our children may find our at-the-time

impressions risible. We know, in fact, that we might laugh at *ourselves* in ten or twenty years.

Still, there are conditions more likely to predispose an essay to lasting philosophical value, deep emotional impact, and/or exceptional lyricism. These do not include: Same-day deadlines, staggeringly poor pay, laissez-faire or wholly absent editors, click-based advertising, unmoderated comments published immediately below the work, sexist male owners of putatively feminist publications, or a general sense that it just doesn't *matter* if the piece is any good, as long as there are words on the screen by deadline. Most, if not all of those conditions were the ones under which we workers in the First-Person Industrial Complex wrote our so-called personal essays, until the market was so saturated with our bodily fluids and artfully arranged traumas that readers finally stopped asking for more.

When Jia Tolentino published "The Personal Essay Boom Is Over" in *The New Yorker* in 2017, it was only the latest in a long line of eulogies for the genre. Agnes Repplier published "The Passing of the Essay" in *Lippincott's Magazine* in June 1894, and eleven years later came Virginia Woolf's "The Decay of Essay Writing." Hilaire Belloc wrote of "a quarrel between those who write essays and those who have written an essay or two to show that the writing of essays is futile." Edward Hoagland wrote, "We sometimes hear that essays are an old-fashioned form, that so-and-so is the 'last essayist,'" forty years before Tolentino declared the personal essay trend passé.

As far as I can tell, the essay "dies" every time a generation becomes sick of listening to itself. In "The Modern Essay," written in 1925, Woolf famously

describes the deleterious effects of mediocre first-person nonfiction on the reading public: "We are nauseated by the sight of trivial personalities decomposing in the eternity of print." But in nearly the same breath, she prescribes the cure: *write better*. "Literature is stern; it is no use being charming, virtuous, or even learned and brilliant into the bargain, unless… you fulfil her first condition—to know how to write."

Becoming a nonfiction writer after a lifetime of fancying myself a soon-to-be-discovered novelist was a small blow to my identity. Becoming a consistently *bad* writer was an enormous one. Back when I could barely see the point in surviving my shame-filled, depressed adolescence, the lodestar that kept me pointed toward the future was writing. The flipside of my nonverbal disability was a precocious facility with words that marked me early as a potential artist. Motivated by the dramatically generous praise we offer small children who exhibit any particular skill, I kept practicing until eventually, I had fulfilled literature's first condition. I was no Virginia Woolf, but I knew how to write.

Allowing myself to write badly, then, was a genuine reason for shame. Between 2008 and 2015, I allowed rambling first drafts, full of shallow analysis and irrelevant tangents, to decompose in the eternity of the internet. Sometimes more than once a day. One of my most popular posts at *Shapely Prose*, the feminism and fat politics blog I founded in 2007, was "The Fantasy of Being Thin," a meditation on the ways we limit ourselves in anticipation of external changes. After introducing the topic with a thought-provoking quotation from obesity researchers who say, "The irrationality of hopes pinned

on weight loss is so striking that dieting might almost be likened to superstitious behavior,"[1] I begin with my own words: "For the last few days, I've been thinking I wanted to blog on this subject but haven't quite been able to pull my thoughts together. (Hence "help me find a dress" post.) Here goes nuthin.'" The words "Help me find a dress" link to a seven hundred-word post that investigates the pressing question, "What should I wear to my husband's company holiday party?"

There is literally no reason for any of those words to be published—especially the link to a different post—but there they are, decomposing, along with performative sarcasm, then-common blog jargon like "Muahahaha!" and "*headdesk*," far too many capital letters, and one paragraph that consists entirely of the words, "Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera." At one point, I format part of a sentence in bold—"I've never quite gotten my head around that one, since **the message we're sending is that you're actually allowed to love your fat body instead of hating it, and you can take steps to substantially improve your health without fighting a losing battle with your weight**"—because I apparently knew even then that those words were A) what I really came to say, and B) likely to be lost among the baggy, meandering prose.

I had not yet joined the paid First-Person Industrial Complex at that point, and to be fair to my past self, part of the reason I blogged was to casually initiate conversation and community with my readers. In that, I was successful: "The Fantasy of Being Thin" has nearly six hundred comments in response. But

[1] Wooley and Garner (1991)

this *was* one of the pieces that caught the attention of people who would eventually pay me to write for them. Because of the strong response to the post's overall message and a few key lines such as the bolded text above and "The thin person inside me finally got out—it just turned out she was actually a fat person," online editors noticed that I had a strong voice, a daily writing habit, and the ability to connect with readers. That, not any particular attention to craft, was what they were looking for.

When I was paid, it was never well enough to justify the choice to write badly. As in the old "pick two" adage, I was fast and cheap, rather than good. I did it to see my name in print, to get a contract for a book I didn't especially want to write, to hear echoes of that childhood praise from harried young editors pleased with my page views, and from strangers who glommed onto a performance of righteous anger that made them feel less alone.

I did it because I lacked courage. A half-assed blog post would elicit immediate approbation, and a non-fiction book proposal only required a few weeks' work before it could be sent off to an agent for cheerleading, then a publisher for money. A novel—what I supposedly wanted most to write, and write well—demands continuous confidence and an abundance of internal motivation just to get the thing *done*. Releasing it into the world for judgment involves a whole other level of bravery.

So instead, I wrote badly.

I mean, look, I'm exaggerating somewhat, which is a literary choice to convey the gulf between what I wanted to do and what I was actually doing in those years. I wasn't (as far as I know) the kind of shitty, needy writer that

made colleagues whisper about the cruelty of editors who let me expose myself to humiliation. I wasn't even a trivial personality, per se; my First-Person Industrial Complex persona was, if anything, far more serious than my real character. Real Kate, unlike Professionally Outraged Feminist Kate, enjoys action movies, pedicures, fart jokes, and Philip Roth. Real Kate binge watches mysteries about salaciously murdered women and listens to deeply problematic podcasts through noise-canceling headphones, hissing at anyone who tries to interrupt. Real Kate has never answered the question "Can I be a total bitch for a minute?" with anything but an enthusiastic yes.

One of the few things Real Kate does take seriously, in fact, is her writing. So, what if she takes everything she's learned over nearly forty years of avid reading, a degree in English literature and two graduate degrees in creative writing, and she writes and writes and revises and revises, and the end result is a book that's, you know, pretty good? Not awful, not great. Just a normal, human book. What then?

I might actually die, is what.

(I am exaggerating. But not for literary effect.)

Every work of literature has a situation and a story, and at the heart of every good story is a pattern of desire and resistance. The protagonist wants a thing, and circumstances stand in the way. What I want is to be a beautiful writer, an *artist*, not a workhorse best known for my hot temper and foul mouth. What stands in the way is my own goddamn brain, every time. That is my story. The situation is shame.

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The first section of this collection, "The Rage Syllabus," explores how American society uses religion, harassment, and physical violence to shame women *en masse*. Susan B. Anthony's arrest for voting, an attempted rape in *The Bell Jar*, fetal personhood laws, and murderous rampages by "involuntarily celibate" men are all part of the same system, designed to remind women that we do not deserve the right to live freely and autonomously. I fight this kind of shame with righteous anger.

In the second section, "My Wretchedly Defective Nature," I look more closely at things that still gnaw at my self-confidence—academic failures, depression, worrying that I'm a bad feminist, wondering if I should have been a mother—and how that internalized shame manifests as fear. I fight this kind of shame, on the advice of an old professor who makes an appearance in the final essay, with love.

Earlier this year, my friend Jess Zimmerman, editor-in-chief of *Electric Literature*, asked her Twitter followers what refrains they keep returning to in their writing. All of her own essays, she joked, boil down to "Remember the time my marriage failed, and it was my fault?" My equally glib response was something like, "Rape. Fat. Dead mom"—and indeed, you'll find all those things in this collection, more than once. Other frequent topics include, "I have never been a great student, but I swear I'm smart (please reassure me that I am smart)"; "The one thing I've ever been good at is writing (please reassure me that I am good at writing)"; "Dogs are so good"; "Since I gave up God, feminism

is basically my religion"; and "No, I'm still not done talking about men's violence against women."

But as Zimmerman points out in an essay about the overwhelming response to that tweet, such inward-looking obsessions only dictate the form an essay takes, not its substance, the thing that makes it worth reading to anyone other than the author. "Maybe I just didn't finish describing my refrain," she writes. "[M]aybe it's something more like 'remember that time my marriage failed? Well, it was a distillation of the messed-up messages women get about love.'"[2]

In my case, whichever refrain I'm plinking out, the second half of the description is, "I have spent so much of my life hating myself, for mostly bullshit reasons, and if you feel that way, too, let's join hands and spit in the face of shame." Come along. If you're not yet sure what you bring to the fight, I promise I have enough rage and love to share.

[2] Zimmerman (2018)

# A NOTE ON NOTES

To avoid interrupting the flow of essays in the creative thesis, I have employed referencing conventions of creative nonfiction. Sources are cited primarily by title and author in the body of the text or, where that does not fit, in footnotes. Where I quote extensively from a single book, such as *The Bell Jar* in "When Woman-Haters Were Like Gods," I do not include the page number of each quotation. Every source mentioned in the creative thesis is included in the bibliography at the end.

The contextualizing research is fully referenced.

## Creative Research: My Wretchedly Defective Nature

The creative section of the thesis has been redacted from this digital version at the author's request.

# Contextual Research: On Becoming an Essayist

# INTRODUCTION

I began this Ph.D. program wondering how postmodern metafictional techniques can be used to redress epistemic injustice suffered by real marginalized people in historical fiction. I end it working in a different genre on very similar questions. Whose voices are deemed credible in society, and why? What does it take to overcome an "identity-prejudicial credibility deficit" as Miranda Fricker (2007) puts it? How does one persuade without preaching? What makes a piece of political prose "literary," as opposed to merely utilitarian? How do I translate my feminist values into work that reads more as art than advocacy?

Through practice-based research, I set out to determine what for me has become an urgent question about the craft of a personal essay. What, I ask, distinguishes the tradition of Montaigne from essays that, as Bennett (2015) puts it, "make a show of maximal divulgence, but are too half-baked and dashed-off to do the work of real introspection"? In the previous ten personal essays, including mostly new work but in a few instances highly-developed expansions of short pieces originally written on tight deadlines for online publication, I explore themes of personhood and dehumanization through the lens of living in a particular body (fat, female, infertile, over-forty) in a particular time and place (Trump's America). In this contextualizing exegesis, I ask where the crucial distinctions between "clickbait" and craft lie, frequently

examining my own practice and development in ways that I hope will be useful to other writers.

Between 2008 and 2015, the proliferation of intimate, accessible nonfiction writing online contributed to a widespread impression that "personal essays," especially those written by women, are an essentially frivolous genre (see Bennett, 2015; Tolentino, 2017; Menkedick, 2017). As someone who participated in what Laura Bennett (2015) calls "The First-Person Industrial Complex" during those years, I recognize that much of the work I produced quickly for laissez-faire editors was indeed simplistic and forgettable, lacking serious attention to craft. Yet historically, personal essay writing has not been seen as a particularly *disciplined* discipline; Samuel Johnson defined the essay in 1755 as "a loose sally of the mind; an irregular, indigested piece…" (quoted in Klaus, 2010, p. xvii). Most attempts to theorize the essay go back four hundred years to Montaigne, emphasizing a translation of his term "*essais*" as mere "attempts" (see Fakundiny, 1991; Fadiman, 2003; Moore, 2010; and Pater, Howells, Musil, Bense, Starobinski, Lopate, Sontag, Mairs, and Graham—all quoted in Klaus, 2010). Somewhere between the tight craft of an exemplary short story and the shallow musings of a hastily composed blog post, a venerable form of nonfiction literature survives.

In an effort to trace the outlines of that form, the personal essay has been defined against "method" (Bacon, 1605; Addison, 1712), philosophy (Hazlitt, 1815; Sontag, 1992), "the poem, the treatise, the essay" (Pater, 1893), the theme (Chesterton, 1932), "organized science and theory" (Adorno, 1958), fiction (Huxley, 1960; Hoagland, 1976), the article (Gass, 1982; Ozick, 1998)

and so on. However, serious efforts to distinguish the artistic genre from women's online nonfiction in the twenty-first century—a category that now seems synonymous with "personal essay" in many minds—are so far scarce. In this thesis, I suggest that key factors are the balance of narrative and reflective writing and the degree of uncertainty around the essay's central questions.

Additionally, I discuss the value of metawriting as a means of adding texture and nuance to a relatively shallow piece. In the feminist essays and op-eds I wrote during what Alice Marwick (2013) calls Web 2.0—"a moment in technology innovation sandwiched between the dot-com bust and the App store," during which blogs briefly flourished and social media emerged—my authority frequently derives from a sort of confident bluster, sufficient to carry the reader along for a short journey toward a predetermined conclusion. In a more serious essay, I believe authority is earned through the patient and vulnerable illustration of a nuanced thought process, which invites the reader to observe the author's struggle toward an unknown conclusion. Self-referential passages that foreground the artifice of the essay can help to highlight that struggle and the author/narrator's flawed humanity, eliminating the didactic or scolding tone that can often attend opinion writing.

Deepening my older pieces and writing new essays has therefore been an exercise in troubling simple answers; exploring additional questions; elevating lazy, utilitarian language; and creating vulnerability not through "maximal divulgence" but through the candid revelation of my own style of thinking. Here's what that looked like.

# CHAPTER 1: SAME QUESTIONS, DIFFERENT GENRE

As I spent more than two years writing a historical novel and contextualizing research that referred directly to it, some discussion of that project, and why I temporarily abandoned it in favor of finishing a nonfiction thesis, seems to be in order. I will not dwell at length on the content of the novel here, but will examine a few ways in which my original research question—how metafictional techniques can be used to redress epistemic injustice suffered by real historical figures—continues to underpin my work in the essay form. I am now thinking in terms of metawriting, rather than metafiction, and of contemporary figures (including myself) as characters, but the craft issues raised by the central question remain quite similar.

While I worked on the novel, I focused my contextualizing research on Miranda Fricker's (2007, loc. 58) concept of "epistemic injustice"—i.e., "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower"—in relation to Patricia Waugh (1984) and Linda Hutcheon's (2003) arguments that postmodern literary techniques can be a feminist vehicle for destabilizing the "winners'" (i.e., white men's) version of history. My primary question was essentially this: Is it possible to create a "truer" story than nonfiction by

imagining the inner lives and unrecorded moments of historical figures denied authority, full self-expression, and political power at the time they lived?

That word, "truer," kept interfering with my progress. How could I know that my educated guesses, my chosen fillers for the gaps in my characters' biographies, were accurate? The simple answer is that I could not, which is why I was writing fiction. But the duty I felt to be as truthful as possible—and arguably *more* truthful than a straightforward biography that lacks the deep emotional contextualization of a novel—hamstrung me, time and again. I struggled to move forward, for fear of somehow betraying the dead women I was writing about. For fear of lying about them.

In *The Historical Novel,* Jerome de Groot (2010, loc. 3237) calls this way of thinking "the authentic fallacy": "the concept that readers of historical novels want to believe that what they are reading is somehow real or authentic, provoked often by the realist or mimetic mode of writing." I do recognize this as a fallacy and even agree with many of the arguments in favor of fully liberating one's imagination when working with long-dead people as characters. The simple reality for the historical novelist and the historian alike is that we'll never know what our subjects thought, felt, did, and said at the granular level of a narrative scene. We are all making it up with as much integrity—with respect to our own goals and limitations—as possible.

Still, sorting out my own goals and limitations in relationship to my integrity proved daunting. To me, integrity is marked by, among other things, scrupulous honesty and giving credit where it's due. Although I did some primary source research—notably, reading Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B.

Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage's *History of Woman Suffrage*, issues of *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, and other letters, journal entries, speeches, articles, and books written by suffragists of the era I was concerned with—the task I had set for myself was essentially to take other people's nonfiction (chiefly Myra MacPherson's *The Scarlet Sisters* and Barbara Goldsmith's *Other Powers*, as well as various biographies of Stanton, Anthony, and Stone) and add my own lies to create a better story.

I'm being simplistic, of course; I never would have undertaken the novel (or the M.F.A. in fiction I completed in 2005) if I believed that writing fiction is "lying" in any pejorative sense. Furthermore, I sincerely believed—and still do—in the potential of metafiction to politicize the historical and the factual, as Hutcheon puts it. Novels like Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, which invent characters to better illuminate and propel their real protagonists' stories, were great sources of inspiration. Using alternating narrators and different modes of discourse—letters, newspaper accounts, passages from a biography of the protagonist—Atwood continually reminds the reader that stories depend as much on the teller and the form as the facts. In her afterword—arguably another narrative voice imposing a version of the story—she writes of the competing "factual" accounts:

> Attitudes towards her reflected contemporary ambiguity about the nature of women: was Grace a female fiend and temptress, the instigator of the crime and the real murderer of Nancy Montgomery, or was she an unwilling victim, forced to keep silent by [accused accomplice] McDermott's threats and by fear for her own life? It was no help that she herself gave three different versions of the Montgomery murder, while James McDermott gave two (1997, loc. 6925-6929).

Those of us working in the historical fiction genre are not writing about or back to real people, per se, but to the texts they left behind, and other authors' texts about them. The act of imagining what's unknown and fleshing out what is known is inescapably one of engaging and retreating from other subjective accounts of similar material, a fact never lost on the astute reader. To attempt this at all is to foreground fiction-making itself, even in a realist novel.

Or, as De Groot (2010, loc. 1974) argues, "the techniques of postmodernism… have become the techniques of the modern historical novel. Questioning the legitimacy of narrative and undermining authority are fundamental to the ways that contemporary novelists approach the past." I still believe in the potential for historiographic metafiction to interrogate and overturn epistemic injustice, but I found myself approaching that goal more often through nonfiction, even as I felt guilty about failing to make progress on my novel.

**Metawriting, Truth, and Fact**

Patricia Waugh writes in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* that commonalities found among such writing include:

> a celebration of the power of the creative imagination together with an uncertainty about the validity of its representations; an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fictions; a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality; a parodic, playful, excessive or deceptively naïve style of writing (1984, p. 2).

Nearly all of those elements can in fact be found in my nonfiction, but it wasn't until I read Jill Talbot's anthology *Metawritings: Toward a Theory of Nonfiction* that I realized just how strongly the work I was doing as an essayist related to my original research question, despite the seemingly radical change in genre.[70] In her essay in that anthology, Kristen Iversen succinctly states its overall thesis: "[A]ll creative nonfiction, memoir in particular, questions the relationship between narrative and reality. Creative nonfiction is inevitably, unavoidably, uncomfortably meta-narrative" (Talbot 2012, locs. 2520-2521).

No matter how thorough my historical research for the novel was, I kept returning to questions of fact, of truth, and of my own authority to put forth a new version of another real woman's life. Drawing attention to the artifice of the project helped allay my concerns, but it didn't answer the questions that most interfered with my progress on the novel: Who am I to tell this story? What gives me the right?

Creative nonfiction in which the protagonist is a version of myself answers those questions before they can even be asked. No one has greater authority than I to tell the stories of my own life—but that still does not mean that I am necessarily the only or even best narrator of those events. Throughout the nonfiction I was writing alongside my novel, I was using the techniques of metawriting to draw attention to the vagaries of memory and the multiplicity of lenses through which one can view a single story. In nonfiction metawriting as

[70] It is perhaps worth noting that the requirement to contribute this contextualizing essay always meant that any version of my Ph.D. project would contain a substantial element of nonfictional metawriting. But metawriting within my creative essays is, I believe, a separate subject.

in metafiction, writes Talbot, "writers admit, via self-consciousness, self-reference, and self-reflection, the artifice, the representation of the I, the author, the narrator, the essayist, and how that artifice shapes the artist's reality. And vice versa" (2012, locs. 226-228).

"My Wretchedly Defective Nature," for instance, is constructed around excerpts from other texts: *Jane Eyre,* books on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, a psychological test report from the late '90s, my childhood report cards, an e-mail exchange with another writer friend. From a craft perspective, these excerpts serve two primary purposes. First, to fragment the text and create jarring shifts from one voice to another—mimicking the feeling of being distracted and suddenly going down a path other than the one you expected to take. Second, to shore up my own credibility as a narrator, supporting my claims with outside texts just as I was taught to do in school.

Yet they also offer the reader an opportunity to disagree with my interpretation of events, diagnoses, and literary works. They suggest that I am a narrator striving to be reliable, but unable or unwilling to call myself the expert, even on my own life. Throughout the essay, questions loom: Is the ADHD diagnosis correct? Does it wholly explain my pattern of underachievement? Does the ultimate rejection of a book proposal based on this essay suggest that the subject itself is lacking? What about the depression mentioned on page 125, and "the wound still so raw, she's afraid to surrender [the] small distance" of writing about it in the third person?

I know my own answers and believe I've made them clear to the reader. But recognizing that the Kate of that essay is neither the Kate of this one nor the

Kate actually sitting here typing right now (who will be doing something else entirely as you read this), I have tried to leave space for the reader to draw their own conclusions. By drawing attention to the constructed nature of the essay—as well as my own tendencies to hide, avoid, give up—I absolve the reader of any obligation to take my word for it.

"Metawriting moves the conversation forward," says Iversen in an interview with Talbot.

> We can stop arguing about whether or not something is really 'true'; we can stop—for a moment, anyway—trying to fix firmly that line between reality and imagination, fact and memory, in a way that's really going to stick. We can start talking about more interesting things. I'm not saying that truth doesn't matter, or facts don't matter. They do. But other things matter, too (locs. 2604-2605).

Writers of creative nonfiction will likely never stop arguing about the importance of facts—or even the definition of "facts"—in our art. I do not have the space to delve fully into contemporary arguments on the matter, but suffice to say I do not subscribe to the position put forth most famously by John D'Agata that because essayists are not bound by the strictures of journalism, factual details can be altered at will for purposes of art.[71] I acknowledge that creative nonfiction is not and should not be reportage, and certain elements, such as remembered dialogue, are impossible to reproduce with one hundred-percent accuracy. Compression of time and omission of real events and characters are crucial to the narrative structure that makes what Iversen calls

[71] See, e.g., D'Agata, J. and Fingal, J. (2012) *The Lifespan of a Fact.* New York: W.W. Norton.

"art tethered to reality." (Talbot 2012, loc. 2595). Still, I believe that where a fact is known, it should not be replaced by the author's invention; and where a fact is unknown, the author's speculation should be acknowledged as such.

In David Shields's *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (the majority of which is composed of openly plagiarized excerpts from other writers' work, distilled into an aphoristic exchange about the nature of art and reality), the section "C: Books for People Who Find Television too Slow" explores the lines between fiction and memoir. Of note is the observation—by Marguerite Youcenar via Geoff Dyer via Shields—that during the middle of the twentieth century, "the novel devours all other forms; one is almost forced to use it as a medium of expression" (Shields 2010, loc. 370). Robin Hemley (2008) writes of the same era, "when the memoir as a genre was reserved for retired generals and doddering actors, memoirs were called . . . novels. Everyone expected a first novel to be a thinly veiled autobiography."

Around the turn of the century, as what Lorraine Adams (2001) called "the nobody memoir" emerged as a the new millennium's defining genre, autobiographical narratives were expected to be not merely "based on a true story," but officially nonfiction. This distinction arguably represented little more than peeling off one label and replacing it with another until 2003, when it was revealed that large portions of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* were invented out of whole cloth, and the fact claims of creative nonfiction became a topic of international conversation.

As this conversation developed over the following decade-plus—and I began writing a kind of public nonfiction discussed at length in Chapter 3—I

remained unconvinced by most arguments in favor of collapsing nonfiction and fiction together under any rubric other than "fiction." To me, a work that contains invented characters or events is always a work of fiction, even if it also leans heavily on autobiographical detail. I believe a nonfiction writer's first responsibility is not to lie to the reader, even if we choose which truths we tell, how much of them, and in what order.

If we must lie—for instance, by changing a name to protect a real person's reputation—I believe we should confess it somewhere in the same document. And if we're not sure whether we're lying, if we can't quite trust our memories, if we're confused about some of the details, then that's where metawriting comes in. We don't have to know the whole truth. We just have to be honest about how we've attempted to wrestle it down. That is how to stop the argument and move forward.

Similarly, changing my program concentration to nonfiction felt like the best way to stop the arguments I was having with myself about truth and authority in historiographic metafiction, so I could move forward with the Ph.D.

**The Personal (Essay) is the Political (Essay)**

The change of program was also prompted by logistical concerns, which led to new research challenges and questions.

Within days of the 2016 election, my friend Samhita Mukhopadhyay and I began assembling feminist contributors for an anthology of essays about Donald Trump, and within a month, it was under contract with Picador. I told myself it was somehow not ridiculous to think I could edit an anthology, work

full-time as Assistant Director of a university women's center, and make significant progress on my Ph.D. novel. All three felt vitally important, for different reasons. The novel because I'd made the commitment, the job because it kept me engaged with young activists in the real world, and the anthology because it felt like *doing something* while stuck in the middle of an unfolding political and moral crisis.

When I inevitably had to back-burner one of these projects, it was the one with an open-ended deadline and no requirement that I appear somewhere in person for eight hours a day: my Ph.D. But my struggle to remain sufficiently focused on the novel went beyond mere time management, a fact I would be forced to acknowledge after I quit the day job and still could not settle back into a thesis-writing routine.

A theme I saw repeatedly on social media in the days and weeks after the election was that artists must not despair to the extent that they cannot work, if only because art helps people process, interpret, and survive political turmoil. Others joked about the quality of art that has emerged under authoritarian regimes, how we'll all have some terrific music and poetry to look forward to when (if) this is all over. In principle, I agree with all of that. In practice, I found my reaction was staunchly pragmatic and uncharacteristically Republican-sounding. *Screw art*, my gut cried. *Right now we need action, not art.*

There are a hundred good arguments for why my gut was wrong, for why we need both art and action (why art *is* action, even) every single day, under every government, and I trust I don't need to rehearse them here. My brain concedes the point without reservation. Unfortunately, all my heart could

think of writing in those early post-election days were helplessly outraged tweets, Facebook posts, and op-eds. All I wanted to read was nonfiction about how we ended up in this mess. The only book project I could bear to spend time on was the anthology.

I was comforted to learn that Leslie Jamison, a writer I deeply admire, felt similarly. In the introduction to *The Best American Essays 2017*, she writes:

> That first morning after the election, I thought maybe nothing mattered but policy op-eds and marching. Maybe nothing mattered but articles about politics with a capital P. That first morning, belief in art as a cultural value in its own right felt intellectually correct but deeply abstract, far removed, like an object under water— no answer for what felt sick and broken in my gut when I thought of millions of deportations and the families these deportations would break open, when I thought of years of stop-and-frisk policing, a national Fuck you to the idea of police accountability; when I thought of a Muslim registry, or girls driving for days across state lines to get abortions they couldn't afford (2017, loc. 222).

In the days and months following the election, I did indeed march and write op-eds and scream profanities into the ether. But as I began work on my own essay for the anthology that came to be called *Nasty Women*, I realized how much I wanted to deepen and complicate the kind of unnuanced, often polemical work I had been publishing. I wanted to write a *literary* essay about my strong political opinions and their emotional effects. My desire to create art, not just slogans, was returning.

"Are Women Persons?" marks the turning point between my work on the novel and my work on the essay collection submitted here. It is a braided

essay that combines my present-day experience—voting for the first major-party female nominee for president, then driving to Seneca Falls, NY, birthplace of the American women's movement—with historical research on early feminists, most notably Susan B. Anthony, one of my novel's original narrators. As I wrote nonfiction about Anthony for the first time, epistemic injustice remained at the forefront of my mind—both in terms of how Anthony was treated in life and how she is regarded today.

**Epistemic Injustice in the Personal Essay**

In journalist Rebecca Solnit's 2008 essay, "Men Explain Things to Me," she describes being in the home of "an imposing man who made a lot of money," who sat her down and inquired about her writing career "in the way you encourage your friend's seven-year-old to describe flute practice" (loc. 32). She told him about her most recent book, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, which prompted him to ask if she knew of the "*very important*" book on Muybridge released that year. The question perplexed and unsettled Solnit.

> So caught up was I in my assigned role as ingénue that I was perfectly willing to entertain the possibility that another book on the same subject had come out simultaneously and I'd somehow missed it. He was already telling me about the very important book—with that smug look I know so well in a man holding forth, eyes fixed on the fuzzy far horizon of his own authority (Locations 37-39).

The punch line, of course, is that the imposing man who'd made a lot of money was speaking about Solnit's book, which he had not read. He had merely seen a review of it, failed to note the author's name, and presumed to lecture that author on her oversight of this *very important* book.

"Most women" Solnit writes, fight a war "simply for the right to speak, to have ideas, to be acknowledged to be in possession of facts and truths, to have value, to be a human being" (Locations 112-113). This issue—the struggle to be seen as fully human while inhabiting a body and/or identity deemed suspect by the dominant culture—is central to most of the essays in *My Wretchedly Defective Nature.* It is also a perfect example of what Fricker (2007, location 295) calls "testimonial injustice," a subset of "epistemic injustice."

In *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing,* Fricker describes the form of testimonial injustice that is a primary concern of my fiction and nonfiction alike: systematic injustice, based on "identity prejudice"—in other words, wrongs done to members of an oppressed class, as knowers, because of negative stereotypes held by those hearing and interpreting their words. "The speaker sustains such a testimonial injustice if and only if she receives a credibility deficit owing to identity prejudice in the hearer; so the central case of testimonial injustice is *identity-prejudicial credibility deficit*" (Locations 415-416). The emphasis is Fricker's own.

Additionally, Fricker identifies a second form of epistemic injustice affecting the marginalized and oppressed, which she calls "hermeneutic injustice." Whereas testimonial injustice refers to a speaker's perceived credibility, hermeneutic injustice offers the speaker only inadequate tools to

interpret and contextualize her own life. "[R]elations of unequal power," she writes,

> can skew shared hermeneutical resources so that the powerful tend to have appropriate understandings of their experiences ready to draw on as they make sense of their social experiences, whereas the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible (Locations 1892-1894).

Put simply, a person with greater social power—defined as "a practically socially situated capacity to control others' actions" (Locations 211-212)—can see more of the "big picture" regarding their own life. Or, perhaps, their "big picture" is smaller, and minimalist, whereas a marginalized person's is overlaid with a complex web of stereotypes, prejudices, and hostile systems working against them. In any case, a person with a boot on her neck can't turn her head to see everything around her; like Plato's cave people, she can only interpret her experience based on what she is allowed to see.

Solnit's opening anecdote in "Men Explain Things to Me" reveals the power of personal narrative to help a knower suffering both kinds of injustice reveal that larger picture to herself. Solnit contrasts her reaction in the moment—assuming the man must be talking about someone else, someone more important—with her later interpretation of this incident as part of a pattern in which an inexpert man presumes to have greater knowledge of a given subject than an expert woman. She immediately reacts according to her conditioning as a woman in a sexist society, but writing and reflection offer her a way to transcend that conditioning and assert her right to speak and be heard.

To some extent, Susan B. Anthony was able to do this for herself, as well; my interest in her as a novel subject, and later as the cornerstone of "Are Women Persons," came from seeing a playful personality in her personal correspondence that gets overshadowed by her fiery political rhetoric. But in addition to the obvious testimonial injustice she faced as a woman advocating for her own rights in the 19th century, she suffered hermeneutic injustice from the ways her culture limited her imagination about what was possible for women. That might be one reason why, as I explore in "Are Women Persons," she compromised with powerful people who promised some relief for her marginalized group at the expense of others.

Such compromises—taking money from a known white supremacist to found her newspaper; fighting to block the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution unless it guaranteed universal suffrage, rather than merely voting rights for formerly enslaved men and other men of color; failing to publicly reject increasingly racist rhetoric among white feminists, as the suffrage battle continued into the 20th century—have come to define Susan B. Anthony almost completely among present-day feminists of my acquaintance. All you need to know about her to keep up with any current conversation is that she was racist and the very emblem of White Feminism, the toxic and ongoing practice of white, middle-class, educated women working to advance primarily their own interests while claiming to fight on behalf of all women. At the same time, her legacy has been reduced to a similarly simplistic snapshot by anti-feminists who claim her as an early opponent of abortion.

There is truth in both claims. I believe it is fair to call Anthony racist, based on the totality of her work, even if she began her career in the public eye as an outspoken abolitionist. And she did write about the tragedy of women trying to self-induce miscarriage because they had no control over whether and how they became pregnant. But to cherry pick those biographical notes and place them into a 21st-century context is, I believe, to commit further epistemic injustice against her. It is to ask her to know things she couldn't have known, then judge her for her ignorance.[72] Throughout "Are Women Persons?" I attempt to foreground the impossible standards by which both Anthony and Hillary Clinton are judged, while using metanarrative to interrogate my own biases as a white feminist.

**Personal Branding and Self-Regulation**

I have dwelled so long on Anthony because writing nonfiction about her raised an issue that's never been far from my mind as I've tried to move away from one-note polemical writing: to wit, how my work will be received and criticized by my feminist peers. Writing an op-ed is relatively simple in that respect. Take the position widely considered correct by other people doing similar work, and no one you respect will get angry about it. But failing to take a position, or taking the position that some things require a full essay's or book's worth of

[72] I absolutely do not mean to suggest that white people in the 19th century did not or could not understand the real dangers of white supremacist thinking. I am simply saying that among contemporary feminist criticism of her, I see little engagement with the epistemic context in which Anthony was operating—with the real daily oppression she faced, with her culture's ideas about how "good" white people were meant to behave and what it meant to be antiracist, with the competing promises powerful white men made to white women and African American men, etc.

nuance to be discussed adequately, can sometimes be seen as a failure to represent appropriate feminist values.

I want to be clear that I do not mean to caricature the present-day feminist movement, of which I consider myself an active and enthusiastic part, as hyperjudgmental or habitually blinkered. I will leave that kind of essay to conservative pundits. But internecine disagreement about tactics and tone is as old as American feminism. Today's debates about "Call-out" or "Cancel" culture[73] echo Jo Freeman's 1976 *Ms.* magazine essay "Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood" and the response it earned, which in turn echoes the separation of Anthony and her allies from other members of the emerging feminist movement in 1869. Suffice to say I do not believe feminist criticism has had a chilling effect on free speech overall—I only wish feminist criticism were that powerful! But in terms of how I developed my nonfiction from simple opinion writing to deeper personal essays, I must note that fear of social consequences within the feminist movement was a frequent stumbling block along the way.

As I discuss in Chapter 3, I began my nonfiction career as a feminist blogger, which led to being paid for the kind of shallow "personal essay" writing that was extremely popular on women's websites between approximately 2008 and 2015. Eventually, I was no longer Kate Harding, human woman with sincerely held feminist beliefs and a writing habit, but Feminist Writer Kate Harding. I was a brand, and that brand was a purveyor of Correct Feminist

[73] See, e.g., Ross, L. (2019) "I'm a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture Is Toxic." *New York Times*, August 17, and Leibovitz, L. (2019) "In Praise of Cancel Culture." *Tablet,* September 12.

Opinions. (When the brand failed at that, it became a purveyor of Sincere Apologies and Promises to Do Better.)

"Personal branding follows the logic of product branding step for step," writes Joseph E. Davis in "The Commodification of Self."

> To self-brand, therefore, individuals must get in touch with their skills, the "selling parts" of their personality, and any and every accomplishment they can take credit for. Then they must consciously craft these traits into a relentlessly focused image and distinctive persona, like the Nike swoosh or Calvin Klein, even testing their "brand" on the model of the marketers by using focus groups of friends and colleagues (2003).

The "relentlessly focused image" requirement of having a moderately successful personal brand was a chronic source of stress for me and a major reason why I quit blogging in 2010 and finally gave up writing op-eds for good in 2019. The market I was beholden to wanted "experts"—which is to say, people who had read quite a bit about a particular subject, regardless of whether they had any formal training in it. I was able to get work as the go-to person on fat politics or rape culture, but rarely as a generalist writer, let alone the literary one I still believed I was down deep. And the go-to person on fat politics and rape culture could not be seen mulling over questions, no matter how fundamentally complex, that the movement had already decided were settled.

After conducting interviews on self-branding with several online feminist writers, researcher Urszula M. Pruchniewska (2017) found that "Many of the participants spoke about their disgust with inauthentic, brand-enhancing

feminism and gave clear examples of it; however, what actually made up 'authentic feminism' was less clear." Several of her interviewees express that their own feminism feels not only authentic but effortless, because it is so interwoven with every other part of their identity. "By claiming feminism as a natural part of themselves, not as something learned, these writers deemed their own feminism as deeply authentic, thus legitimizing their use of feminism as their self-brand."

I recognize and relate to this feeling, but in my experience, other people will certainly let you know when your authentic feminist self conflicts with what their idea of authentic feminism looks like. As the community's boundaries become clearer, your "authentic feminist" persona might come to omit a fair number of your personal beliefs and any lingering questions.

Drawing on Foucault's "technology of the self," which she describes as "anything that helps people alter themselves to best fit an ideal, including therapy, plastic surgery, and self-help books," Alice E. Marwick writes:

> Since these ideals collude with the dominant political perspective, "technologies of the self" also function as a mode of governance, or governmentality. Rather than regulating people to fit into an ideal directly, technologies of subjectivity result in self-regulation (2013, locs. 287-288).

When the ideal is a feminism that's simultaneously accessible to the mainstream and inoffensive to those steeped in activism and/or the academy, the constant self-regulation can become exhausting. My essay "Victim (Noun)" addresses this conundrum directly:

> Whether I should call myself a "victim" or a "survivor" is a relatively simple question—I'm a grown woman who can call herself whatever she wants—that pops the lid on a much more difficult one: How precisely should I tell the truth about my own life, if increased precision edges us closer to damaging anti-woman stereotypes and bad-faith arguments stretching all the way back to Eve in the garden? At what point does my need to break everything down to its most literal, straightforward definition make me vulnerable to criticism that quietly indicts every other person who has been raped?
>
> In other words, is it my story to tell or not? Is this a thing that happened to me, or a thing that happens to one in six American women?

Finding the boundaries of my own story is a challenge in every piece of autobiographical writing I've done, but as we see here, metawriting is one way of threading the needle. Again, I offer it up to my audience: *Here are the questions I get stuck on as I grapple toward a conclusion. I can tell you where I ended up after thinking about them, but I won't pretend I'm sure. What do you think? We are, after all, in this essay together.*

It's not a perfect solution. I am mindful of Robin Hemley's caution that "a little self-loathing goes a long way" (Talbot 2012, loc. 1826). In other words, too much self-interrogation and -incrimination on the page risks undermining one's own authority and alienating the reader. If the writer doesn't know what she's doing, why should the reader care? But to the extent that metawriting can address a reader's likely questions without surrendering the author's control over the work, it is an effective way to indulge that self-regulatory impulse without veering into outright self-censorship.

# CHAPTER 2: THE ESSAY VS. FICTION

After committing to my change of program, I realized my first task was to define what I mean by "essay." I've been mulling over my answer to the most basic question—"What, exactly, is an essay?"—since I began teaching short-form creative nonfiction in 2011. Before I taught that first class, I bought Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French's *Essayists on the Essay,* in which fifty masters of the craft, from Montaigne to Sontag, meditate on precisely the questions bedeviling me: *What is an essay? How should an essay be? What should an essay make the reader feel? What kind of person writes essays?* Surely, by the end of the book, I would know.

At that point, I had written a great many things that fell vaguely under the heading of "personal essays," read a great many more, and even constructed a syllabus around essays I love, which my students and I would discuss during non-workshop time: Joan Didion's (2018) "Goodbye to All That," Sandra Tsing-Loh's (2009) "On Being a Bad Mother," Cheryl Strayed's (2003) "The Love of My Life," and the standard-bearer, the personal essay that should tempt us all to hang it up and go home because the form has been perfected, Jo Ann Beard's (1998) "The Fourth State of Matter." I saved that one for the last class, because I didn't want my students to get their grubby hands on something that has been

so formative to my own thinking and writing and methods until I'd taught them a few things about essays, even if I had no clue what those things would be.

The first time I read "The Fourth State of Matter," I thought it was fiction for the first several pages, because it is crafted so like a short story—replete with image patterning, foreshadowing, character development, desire and resistance, a beginning, a middle, and an end. From the first sentence, it seems to know exactly what it's doing and where it's going; the pleasure of reading it is in watching a virtuoso dazzle and surprise the audience with her mastery of language, wit, pacing, and revelation.

In "Toward a Collective Poetics of the Essay," Carl H. Klaus's (2012, p. xvii) preface to *Essayists on the Essay*, the author suggests that the pleasure of reading an essay derives more from the author's *lack* of mastery over her subject, from the companionable experience of following her candid, humble struggle with it. Most gestures toward a concrete definition begin with the term itself, coined in French by Montaigne and translated most commonly as "an attempt"; Leslie Jamison (2017) wryly notes of this common practice, "Etymology arrives as show pony and absolution, along with its attendant permissions: The essay doesn't offer seamless narrative or watertight argument. It investigates its own seams. It traces what leaks." Klaus also quotes Samuel Johnson's definition, "a loose sally of the mind," (p. xvii) and Cynthia Ozick's, "the movement of a free mind at play," (p. xviii) to reinforce the idea that the essay is essentially a matter of an author mucking about in ideas with no fixed destination in mind.

The more I read and reread "The Fourth State of Matter," however, the more I saw it as a study in restraint and control. A close reading of it reveals a craft approach that feels, to me, more artistically aligned with the short story as a form than with the essay in the tradition of Montaigne. My purpose in saying so is not to advance a further argument for one side of a contentious debate regarding the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, but to explain the thinking that kept leading me toward the essay and away from my novel.

"The Fourth State of Matter" opens on a decrepit old collie, "with her head slightly tipped to the side, long nose, gazing eyes," (p. 74) silently pleading with the narrator to take her out for a midnight pee. As a connoisseur of old dogs, I would have been delighted to follow the collie's story wherever it led, but Beard quickly zooms out—and out and out—to the quite literally universal.

> In the porchlight the trees shiver, the squirrels turn over in their sleep. The Milky Way is a long smear on the sky, like something erased on a chalkboard. Over the neighbor's house, Mars flashes white, then red, then white again. Jupiter is hidden among the anonymous blinks and glitterings. It has a moon with sulfur-spewing volcanoes and a beautiful name: Io (p. 74).

The narrator has learned about this volcanic moon of Jupiter from the astrophysicists she works with, "Guys whose own lives are ticking like alarm clocks getting ready to go off, although none of us is aware of it yet" (p. 74); men whose final, posthumously lingering chalkboard calculations will eventually be erased by the narrator herself (p. 85). In just the first four paragraphs, Beard previews the entire essay: the dying dog, her looming divorce from the person with whom she first loved the dog, a family of squirrels

who must be evicted from her spare bedroom, and the sudden deaths of her co-workers at the hands of an enraged student with a gun—back when school shootings were uncommon enough in the United States to merit entire days' worth of national news coverage.

It was the memorable name of the shooter, Gang Lu, that made me realize the *New Yorker* piece I was reading was categorized as "Personal History," as opposed to "Fiction." *Oh yes, the University of Iowa shooting. That's what this is about*, I thought. But the essay's brilliance is that it is also about the squirrels and the husband and the doomed collie, above all about the agonizing limbo of knowing loss is inevitable—even that it's already happened—but feeling unable to accept it. The narrator Jo Ann's central desire, for everything to stay the same, is thwarted again and again by outside events, which demand that she move forward.

Beard writes of an uncertain afternoon spent receiving panicked, factually questionable phone calls about the tragedy, many of which hint without confirming that her close friend Chris is among the dead: "I have the distinct feeling that something is going on I can either understand or not understand. There's a choice to be made" (p. 91). As with the dog—an obvious candidate for euthanasia to everyone except the narrator—and the husband, who has moved out but not completely on, she chooses not to understand for as long as she possibly can. The one decisive action she takes—calling a friend to help her evict the squirrels—leads first to relief and then to regret, or at least a thematically consistent wistfulness: "I stand at the foot of the stairs staring up into the darkness, listening for the sounds of their little squirrel feet. Silence. No

matter how much you miss them. They never come back once they're gone" (p. 95).

The thematic and structural cohesiveness of "The Fourth State of Matter" reminds me of something Eudora Welty says in her essay "Looking at Short Stories":

> It is when the plot, whatever it is, is nearest to becoming the same thing on the outside as it is deep inside, that it is purest. When it is identifiable in every motion and progression of its own with the motions and progressions of the story's feeling and its intensity, then this is plot put to its highest use (2002, p. 14).

Rust Hills (2000, p. 3), in *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular,* goes so far as to say, "The successful contemporary short story will demonstrate a more harmonious relationship of all its aspects than will any other literary art form, excepting perhaps lyric poetry." Here, he is attempting—essaying—to define the short story against both the novel and the sketch, but he offers a useful point of contrast to the personal essay as well.

Some practitioners of the essay argue that the short story and essay should be essentially similar in this way, with the only notable difference being whether the narrative is based in fact or not. Lee Gutkind, who has been called "the godfather of creative nonfiction," 2012, loc. 269) writes, "The creative nonfiction writer is encouraged to utilize all the literary techniques available to the fiction writer in order to render his or her true story as dramatic, appealing, and compelling as possible" (1997, loc. 342).

Vivian Gornick notes, however, that not all literary techniques available to the fiction writer are necessarily available to the writer of creative nonfiction; at least, not to the writer of personal essays.

> A novel or a poem provides invented characters or speaking voices that act as surrogates for the writer. Into those surrogates will be poured all that the writer cannot address directly—inappropriate longings, defensive embarrassments, anti-social desires—but must address to achieve felt reality (2001, locs. 59-61).

The focalizer of a personal essay, though, is not "invented" in the same way. Although there is, of course, some difference between the persona and the person writing, it is chiefly one of craft and clarity. Through the magic of revision, the "I" of my essays is wittier, more measured, and often more optimistic than I am, but her opinions, hurts, mistakes, and conclusions are necessarily my own. As a writer of nonfiction, I cannot fabricate a character to be a mouthpiece for other points of view.

Phillip Lopate, noting that he doesn't wish to feud with Gutkind and does agree that nonfiction "should have a plot, suspense, and strong characterization," is also skeptical of the notion that creative nonfiction is essentially fiction without invented plot elements:

> For all their shared boundaries, the experiences of fiction and nonfiction are fundamentally different. In the traditional short story or novel, a fictive space is opened up that allows you the reader to disappear into the action, even to the point of forgetting you are reading. In the best nonfiction, it seems to me, you're always made aware that you are being engaged with a supple mind at work. The story line or plot in nonfiction consists of the twists and turns of a thought process working itself out (2013, loc. 116).

In “a supple mind at work,” we hear the echo of Ozick’s “free mind at play” and Johnson’s “loose sally of the mind.” Susan Sontag (2012, p. 151), in her introduction to *The Best American Essays 1992*, elaborates: “We get out of essays everything a prancing human voice is capable of. Instruction. The bliss of eloquence displayed for its own sake. Moral correction. Entertainment. Deepening of feeling. Models of intelligence.” The essay, she notes, “introduces digressiveness, exaggeration, mischief” to the staid discipline of philosophy (p. 149). Its pleasures derive from “a vivid, flavorful prose style with a high aphoristic content” (p. 151).

While many of these characteristics are present in “The Fourth State of Matter,” it is much more a tightly controlled and “harmonious” work than those definitions of the essay would suggest. It creates the effect John Gardner (1999, p. 5) describes as a “vivid and continuous” dream, uninterrupted by spontaneous digressions or show-stopping aphorisms.

Although Beard juggles four distinct plot threads, she never lets herself go off on a tangent; every scene, every image is designed to serve the focalizer’s character arc. The central theme, of life forcing Jo Ann to let go of beings who cannot love her back any longer, if they ever could (her implied crush on the married Chris only adds to her heartbreak at his death) is, as Hills (2000, p. 1) writes of “successful” short stories, “inseparably embedded in the action taken by the characters—and indeed is implicit in all the other aspects, even the language.” The more I read, taught, and considered “The Fourth State of Matter,” the more I began to believe my example of the very finest

contemporary essay writing was in fact more of a short story that happened to be true.

I do not believe that there is a single answer to the question of how much personal essays do or should diverge from short stories. I can only say that for me, as a writer, the distinction drawn by Lopate, Gornick, and Sontag is a meaningful one. Although storytelling is at the heart of all of my work, I am drawn to the essay because it relies so much more on personal reflection—to the extent that, as Lopate says, the narrative arc is often about the writer's own thought process, as opposed to external events.

Certainly, other writers are more willing to blur the lines between fiction and nonfiction; John Gardner (1991, p. 20) writes, "Genre-crossing of one sort or another is behind most of the great literary art in the English tradition." Nevertheless, he also notes the importance of knowing for oneself where those lines are. "Though the fact is not always obvious at a glance when we look at works of art very close to us in time, the artist's primary unit of thought—his primary conscious or unconscious basis for selecting and organizing the details of his work—is genre" (1991, p. 18). The form in which we choose to write instantly erects certain boundaries around audience, voice, and content. For me, nonfiction and fiction are two distinctly different frameworks, each demanding a different narrative approach.

**Innocence and Experience**

My second-favorite essay to teach, Cheryl Strayed's "The Love of My Life," is much more the kind of work one would expect after reading all of the above

definitions (however untidy and occasionally contradictory they may be) of the form. In fact, its "aphoristic content" is so high that for years I recalled it, and loved it, primarily for just a few pronouncements on grief, such as:

> Dying is not your girlfriend moving to Ohio. Grief is not the day after your neighbor's funeral, when you felt extremely blue. It is impolite to make this distinction. We act as if all losses are equal. It is un-American to behave otherwise: we live in a democracy of sorrow (2003, p. 295).

And:

> Imagine if there was a boat upon which you could put only four people, and everyone else known to and beloved by you would then cease to exist. Who would you put on that boat? It would be painful, but how quickly you would decide: *You and you and you and you, get in. The rest of you, goodbye* (2003, p. 295).

It's been fifteen years since I first read that essay, and I still play what I've come to think of as "the boat game" once or twice a year. My answer hasn't changed much in a long time, but when I was younger, single and, like Strayed (2003, p. 291), "raw, fragile, vicious with grief" for my mother, I was forever jockeying around friends and family, challenging myself to make the cuts—*how quickly you would decide.* Would I take my dad, even though he's the kind of person who believes in investing everything in future generations, and would in all likelihood demand to be abandoned on an ice floe? Could I take my older siblings, knowing that separation from their children and partners would be unbearably painful for them—that even if they were still in my four, I was not in theirs? Should I choose four out of five of the nieces and nephews to save?

How could I? Do dogs count as people? Underneath it all was the violent truth that weighed me down: I would have thrown every one of them overboard to have my mother back.

So deeply did I connect with that aspect of Strayed's essay, I was genuinely shocked when, the first time I taught it to a group of aspiring essayists at a community writing studio, one of them said she'd been put off by the narrator's heroin use, promiscuity, and abortion. It wasn't just that I didn't share the student's value system; I had literally forgotten about all of those plot points—even about the "very long walk" (2003, p. 304) that ends "The Love of My Life" and would become the basis for Strayed's bestselling memoir, *Wild*—until re-reading the essay for that class. It had stayed with me for years by that point, but only in its most stripped-down, epigrammatic form; I could hardly believe that another person could read this essay and come away fixated on the *plot*, as opposed to its insights about all-consuming grief. Did she not read the part about the boat? The democracy of sorrow?

Of course, my own intense focus on those insights belies the artistry surrounding them. "The Love of My Life" is skillfully constructed throughout, alternating vividly described scenes with reflective passages, in what Philip Lopate (2013, loc. 383) calls a "double perspective." Memoirist Sue William Silverman (2009, p. 189) calls these two perspectives "innocence" and "experience," arguing that the interplay between them is what distinguishes memoir from straightforward autobiography.

> The innocent voice relates the facts of the story, the surface subject, the action—not altogether unlike autobiography. It conveys the experience of the

> relatively unaware persona the author was when the events actually happened…. The experienced voice, on the other hand, plunges us deeper into the story by employing metaphor, irony, and reflection to reveal the author's progression of thought and emotion. It reveals what the facts mean, both intellectually and emotionally (2009, p. 189).

This is the crucial difference between "The Love of My Life" and "The Fourth State of Matter," which is written in the present tense, with no effort to tell us "what the facts mean." Reflection is almost entirely absent in the latter, as befits a piece that is essentially about being stuck. "The Fourth State of Matter," despite its braided narrative, runs almost exclusively on the track of innocence; Beard uses metaphor and irony not to establish a credible voice that has learned from past mistakes, but to signal to the reader that she is not a wholly reliable narrator. We must layer *our* accumulated wisdom over her decisions in order to fully understand the story. "In a few hours the world will resume itself, but for now we're in a pocket of silence," she writes in the essay's final lines, imagining herself in the "plasmapause" of equilibrium she learned about from her departed friend. "Around my neck is the stone he brought me from Poland…. Shards of fly wings, suspended in amber" (p. 96). Beard doesn't say outright what happens when the world resumes itself, because it's all there in the ferociousness of her desire to forestall the inevitable.

# CHAPTER 3: THE ESSAY VS. CLICKBAIT

***Note to the Reader:*** *A few paragraphs in this section are identical to some in the preface to the creative thesis. I felt they were important points to introduce early in the creative work, to give the reader a sense of what to expect from the essay collection, but they are also crucial to this larger contextualizing essay. Rather than attempt to paraphrase my own work, I have simply repeated them here.*

## The Situation and the Story

"Every work of literature" says Vivian Gornick (2001, locs. 124-126), "has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say." The story of this essay collection, the thing that I have come to say, again and again, has to do with who in this culture is deemed *worthy*—of time, attention, affection, love, power, personhood—and the ways we dehumanize those who fall short.

The situation is that I live in a particular body—female, fat, absent-minded, now infertile, aging, and once the site of a life-altering act of violence—in a particular society that yokes all of those characteristics to deep shame. To resist that shame is to feel anger at the situation on a nearly constant basis; when your society keeps telling you to hate who you are, you can either obey and gradually rot of it or spend a great deal of emotional energy telling your society to get bent. I spent my teens and twenties doing the former, and my thirties doing the latter.

That anger was more than sufficient to fuel a column called "All the Rage," a blog about feminism and fat politics, a book about rape culture, and

dozens of op-eds about political threats to women's bodies. As Gornick puts it, "politics had provided me with a situation, and polemics had given me my story" (loc. 120). But if polemics can be called a story at all, it's one without much depth.

In my case, I wasn't coming to tell a story so much as I was coming, again and again, to scold: *This is wrong. Here's why it's wrong. I know I'm right, so don't even try to tell me otherwise.* I distilled all the texture and curiosity in my thoughts on injustice down to simple imperatives to anyone reading: *Stop it! Do this instead!* There was often a measure of nuance, as I dug down into the particulars of an argument and anticipated objections, but there was no real conflict or complexity. These pieces all began and ended with a point I was sure of. That was the problem.

I never wanted to be a polemicist; I wanted to be an essayist. Well, I wanted to be a novelist, but after I finished my M.F.A. in fiction, I stumbled into the good news/bad news circumstance of people offering me money to write nonfiction, so that's what I've been doing almost exclusively ever since. The point is, I wanted to be a *creative* writer, a *literary* writer in publishing parlance, the kind known for language, imagery, and insight, as opposed to seemingly limitless outrage.

Instead, I became a cog in what Laura Bennett (2015) would call "The First-Person Industrial Complex," an explosion of intimate, accessible nonfiction written by and for women, which left (female) bodies all over the internet between about 2008 and 2015. At one extreme, women confessed to foreign objects doctors found in their vaginas (a tangle of cat hair and a very old

tampon, in the two most scarringly memorable examples) with no greater apparent purpose than getting the grotesque memories off their chests. At the other end, my end, feminist activists offered up our rapes, our abusive relationships, our abortions, our miscarriages, our eating disorders, our worst parenting fears—all the things we were meant to be ashamed of—recast as "hooks" for essays that aimed to explain structural oppression in general, patriarchy in particular, to a mainstream audience. In between were a whole lot of nicely written personal anecdotes with some vague connection to larger cultural themes.

Most of the work, all along that continuum, was bad. That's not a slam on women's confessional nonfiction as a genre; it seems obvious to me that most of *everything* is bad. Most writing, most movies, most music, most fashion, most art. In any given year, a load of new content is thrown at the walls of our culture, and it will be decades before we really know what stuck, what continues to resonate across generations. We make our pronouncements about genius and universality; we make our "Best of the Year" lists; we dole out our awards, but we do so with the knowledge that our children may find our at-the-time impressions risible. We know, in fact, that we might laugh at *ourselves* in ten or twenty years.

Still, there are conditions more likely to predispose an essay to lasting philosophical value, deep emotional impact, and/or exceptional lyricism. These do not include: Same-day deadlines, staggeringly poor pay, laissez-faire or wholly absent editors, click-based advertising, unmoderated comments published immediately below the work, sexist male owners of putatively

feminist publications, or a general sense that it just doesn't *matter* if the piece is any good, as long as there are words on the screen by deadline. Most, if not all of those conditions were the ones under which we workers in the First-Person Industrial Complex wrote our so-called personal essays.

The market's greed for narratives of women's suffering is nothing new, but the expected relationship between writer and reader changed with the advent of the internet, and especially the comment section. Now, instead of publishing a curated selection of letters to the editor, online publications were encouraging—in my own experience, sometimes demanding—immediate, real-time interaction between their content providers and consumers. Writers were not only expected to dredge up details of our most painful and humiliating experiences for low pay, but to answer infinite follow-up questions from anyone with an internet connection.

In some cases—specifically, well-moderated comment sections, where trolls were summarily banned before they could poison an entire conversation—a real sense of community would develop among writers and regular readers. This was my experience writing my blog *Shapely Prose* from 2007 to 2010. But even keeping up with positive feedback was exhausting and, ultimately, unsatisfying. A few friends I met online became friends I see in person, speak to on the phone, even travel with. But the other "friends," I came to realize, were just people who believed they knew me because they were well acquainted with my online persona. I felt close to them because they were kind and funny in comments, instead of calling me horrible names and sending death

threats. Persistent trolls of the sort I write about in my essay "Not All Men" had set the bar for my gratitude and loyalty painfully low.

Describing Lauren Berlant's concept of "intimate public," Margaretta Jolly (2011) writes of blogs, online personal essays, and other media that lend themselves to public performance of an author's private life:

> They create affect worlds, where strangers meet on the basis of emotional connection in both wonderful and alarming ways. But they are also part of a market driven by desires and discontents, sometimes consciously so. They possess the latent power for political claim or advocacy Berlant describes. Only rarely, however, can we say they achieve genuine political realization or integration with other structures of change, and sometimes their reach for community ironically backfires. (p. vi.).

In retrospect, it seems obvious that these "affect worlds" would fall apart as people began to recognize the essential artificiality of the connections they were making. The death of the confessional "ladyblog" essay—and its corresponding comment section free-for-all—was inevitable, even before we come to the fact that most outlets never did make the money they believed all of those clicks from fans, trolls, and rubberneckers deserved.

Still, when Jia Tolentino published "The Personal Essay Boom Is Over" in *The New Yorker* in 2017, it was only the latest in a long line of eulogies for the genre. Agnes Repplier published "The Passing of the Essay" in *Lippincott's Magazine* in June 1894, and eleven years later came Virginia Woolf's "The Decay of Essay Writing." Hilaire Belloc (1929, p. 51) wrote of "a quarrel between those who write essays and those who have written an essay or two to show that the writing of essays is futile." Edward Hoagland (1976, p. 101) wrote, "We sometimes hear that essays are an old-fashioned form, that so-and-

so is the 'last essayist,'" forty years before Tolentino declared the personal essay trend passé.

As far as I can tell, the essay "dies" every time a generation becomes tired of listening to itself. "The spirit of the time calls for something different, and the 'best business talent'—delightful phrase, and equally applicable to a window frame or an epic—is moving in another direction," Repplier (1894, p. 32) writes. The form "has been used with considerable frequency since [Montaigne's] day," says Woolf (1905), "but its popularity with us is so immense and so peculiar that we are justified in looking upon it as something of our own—typical, characteristic, a sign of the times which will strike the eye of our great-great-grandchildren."

Phillip Lopate defines the essay against the magazine or newspaper column by diagnosing the latter as "too tight and pat":

> What most column writing does not seem to allow for is self-surprise, the sudden deepening or darkening of tone, so that the writer might say, with [Charles] Lamb: 'I do not know how, upon a subject which I began treating half-seriously, I should have fallen upon a recital so eminently painful…' (2013, p. 138)

When I began my Ph.D. studies in 2014, I wrote a weekly column for *Dame Magazine* in which I combined personal vignettes with opinion writing about politics and culture. As the column's name, "All the Rage," suggests, it rarely varied in tone—it was furious, polemical, fiery. Generally, I would not use the space to explore a question in a way that led to further questions; instead, I wrote mini-lectures for an audience that included (hypothetically) Bad People

Who Didn't Get It and (realistically) people who already agreed with me, who sought the comfort of righteous solidarity. The lack of "self-surprise" is absolutely a defining characteristic of the work I produced in those years.

**Trivial Personalities Decomposing in the Eternity of the Internet**

For several years prior to that weekly column, I was a daily blogger, an occupation that didn't exist when Lopate compared the essay to the column in 1989 but is essentially a hybrid of column writing, pamphleteering, and journaling, with the occasional gesture toward a full-fledged personal essay. Blogging is by definition a reactive and personal form, and the most successful bloggers—of which, among feminists writing in the late aughts, I was one[74]—achieve their page impressions and links and social media shares based on voice first, everything else after.

In this, blogging resembles personal essay writing, a genre Sontag (1992, p. 151) defines largely in relation to "a distinctive prose voice." A thorough discussion of "voice" in the personal essay could be another thesis entirely, but for our purposes, I will define it as the craft element that creates the impression of a conversation, albeit a unidirectional one; the thing that makes it feel as though you're hearing this story over brunch with your funniest or most

[74] My blog, "Shapely Prose" (kateharding.net) ran from 2007-2010, and became popular enough to occasion the sale of a related book, *Lessons from the Fat-o-Sphere* (Perigee, 2009). From 2008-2010, I blogged regularly for high-traffic websites Salon.com and Jezebel.com, and in 2011 and 2012, I worked on another blog spin-off, *The Book of Jezebel* (Grand Central, 2013). My 2015 book, *Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture* (Da Capo) was sold largely on my platform as a well-known feminist blogger. I wasn't famous enough to make much money for my books, let alone to launch a lifestyle brand or a television show, but I feel comfortable saying I was quite successful in the field at the time.

insightful friend, as opposed to around a campfire or in a lecture hall. Voice is a tool the narrator uses to establish herself not only as a character in the story, but as a protagonist with whom the reader is meant to identify.

The type of "voice" that kept afloat my relatively modest career as a Professional Outraged Feminist has characteristics in common with the type of voice that turned other American bloggers writing at the same time into bestselling authors— Heather Armstrong ("Dooce"), Samantha Irby ("Bitches Gotta Eat"), and Jenny Lawson ("The Bloggess"), to name a few of the most notable. Deceptively informal and immediate, it leavens outrage with humor and cultural criticism with self-deprecation. It approaches the reader as a co-conspirator, saying, "Come and join me for a chat. I'll hold the floor for the entire time, but I'll tell a few embarrassing stories about myself, make a ton of wisecracks, and complain loudly about something you also hate, so by the end, you'll feel like we've gotten to know each other. You'll think I made myself vulnerable and invited you to commiserate, when all I really did was talk about myself in a controlled manner, offering exactly as much information as I wanted to share."

I don't mean to suggest that any of us using that voice were or are consciously that cynical about it. (Perhaps some are; I certainly never was.) In fact, during the heyday of blogging, genuine friendships and professional connections were forged in well-moderated comments sections, which often included lengthy conversations between authors and readers; since then, the same has happened on social media. But my blogging voice, virtually indistinguishable from my columnist voice, was a persona that only gave the

illusion of being my unfiltered self. The political opinions, the empathy, the anger were all my own, but the self-confidence and unflappable certainty that drew many readers to me were embellished, to say the least. When I expressed genuine self-doubt or set boundaries on my time, many readers reacted as if I was behaving out of character. They were even right, I suppose, with regard to the *character* I was projecting—the voice—but those things were perfectly in character for the human being behind the blog. The distinction between the two was always stark in my own mind, if not my readers'.

Long before any of us dreamed of blogging, Virginia Woolf saw that an approachable, clever essayistic persona could produce both appealing literature and embarrassing garbage, depending on the skill and care of the author wielding it. Of Max Beerbohm's essays, she writes:

> He has brought personality into literature, not unconsciously and impurely, but so consciously and purely that we do not know whether there is any relation between Max the essayist and Mr. Beerbohm the man. We know only that the spirit of personality permeates every word that he writes. The triumph is the triumph of style. For it is only by knowing how to write that you can make use in literature of your self; that self which, while it is essential to literature, is also its most dangerous antagonist. Never to be yourself and yet always—that is the problem (1925, p. 46).

To underscore the difference between those who can write and those who can't, she writes of less accomplished Victorian essayists, "We are nauseated by the sight of trivial personalities decomposing in the eternity of print" (p. 46). Medium aside, this observation sounds quite like complaints about the "personal essay boom" Tolentino (2017) describes flourishing between 2008

and 2015, as online publications hungry for daily content proliferated and often recruited new talent from the blogging world. This "specific sort of ultra-confessional essay, written by a person you've never heard of and published online" was quickly and strongly associated with women's publications such as *Jezebel*, *Salon*'s "Broadsheet" blog, and *Dame*, all of which I contributed to during the years in question.

**The Importance of Time for Reflection**

Three essays in this collection—"None of This Befalls the Non-Existent," "Not All Men," and "What We Stay Alive for"—had their origins in my *Dame* column, which I wrote contemporaneously with my Ph.D. novel. To illustrate what I believe to be the difference between "clickbait" and craft, I will spend some time detailing the changes "None of This Befalls the Non-Existent" underwent prior to its inclusion here.

"None of This Befalls the Non-existent" began as a 1900-word column written in the fall of 2014, just as I was beginning my Ph.D. studies. The differences between that online version and the revision included here offer some starting points for distinguishing between "First Person Industrial Complex" essays and literary personal essays. I am using the term "literary" here to denote a more thoughtful, reflective approach to craft, not as a judgment of quality.

The most obvious difference between the old and new versions of "None of This Befalls the Non-existent" is that the latter is one thousand words longer. In some ways, the new version is arguably more "ultra-confessional" than the

FPIC one. It features almost six hundred words of vivid, concrete description of the central reproductive crisis, for instance, as opposed to the original's quick summation:

> At that point, I was 38 years old and recently diagnosed with a large uterine fibroid, which had been wreaking havoc on pretty much everything between my ribcage and my thighs for some time. Chances were good that we'd need expensive medical assistance to create a viable embryo, if we suddenly wanted one (Harding, 2014).

In the revised version, I chose to describe my heavy periods and frustrating search for an accurate diagnosis for a few reasons. First, there is the feminist agenda that's never too far from my mind, no matter what kind of work I'm writing: uterine fibroids are an incredibly common but little discussed ailment, so I wanted to be specific about what my experience looked like and, by extension, why fibroids can be an exhausting and devastating condition, even if benign. Explaining in detail some of what I meant by "wreaking havoc on pretty much everything between my ribcage and my thighs" is a rejection of culturally expected shame about menstruation, infertility, and femaleness in general.

Expanding on the physical realities, though, was also a matter of shaping this essay to tell a different story than the original version did. Another significant change between the *Dame* piece and the one submitted as part of this thesis is that I deleted a list of potentially hereditary ailments found in my hypothetical child's family background. Here is that passage in the original:

> If Al and I were to have a biological child, it would be smart and fat; that's as close to a genetic guarantee as you're going to get. The list of other things our child

> would stand some chance of inheriting, from one or both sides, includes:
>
> - Major Depression
> - Bipolar Disorder
> - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
> - Binge Eating Disorder
> - Autism
> - Addiction (multiple, most likely: alcohol, drugs, gambling, cigarettes)
> - Diabetes (Type 1)
> - Diabetes (Type 2)
> - Heart disease
> - Assorted cancers
> - Alzheimer's Disease
>
> Said heart disease killed my grandfather in his thirties, and my mother in her early sixties. The cancer took a few great aunts and uncles on both sides before their time. But as you can plainly see, the greatest potential source of suffering for my hypothetical child would be its own brain.

Choosing not to include that passage in the revised version was, in some ways, a matter of making the piece *less* confessional. Worry about my hypothetical child's predisposition to mental illness was a factor in my decision not to try to become pregnant, but did my audience need to know that? What part of the story did it advance?

One problem with writing quickly for immediate publication—my *Dame* column was weekly, but I rarely spent more than a day on a piece—is the lack of time to ask such questions. I may believe intellectually that "confessional"

material is fine when it serves the story and inappropriate when it leads the reader to feel as though they are witnessing a therapy session, but if I haven't had time to fully work out what the story is, how can I know where to draw the line?

I have always been someone who edits as I go along, paragraph by paragraph (sometimes sentence by sentence), so it didn't *quite* feel as though I was publishing first drafts at the time. Yet the difference between a first and later draft is not merely a matter of polish, but of reflection and expansion upon the central narrative and themes. I turned in clean copy as a columnist, but it lacked the distance that comes from letting a piece rest long enough to return to it as a reader and let the work teach you what you really meant to say.

In this case, the essay I meant to write was about the physical and mental experiences that led me to decide not to have children, which was never a simple matter of listing pros and cons, or balancing hopes with fears. It was, like most of my writing, an inquiry into what I believe it means to be human, to be an adult, to be a woman. The journalistic version, illustrated with a stock photo of a Chihuahua puppy, can be read as the story of a woman who had some reproductive troubles and a concerning family history, so she ultimately decided she was just as happy with dogs as she would be with kids. The final version presented here makes it clear that the decision only *seemed* to come easily (even if I do poke fun at myself about it), after many years of physical suffering and internal debate.

Although I lack the space to engage in a thorough discussion of "Not All Men" or "What We Stay Alive For" here, suffice to say the revision processes for

those involved similar questions. *What am I trying to say, and why is it worth saying? Does every element advance the story I'm trying to tell? Is the language fresh and unexpected, or am I relying too much on blogger/columnist voice? Am I trying to persuade the reader of a predetermined conclusion or move them emotionally? How can I take this deeper?*

# CHAPTER 4: ESSAYING

**Hermit Crab Essays**

In this chapter, I will discuss the collection's most recent essays, "The Rage Syllabus," "Magic, True or False, and "Victim (Noun)," as well as the most significantly revised essay, "My Wretchedly Defective Nature." Each illustrates a different aspect of what I hoped to achieve with this thesis.

"The Rage Syllabus" came about during a week when it felt as though, even more than usual, the entire body of feminist research, art, and argument might as well have been sucked into a black hole. Several top news stories involved women being punished for standing up for themselves and men succeeding despite having been publicly accused of harming women. As I wrote in an early draft, after noting that four books on women's anger were published this year,

> Meanwhile, in just the last few weeks, Serena Williams was penalized and pilloried for raising her voice at a referee; a bunch of men whose careers were supposedly ruined by the #MeToo movement were given high-profile comeback platforms; sexual assault allegations against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh made women of a certain age relive our fury over the 1991 Clarence Thomas hearings; and Warner Brothers just put racist, anti-Semitic abuser Mel Gibson in charge of the Wild Bunch remake.

"Every American woman I know," I wrote in the revised version, "is a live wire, snapped and flailing, in a storm that won't be letting up any time soon."

Structurally, I am using what Suzanne Paola and Brenda Miller (2012) call a "hermit crab" essay form. "A hermit crab is a strange animal, born without the armor to protect its soft, exposed abdomen," they write in *Tell It Slant* (p. 114). "And so it spends its life occupying the empty, often beautiful, shells left behind by snails or other mollusks." The hermit crab essay, similarly "appropriates existing forms as an outer covering, to protect its soft, vulnerable underbelly."[5] The appropriated form might be as simple as a datebook—see Zadie Smith's "One Week in Liberia," separated into sections named after days of the week[6]—or as complex as Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, around which Leslie Jamison builds her essay "Morphology of the Hit."[7] Other examples include Eula Biss's "The Pain Scale," a meditation on chronic pain that takes the 0-10 emergency room metric as its form,[8] and Miller's own "We Regret to Inform You," which is told through rejection letters.[9]

The advantage of the hermit crab format is that it provides a handy container for strong emotions. As the reader can easily surmise, my anger at the dehumanization of women in my society is essentially limitless, so the challenge for me as an essayist is to convey that without seeming aggressive and one-note. Here, the mock-syllabus format discourages certain forms of expression that I use often in other essays—swearing, preacher-like anaphora, long tangents—while creating multiple opportunities for humorous punchlines that diffuse tension. The subject headings and generally formal register establish one set of expectations for the reader, which can then be punctured at

intervals by my true voice, reinforcing the overall impression that I am barely keeping a lid on my anger.

In the ideal hermit crab essay, say Miller and Paola, "the form itself adds meaning to the piece. It becomes part of the metaphorical significance" (p. 116). How closely the writer hews to the chosen form is a matter of taste and need. In an earlier draft of "The Rage Syllabus," published at *Electric Literature* (as "A Master Class in Women's Rage"), I made relatively weak use of the syllabus format. Most of the essay appeared as blobs of text under "Lesson" headings that weren't attached to any particular time frame. Although I originally turned the piece in with a list of all fifty-eight texts right up front, my editor suggested that, for ease of online reading, I break up the "Required Reading" list, putting full bibliographic entries under the relevant lesson headings—and losing one of the most syllabus-like aspects of that version.

I always intended the sheer length of that reading list, which runs just over two single-spaced manuscript pages, to be a visual illustration of the crucial point that feminist writers have already done so much work contextualizing women's lives. The media may act as though trauma, harassment, sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and other subjects of longtime feminist concern are essentially mysterious and untheorized, but I offer a year's worth of reading that belies that attitude. I thought of Lorrie Moore's (1998) short story "Real Estate," in which the word "Ha!" is repeated for two solid pages—surprising, amusing, and ultimately unsettling the reader (pp. 178-9). In the case of "The Rage Syllabus," there are several repetitions working together to paint a picture, almost in the manner of a found poem. The

words “anger” or angry” appear six times in the fifty-eight listed titles, plus one “fed up,” and one “mad” used in the same sense. The word “power” also appears six times, as do versions of “sexism” and “misogyny.” “Rage” or “raging,” variations on “terror” or “fear,” and the words “revolt” or “revolution” show up four times each. Even words that are only repeated once—“fight,” “trainwreck,” “boys’ club,” “hate,” “resistance,” “riot”—contribute to the impact, as do one-offs like “struggle,” “peril,” “harm,” “war,” and “apocalypse.” If you do nothing but read that list, you understand the main feelings and points I want this essay to convey.

Nevertheless, I took my editor’s point that such a wall of text might not work well for scrolling, and I agreed to break up the list for publication. Later, after I sent the published draft to one of my thesis supervisors, her first question was why I hadn’t put all the “required” texts in one list. She encouraged me to revise with an eye to shoring up the faux-syllabus structure, by adding other common sections (e.g., “Course Objectives” and “Prerequisites”), and making the voice a bit more formal overall, largely by removing contractions. I took her advice and am pleased with the results. The familiar format and elevated tone provide a strong counterpoint to moments of humor and exasperation.

Sometimes, what begins as a hermit crab essay will insist upon forming its own exoskeleton, obviating the need for the stolen shell. When I began writing “Magic, True or False,” I knew three things: 1) I wanted it to begin with my father announcing his conversion to Anglicanism, followed immediately by his admission, prompted by my own, that he’s still an atheist. 2) I wanted to

parallel that conversation with the one in which the pastor who married me averred that he was no more religious than I. And 3) in between, I wanted to talk about that time I tried to be Catholic as an adult.

Because I saw this as primarily an essay about religion and thus recognized its strong potential for endless tangents, I hunted around for a shell that would contain my thinking just enough to write with clarity. My first thought was to draw on the Catechism of the Catholic Church—and then, specifically, to take headings from *The Baltimore Catechism* (1941), the simplified version my mother would have been taught as a child. Some of those—"The Purpose of Man's Existence," "Actual Sin," "The Communion of Saints and Forgiveness of Sins," "How to Make a Good Confession," "Temporal Punishment and Indulgences"—struck me as excellent writing prompts. But others, such as an entire section on the Commandments, fell flat.

Next, I considered taking some of the questions in the *Baltimore Catechism* and writing the entire essay as a catechism, in questions and answers. The very first section of Part One: The Creed, could have been the basis of a good essay. "Who made us?" "Who is God?" "Why did God make us?" "What must we do to gain the happiness of Heaven?" "From whom do we learn to know, love and serve God?" "Where do we find the chief truths taught by Jesus Christ through the Catholic Church?" (Baltimore, 1941). Even better, the last "question" in this section is actually an imperative: "Say The Apostle's Creed." Because the story of my adult Catholic phase ends with my realization

that I was unable to say and mean The Apostle's Creed[75], it seemed like a perfect set-up. But as I played with that format, I found that it was it too constricting for the story I wanted to tell, which was about my own searching more than any particular theology. I could have made it fit by adjusting the shell to fit my work, but for me, the point of a hermit crab essay is to fit the work to the shell.

Finally, I considered using the first six of the seven sacraments—baptism, Eucharist, confirmation, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, and marriage—as a framework, but I couldn't settle on *whose* sacraments I really wanted to write about. My mother underwent all six in her lifetime (the seventh is the taking of holy orders), so it seemed like a logical foundation for an essay about her. One day, I might write that as a piece of semi-speculative nonfiction, in fact—guessing at her infancy and childhood, at what she had to confess, at how she felt as a bride, before I get to the one sacrament I actually witnessed, her last rites—but those were not the questions burning a hole in my mind as I struggled to convey what her religion meant to me after her death. As for me, since I wasn't married in the Church, I've technically only undergone two sacraments, which didn't seem like enough to make that shell an integral part of the essay. And in either case, what was I going to do with Dad, who had sparked my desire to write the essay in the first place?

[75] In another example of the way current politics seem to invade and intertwine with even my most personal writing, the big news as I write this is that Donald Trump, allegedly an evangelical Christian, did not say The Apostle's Creed along with the congregation at George H.W. Bush's funeral.

**Finding the "Thesis Statement"**

At this point, I finally abandoned the idea of writing "Magic, True or False" as a hermit crab, but it still didn't come easily. In earlier drafts, I began with dialogue:

> "Did I tell you I'm Anglican now?" my father asks me. "I go to church every Sunday, and I still remember all the hymns!"
>
> "That's terrific," I tell him. We both know I'm only celebrating the second part. He's been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, which his mother and sister died of after many difficult years. Remembering is good.
>
> "I'm still pretty much an atheist," I confess.
>
> He laughs. "Me, too."

When I wrote the line about his Alzheimer's, I thought it would be a minor piece of information, just a quick explanation for why he was excited to remember hymns. I am surprisingly okay with my father's diagnosis most of the time. He's been expecting it for my entire life—his mother was diagnosed when I was an infant—and at this writing, his core personality hasn't changed. He mostly accepts his forgetfulness instead of railing against it, and he remains a kind, easygoing man who likes to tell stories; they're just shorter and more repetitive now. I do my best to be a kind, easygoing daughter who likes to listen to stories, and I congratulate myself on maturely accepting my father's decline, instead of grieving for the aspects of his personality that are gone. If there's one thing I learned from losing my mother, it's that as long as a person I love still exists in the world for me to hug, everything else is negotiable.

And yet. I cannot read articles, essays, stories, or novels about people with dementia. Between ADHD and writerly curiosity, I am a person who clicks on basically every link I see, but I scroll past anything that comes up in the news or my social media feeds about cognitive decline. It's reflexive, barely conscious. When I think about his memories disappearing in reverse chronological order (which is not exactly how it works, but also not *not* how it works) and remember that I'm his youngest child by quite a bit, it tends to trigger heaving sobs. It's possible I am not really okay with all this.

In light of that, I definitely was not planning to *write* about his Alzheimer's. But after I went to visit him for a week in spring 2018—technically, to babysit him while his wife went on vacation with her daughter—I came home with multiple new stories about his childhood and an updated perspective on his disease and his mortality, which had both grown more assertive than I had ever seen them before. Now, "Magic, True or False" was about both of my parents, both of their childhood religions, and my own brief return to my own. I generated plenty of material, around 7,000 words, but still could not quite find "the thing [I] had come to say," as Gornick puts it.

At this point, I was also reading through the craft essay archive at *Brevity* magazine, looking for resources to share with a new group of students. When I came across Cynthia Pike Gaylord's (2011) "So What's Your Point? Thesis Statements and the Personal Essay," I was struck by the line, "Summarizing my point in one sentence seemed to keep me from rambling, as well as its homely cousin, the rant." Ranting and rambling being the two pitfalls I most wished to avoid, I paid attention.

If you don't know what your thesis statement is, Gaylord suggests, you can probably find it in what you've already written.

> Here's one from Joan Didion's essay "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream": "This is a story about love and death in the golden land, and begins with the country." Another good one – although it is technically two sentences – is found in Lars Eighner's essay "On Dumpster Diving." It reads: "I have learned much as a scavenger. I mean to put some of what I have learned down here, beginning with the practical art of Dumpster diving and proceeding to the abstract."

I identified some lines in what I had written at that point that seemed to get at larger themes I was exploring: "I have never lacked for knee-buckling awe; only faith in a single, particular source for it." "We all approach the sublime in our own way."[76] "What I longed for was the comfort of history, of belonging not to any particular parish but to my own ancestors."

None of these, however, pointed me toward a conclusion for the essay, which at that point cut off at the end of the Las Vegas segment, followed by a note to early readers: "[THIS ISN'T THE CONCLUSION, BUT I DON'T KNOW WHAT IS YET.]"

In retrospect, the note itself approximates the thesis of "Magic, True or False." But at the time, all I could do was keep juggling these three things I needed to write about—Mom, Dad, religion—and hope that something new emerged. I reread Chesterton's *Orthodoxy,* hoping to re-immerse myself in

[76] This line was cut in the purge of Dad stories that slowed down the momentum of the opening, but it referred to Dad saying gleefully of his work as a surveyor, "It was all camping and math! What could be better?" In this, too, I am my mother's daughter.

some of the thoughts and feelings I had during my Catholic phase, and some of that made it into the essay. I wrote down everything Dad told me about the Salvation Army and his mother's family, which stayed in the opening section until quite late. (Once I did have an ending, I kept re-reading the essay and thinking, "This really picks up steam about one-third of the way in," until I admitted what that meant: I should cut much of the first third, which was full of information important to my family but not my reader.) I wrote about trying, and failing, to say The Apostle's Creed. And then finally, I marshaled the courage to write about my father's failing memory.

"The last time I visited Dad, I learned the hard way that CBC's nightly news magazine, *The National*, airs twice in a row, at nine and ten p.m.," I began. By the end of that paragraph, I'd written my favorite metaphor in the entire piece: "each new thought in his head is a helium balloon in the hand of a toddler, grasped jealously until the next distraction, then lost forever." Two paragraphs later, after the line "A simple, memorable story he can tell himself again and again about his place in the world," I wrote, "That's essentially what I was looking for when I tried to be Catholic. I know I'll be on the hunt for another foundational myth after Dad goes, maybe even before—one that makes me feel small, humble, and close to his memory, like the illusion that I loved my mother's God once did."

There was my thesis statement, and with it, a revelation: this is not an essay about religion. It is an essay about grief.

In the final draft, I changed those lines to, "Turns out I am my father's daughter, after all. I know I'll yearn for another story, another foundational

myth of my own, after Dad goes—one that makes me feel small, humble, and close to his memory, like the illusion that I loved my mother's God once did." The first sentence is a callback to my earlier statement, "[I]n terms of belonging, in terms of *home* as a spiritual compass point, I am my mother's Chicagoan daughter and my father's sorrow." Although I don't spell it out in the essay, another thing I realized after visiting my father in Ontario is that I've started missing his and my old hometown of Toronto, the same way I missed Chicago when I lived in Canada. Partly, that's because I've been gone for more than a decade now, and partly, it's because Donald Trump is President of the United States. But mostly, it's because after my mother's death, I clung to my Chicagoan identity for the same reason I clung to my Catholic one: it made me feel like more of her was left in me, which had to mean not all of her was gone. And now, as I watch my 83-year-old father slip away, I'm desperately nostalgic for Toronto, for Northern Ontario lakes, for the Canadian identity that never really fit me properly. I almost instinctively want to strengthen those parts of me, as a bulwark against the incoming tide of grief.

I chose to end the collection with "Magic, True or False" because I feel it's the most fully realized example of my writing as a personal essayist, as opposed to a cultural critic or "hot take" generator. It is arguably the least connected to the theme of shame, although that subject does make an appearance when I write about publicly declaring myself an atheist at thirteen: "[W]hat I felt more than anything at thirteen was a chronic, low-level shame, a consuming drive to walk invisibly among my peers. (In other words, a

consuming drive to be loved by my peers, combined with a total lack of skills or even preliminary ideas for making that happen.)"

When I revise *My Wretchedly Defective Nature* for potential publication as a thematically linked essay collection, I might explore other ways shame affected the narrative threads in "Magic, True or False." When I was attempting to practice Catholicism as an adult, I was ashamed that I hadn't been confirmed and didn't know all of the basic things that were drilled into people who went to Catholic school and Mass all their lives—and at the same time, I was afraid to tell my progressive, secular friends that I was trying to be a practicing Catholic. It felt as though there was no way to explain to *anyone* that what I was doing was sincere, deeply felt, respectful of tradition, and yet not remotely tethered to anything the Pope said. I didn't want to be accused of substituting my own worldview for God's, but I also didn't want my friends to suspect I was drifting to the Right and cleaving to a community that wouldn't welcome them. These were issues I considered including in the essay, but as this version took shape, they fell by the wayside.

**Adventures in Word Limits**

I should note one other reason this version took shape the way it did: I was trying to keep it under five thousand words. In the fall of 2018, I began applying for creative writing teaching jobs, in anticipation of finishing the Ph.D. As I updated my C.V., I was confronted with how non-literary it looked. I have an M.F.A. in fiction but only two, quite old, fiction publications; I stopped writing short stories when I began working on novels, none of which I ever finished. I

have a poetry chapbook and a couple of literary magazine publications, but I haven't written poetry in fifteen years. All of my publications in the last decade have been nonfiction, and with the exception of a few placements in online outlets such as *Electric Literature* and *The Millions*, none of them could be considered literary. I was a finalist for a noteworthy book award, but it was in general nonfiction, and I have a national reputation for my writing, but it's as a feminist activist, not an artist. You get the picture.

Apart from writing the best possible cover letters, there was little to be done in terms of this year's job search, but I resolved to start building my literary C.V. for the future. I decided to enter literary magazine contests, but as I looked over my thesis for work I could submit, I realized that nearly all of the essays were unsuitable for reasons that had nothing to do with how proud I was of their quality. One had already been published in my own anthology, *Nasty Women: Feminism, Resistance, and Revolution in Trump's America*, and two were earmarked for forthcoming anthologies. Three appeared in embryonic form in my *Dame* column from 2014-15, and although I revised and expanded them substantially for the thesis, I couldn't in good conscience sell someone else first serial rights. Similarly, two essays I wrote in the last year were commissioned for *Electric Literature*, although the versions in this thesis have also been revised. That left two essays, "My Wretchedly Defective Nature" and "Magic, True or False," available to submit.

"My Wretchedly Defective Nature" has undergone the most substantial changes of any piece in this collection. Now a relatively tight fifty-one hundred words, it was at one point part of a twelve-thousand-word triptych essay on

books I failed to read as a high school student or undergraduate—*Jane Eyre*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Unfortunately, I could never quite get the three strands of that essay to work together; the connective tissue was too weak. The *Jane Eyre* section, which is now the entire essay, told the story of my post-college learning disability diagnosis, and the intellectual shame I'd spent years accruing, without ever knowing why certain things were such a struggle. The *Slaughterhouse-Five* section, written most recently, addressed a topic I touch on in "What We Stay Alive For" and which Sontag points to as one of the pleasures of the essay: "high aphoristic content," for which Vonnegut is famous. It discussed my sincere appreciation for the power of a good aphorism to distill a whole philosophy into a manageable, memorable package.

In keeping with the theme of the collection, I also discussed my longtime presumption, based on nothing but snobbery and bad information, that Vonnegut was not a serious writer of the sort that an adult should readily admit to enjoying. I had the same basic erroneous impression of him that many people seem to have of Sylvia Plath—this is work beloved by teenagers, ergo it must not be deep literature—but instead of adding an extra heap of disdain for reasons of gender, I added one for reasons of genre. *Slaughterhouse-Five* was, as I understood it before I read it, a sci fi book about aliens and time travel. Imagine my surprise when I finally did read Vonnegut's best-known work and discovered a beautifully crafted, deeply moving war novel that just happened to contain time travel and aliens.

That tendency toward snobbery is, of course, the externalization of my intellectual shame. Over the years, I developed a number of coping mechanisms

for feeling chronically behind the curve, one of which was emulating other people's snobbery. Like a four-year-old who wants nothing to do with a *baby* book, I dismissed any text I surmised to be Unworthy of a Serious Person of Letters. It wasn't until I undertook my MFA studies in my late twenties that I began asking myself what I, personally, found beautiful and important in books.

The *Jane Eyre* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* sections of the essay, then, had some strong thematic links and shared a narrative arc in which I matured beyond my childhood apprehension of the situation—"People keep telling me I'm smart, but I must be stupid, because I keep failing"—to an understanding that the word "smart" means many different things, that failure has its uses, that simple is not the same as simplistic, and that my peculiar brain, frustrating though it may be, serves me well.

The main problem with that version of "My Wretchedly Defective Nature" was the *Gatsby* section. In short, I never found what that section was really about, but I refused to abandon it for a very long time because it contained some of my dearest "darlings." I really loved a few scenes and some of the sentence-level work, so I kept noodling with it, hoping to find what connected my own experience to *The Great Gatsby*, and that to the experiences I'd related to *Jane Eyre* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. There were a number of potential thematic threads to pick up—about class, about violence, about place, about the craft of writing, and indeed, about shame—but I could neither focus on one nor braid them all in a harmonious manner.

At one point, I took the text, which was then around three thousand words, and, as an exercise, began trimming everything but the passages I

couldn't bear to give up. I then wrote around those in hopes of discovering what my point was. First, I took it down to thirteen hundred words, but that didn't make it feel tighter, exactly—only shorter. I was enjoying the exercise of decluttering my own work, so I decided to see if I could get it under *Brevity* magazine's word limit of seven hundred fifty; perhaps that would clarify what the piece was *really* about. It did not. But it was still fun, so I kept going, this time with a goal of five hundred words.

It is worth quoting the (untitled) result of that exercise in its entirety:

> I start reading *The Great Gatsby* again in Lake Forest, Illinois, hometown of Tom Buchanan's polo ponies. I'm sleeping and working in the former hayloft of a former barn at Ragdale, an artists' colony that backs onto semi-wild prairie and abuts Hamptons-esque mansions on either side. It feels a bit like being at a friend's country house, if you're the kind of person who has such friends. The neighborhood is guarded by hedges shorn into harsh right angles, wrought-iron fences, brick walls. The air is, like Daisy Buchanan's voice, full of money. I've always hated this book.
>
> But here in my hayloft, with its single bed and gingham curtains, I begin to feel a kinship with Nick in his forgotten caretaker's cottage. Am I softening?
>
> I've felt this way before. Different colors of highlighter decorate the first few chapters of my cheap paperback. For me, page sixty of *The Great Gatsby* is like the three-month mark in a relationship, when you've heard all the guy's best lines and have to figure out if you still give a shit. Historically, I do not.
>
> But that first party scene! The one with "yellow cocktail music" and easy laughter, with confident girls weaving tipsily around the "stouter and more stable" ones. You don't just want to go to this party; you want to *live* at this party. You want to curl up inside this party and let it take care of you for all eternity. He does all that with *sentences.*

> I came to writing as an overthinker, not an imagist. I rely on wordplay and jokes, piles of clauses, the repetitive cadence of a tent preacher. I wantonly abuse em-dashes and the rule of three. I am a shitty poet. Trying to write lush, evocative description makes me feel like I'm at a party where everyone else is cold-cock glamorous and I'm just standing there, stout and stable as a bungalow, being who I've always been.
>
> The problem is, like a tedious young mustache in your MFA workshop, Fitzgerald obsesses over dazzling sentences at the expense of structure and pacing. Jordan Baker gets a bizarre, four-page expository monologue. Gatsby's entire backstory is revealed at once in a tangential chapter. If something doesn't fit, he just mashes it into the narrative like a child pissed off at a jigsaw puzzle. He interrupts the dream, and I hate him again.
>
> I've been writing this essay for years. It has been about *Gatsby* and: failure, rape, loneliness, beauty, money, lack. It never comes together, and I cannot stop writing it. It's been three thousand words, five thousand, ten thousand. It has been wildly overthought. So we beat on, ceaselessly.
>
> But soulless excess inevitably collapses under its own weight. What do I even love about this thing that's changed so much over time, so unrecognizably?
>
> Just how hard it is to ever get it right, I think. How hard it is to try.

There are things I like about this, as my first attempt at a flash essay. It has a narrative arc: I begin by hating *Gatsby*, but by the end, I have an appreciation for Fitzgerald's ambition and artistry, because I know how hard it can be to make your words execute your vision. It has a thematic connection to *Gatsby*, spelled right out in the second-to-last paragraph. I like the phrase "cold-cock glamorous," which feels like it came from somewhere outside my usual writerly habits. (I should perhaps note here that in the U.S., "cold-cock" means

to deliver a knockout blow. The internet tells me that's chiefly North American, and I can imagine it being interpreted differently.) I like how "I've always hated this book" brings any thoughts of romanticizing wealth to a dead stop. I like "stout and stable as a bungalow."

Still, when I came to the end, I couldn't help laughing at myself. After so many versions and so many years, was *this* the core thing I came to say in that piece? That writing is hard?

Ultimately, I could not make the *Gatsby* section work with the *Jane Eyre* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* sections, so I had to abandon the idea of a triptych. In consultation with my advisors, I decided to keep the *Jane Eyre* section, which we agreed was most compelling, and jettison the other two. That meant the *Jane Eyre* section would need a proper ending, though, and I could not yet see what that would be. And that meant that despite having ninety-five percent of a finished essay collection, I only had one essay suitable for contest submission.

**Professional Concerns**

I looked at the contest listings in *Poets & Writers* and found that the next deadline was for a *Sonora Review* contest, with a prize of $1,000, judged by none other than Jo Ann Beard. Submissions needed to be under five thousand words, so I trimmed "Magic, True or False" until it was, polished it to the best of my ability, and sent it in.

Making creative decisions about an essay based on contest requirements may not seem like Ph.D.-level craft, but I stand by that choice for a couple of reasons. First, because the resulting essay works. I am extremely pleased to

report that just before I submitted this thesis, I learned Beard (2018) chose my essay as the *Sonora Review* contest's winner, calling it "a gorgeously sustained meditation on memory, spirituality, family, religion, loss and (somehow, miraculously) gain."

But even before I had that stroke of good fortune, I felt that "Magic, True or False" was a strong, polished example of just what I set out to write for this collection: essays that ask deep questions, without preconceived answers, and use metaphor and carefully chosen language to elevate my naturally informal voice beyond the sloppier version I used to offer the internet every day. I still swear, crack wise, and break the fourth wall, just as I did while blogging, but here, those signature moves are deliberately set against grief, uncertainty, nostalgia, sentiment, and spiritual longing. They are not there to charm an audience into agreeing with my half-baked opinions, but because they help to establish me as a character in my own story.

I also stand by the choice to finish "Magic, True or False" with an eye to contest rules because to me, it was a simple matter of thinking like a working writer, which is what I have been all throughout this Ph.D. program. During my first semester, I was writing my *Dame* column and finishing my book *Asking for It* while working on my novel. During much of the 2015-2016 school year, I traveled to promote the book and speak to university audiences about it, the latter being my primary source of income that year. During the 2016-17 school year, I worked a full-time job, co-edited an anthology, and took a month off to teach an intensive course in political writing for performance as a Distinguished Visiting Writer at a small liberal arts college. In late 2017, I

toured the U.S. with the anthology, speaking to audiences about my own essay and the twenty-two others in it. I wrote an essay for a live lit show in Chicago, then sold a revised version of it to the online magazine *Refinery 29.* I wrote the original version of "When Woman-Haters Were Like Gods" for a collection of critical essays on Sylvia Plath edited by my supervisor Tracy Brain, knowing that when I'd finished writing it to her specifications for that book, I would revise it according to my own for this thesis. In the last year, I've published op-eds in *The Washington Post* and *The Huffington Post,* and on the *NBC News* website, and written essays on commission for *Electric Literature* that I knew would go straight into my thesis after a bit of revision.

Last spring, I wrote a proposal for a new book, *Victim Complex: On Snowflakes, Witch Hunts, and the Cult of Personal Responsibility*, and sold it to St. Martin's Press. The sample chapter I included was an essay written on commission for Lizzie Skurnick's forthcoming anthology on language and identity, *Pretty Bitches,* which laid out the main themes I plan to address in *Victim Complex*—to wit, that we treat "victim" as a dirty word, and victims as accordingly dirty; that we attach shame to the blameless experience of being overpowered; that the dominant culture claims to be victimized by the very people it oppresses. My editor at St. Martin's (then at Picador—the same woman I worked with on the 2017 anthology) gently put it to me that the sample chapter was not exactly what they were looking for, which was not unexpected. But along with a chapter outline and a promise to be less essayistic going forward, it was sufficient to get the contract. Once that was done, I continued polishing the essay for inclusion here, as "Victim (Noun)."

This is what I do. I write, then revise, remix, and recycle. I use word counts, deadlines, and specific requests the same way I use the shell of a hermit crab essay—to help narrow down the list of possible subjects and approaches from "literally all of them" to something one highly distractible person can manage. I care deeply about my writing, but I don't sweat edits or get overly precious about my vision. I figure out how to make the piece work for a particular outlet, and I send it there.

This is not to say I have little investment in what the finished version of an essay looks like; this thesis represents the work done *my* way, with the goal of a Ph.D. at the end but no other external forces dictating craft decisions. I agreed to break up the Required Reading list in "The Rage Syllabus" for publication, but I've restored it here for reasons I've already detailed; I believe the intact list creates a layer of meaning that is lost in the published version. Similarly, Skurnick has asked for edits on "Victim (Noun)," which I will deliver as requested for her anthology, but the version included here is the one I consider finished.

Skurnick's requests are reasonable for the kind of essay she wants to publish. She asked for things I often ask of my own students, things I asked of several contributors to *Nasty Women*: concrete and vivid scenes, more clarity on what happened, when, and who was there. Because she's a friend, and it's her book, I will give her those things.

But my purpose in writing "Victim (Noun)" was to take the "supple mind at work" principle and give it my best shot. I wanted the narrative arc to be the movement of my own thinking on a question that has long haunted me, as

opposed to a series of described actions. I deliberately avoided writing about the rape in detail, because I wanted to keep the focus on the aftermath and, for once, away from my body. As I say in the piece, I have told the story of the rape countless times; this is the story of my relationship to the word "victim." This is my mind at work.

# CONCLUSION

For personal and political reasons, essays were the form that spoke to me most over the last four years, even as I spent two of them trying to write a novel. I am proud to have completed an essay collection that contains formal experimentation, varying balances of narrative and meditation, and a sustained effort to do deeper, more challenging work in the genre.

I am equally proud, however, of the work that does not appear in this thesis: one hundred-plus novel pages and a half dozen approaches to a contextualizing essay on epistemic injustice and historiographic metafiction. As someone with ADD, I respond extremely well to structure—which can be seen in my love of the hermit crab essay, editorial feedback, themed prompts, and word counts—and struggle with large-scale, open-ended tasks, such as writing a novel. I knew that going into this program, but I hoped that the structure and deadlines would help me manage both the project and my nerves. I now believe that if I am to finish this or any novel, I need to accept that it will be slow going, and I will most likely need to write tens of thousands of words that don't belong in the final draft, just to get to what I really want to say.

In the meantime, focusing on the craft of essay writing has given me a much greater appreciation for the art, and helped me overcome a silly but deeply internalized notion that fiction is *real* writing, and nonfiction is just an

easy thing I do on the side. While I still believe short stories and essays are distinctly different—at least in the way I choose to write them—nonfiction written with sincerity and artistic purpose can be as thrilling as the best fiction, and I look forward to spending the rest of my life getting better at both.

Doing creative practice as research at the graduate level in two genres also gave me a unique window on who I am not just as an essayist or novelist but as an artist. In the end, regardless of genre, I return to the same few questions about what it means to be human. Nearly everything I write is, one way or another, about epistemic injustice—the ways in which certain people are silenced and deliberately kept in the dark about oppressive forces that act on them. The themes of this essay collection were also at play in the abandoned novel; the story arc I had planned was very much about the protagonist overcoming cultural expectations based on her sex and becoming her authentic self. Both books could be described as the story of a woman wrestling and reckoning with a false vision of who she is, one that took root when she was too young to understand or resist.

Although beginning the program as a novelist and ending it as an essayist was perhaps not the ideal route to a completed thesis, it was a very *Kate* route: a wryly amusing final chapter to the essay "My Wretchedly Defective Nature." I have never had a knack for smoothly executing the duties of a student, but my love of learning and willingness to change course as necessary have always, eventually, carried me where I needed to go. I don't believe a minute was wasted.

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