

Painting Myself for Others:

The ‘Hum of Perpetual Noticing’ in the Personal Essay

Exegesis Submission



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Painting myself for others... I have painted my inward self with colours clearer than my original ones. I have no more made my book than my book has made me...

Michel de Montaigne, ‘Of Giving the Lie’
(as cited by Klaus, 2010, p. 7)

It is the hum of perpetual noticing....to seize the hum and set it down for others to hear is the essayist's genius.

Cynthia Ozick, ‘SHE: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body’
(Ozick, 1998, para. 19)

I. Introduction

Having worked as a newspaper columnist for a decade, my writing toolkit has been heavily stacked with peddling opinion and building a coherent argument succinctly in an 800-word format. In the following thesis submission, *Small Slaps*,

a collection of 16 personal essays, though aspects of those columnist's tropes weren't entirely dismissed, they took a definite back seat to my new directive of personal expression. *Small Slaps* is my attempt to explore outside the confines of an 800-word opinion column, to find out what would come out of my pen if I opened myself up to personal reflection, intertwined with what was, for me, learning a new literary form; the personal essay. I did not want to be constrained by some common parameters of column writing here: limited word count that does not allow depth, the primary need to inform, to argue, and to be succinct up front to gain the reader's attention; but most importantly, I sought to reverse having to eschew personal reflection and story-telling, often the poor cousins to argument in an opinion column format.

The resulting collection of essays is purposefully diverse, personal, first person and decidedly not academic in focus. Though some reportage pieces are revisited, ranging from interviewing former political prisoners along the Thai-Burmese border, to covering Obama's first nomination for president in 2008; that is where journalism left the page. Originally conceived as issue-driven, (a natural inclination for me), this collection took an unexpected turn into the uncomfortably intimate and occasionally playful, looking at topics ranging from women's body issues, childbirth, the last days with a dying friend, to a lover's made-up, snarky response to a D.H. Lawrence letter and twelve-steps on how to win friends and influence people by writing—yes, a personal essay, among other topics.

The unifying element of these essays is embodied in the 'small slaps' of the title (the phrase also recurs in several essays); those seemingly innocuous moments when there is a "quiet awakening from the mundane into sudden poignancy" (herein, *'It's Just What You Do'*, p.200). These essays represent an action, a word,

a shutter click in time that felt as indelible to memory as a small physical slap. Not necessarily a rebuke, but an awakening, an uncovered life marker that—because of the quiet force of the personal insight it generated—deserved these novice attempts to set it down in writing.

My first draft goals for *Small Slaps* were fairly straightforward:

1.) To study the tools and creative choices used by other writers and incorporate them into my own work where applicable.

2.) More importantly, to unleash a new writing voice of my own, no matter how untried and unruly, even as I was simultaneously assembling these newly learned techniques;

3.) To put what I would define as ‘personal’ firmly in front of the word ‘essay’, the evolving definition of that being an essential part of my own process during this project.

Equally, my aim for *Small Slaps* was to make it purposely process-driven foremost, as opposed to focusing on the resulting first draft product (or so I wanted to believe; it proved difficult not to harshly judge the fledgling results). My definition of ‘success’ became: have I tried new techniques, new writing styles, been playful, non-directive, explored untried subject matter (for me), been open to making the work more personal? It was important to allow myself the freedom of unrestricted subject, tone, language (the freedom to swear was so welcome), and structure (or lack thereof) in this submission of the first draft. The key phrase here is ‘first draft’. At this stage, this is not a book and will likely look very different by the time I seek publication, with new essay entries and others deleted. (The next stage of this work will be discussed further in the conclusion section of this exegesis).

The target of this exegesis study, ‘Painting Myself for Others’, has been to examine the process of how best to open up to this new personal exploration into an unfamiliar genre and reflect on the result. I also sought to answer: what is the most personally effective way to accomplish this new exploration? How has this study informed my writing process as I explored it over the year? What functioned well as an encouraging catalyst versus what was detrimental to my writing? How did this self-directed teaching impact on the end result?

This exegesis study will reflect upon the trajectory of my process; starting from my first attempts to learn the depth and elusive definition of the genre, understanding my role in personal exploration, embracing or shedding a linear or singular narrative structure, consciously putting away my previous journalistic practice of informing the reader, addressing the question of the personal as universal, choosing what to reveal versus what to conceal, ignoring or exploring different mentor voices and finally, a partial overview of how I see this work evolving before seeking publication as a collection.

I began the process of exploring the personal essay with what I naively thought would be the easiest task, defining it.

II. The Indefinable Beast: The Amorphous Definition of the Personal Essay

Pursuing the amorphous the definition of the personal essay became both frustratingly elusive, yet gratefully, ultimately freeing. Graham Good defined the essay as “knowledge of the moment, not more. The moment is one of insight, where self and object reciprocally clarify and define each other” (Good, 1988, p. 8). Good

further refined his definition, further stipulating that “thoughts in the essay are often made through things, rather than being linked directly in a continuous argument...a provisional reflection of an ephemeral experience” (p. 7). But from my first readings, my preconceptions that the form contained these kind of very specific parameters were quickly dispelled. For example, I suddenly learned there didn’t have to be a collection of cited voices within my own, personal narrative could drive a piece solely (or not), even the form itself may not look like what I perceived as standard prose; it can look and sound like a rap performance (Braithwaite, 1970/2009, pp. 599-646), it can scan like a poem (Beckett, 1976/2009, pp. 663-666), or it can be as simple as a list (Foster Wallace, 2012, pp. 261-280).

Those rules started to collapse the moment I began chronologically with Ziusudra of Sumer, arguably the first practitioner of the form, who offers an essay as a list, a format I had never considered. Stylistically, his approach was simple. In ‘The List of Ziusudra’ (Ziusudra, c. 2700 B.C.E./2009), Ziusudra uses an uncomplicated, near bullet-point approach in simple declarative sentences. He wonderfully counsels, “Neither should you buy your prostitutes from the street, for they are the kind that will usually bite” (p. 7). How was I supposed to reconcile that bare simplicity to the more florid prose of Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) and Charles Lamb’s *Essays of Elia* (1823/1935), to more modern incarnations, like Samuel Beckett’s elaborate comma-a-thon, in ‘Afar A Bird’ (Beckett, 1976/2009, pp. 663-666), an intricately crafted, tonally-complex piece consisting entirely of clauses, with no full stops even at its end, or the poetic lyricism of the Mexican-American confluence of Richard Rodriguez’ (1982) *Hunger for Memory*? It wasn’t just stylistic differences reflective of their era that broadened my definition of the form. It was the huge chasm of different voices,

topics, ideas, and even form that surprised me. For example, despite the 100-year stylistic chasm between Virginia Woolf extolling *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf, 1929), I soon realized I had to throw the nasal deadpan of David Sedaris extolling human taxidermy in a Christmas present hunt for his lover in *Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls* (Sedaris, 2013) into the same genre category as John D'Agata literally arguing on the margins of the page with his proof-reader in *Lifespan of a Fact* (D'Agata, 2012), all as part of the same literary genre.

The more I read, the more the parameters of the form seemed to expand, not contract. The lines between a prose poem, creative non-fiction, memoir and the personal essay often seemed comfortable remaining blurry, as seen in the cadence of poetry in Peter Handke's 'Suggestions for Running Amok' (D'Agata, 1971/2009) or Kamau Brathwaite's 'performative essay' 'Trench Town Rock' (D'Agata, 1994/2009) which uses varying sizes of text, boldness and font to add to the author's raised voice/shout, as if the reader can hear the spoken word performance on the page. I made a modest attempt to copy Brathwaite's varying use of text size to crank up the volume in 'Listen Up' (herein, p. 121).

Most interesting to me, the lines between journalism and the personal essay were sometimes completely erased with simple re-branding, as in the case of Pete Dexter's wry newspaper columns being reclaimed in a book now sold as 'personal essays' in *Paper Trails*, (Dexter, 2007), or Joan Didion's 1960-70's magazine work, originally birthed as 'feature articles' that have now become hallmarks of the personal essay genre in *We tell ourselves stories in order to live* (Didion, 2006). Indeed, often the journalism tradition that encompasses the tropes of columnists, reporters and feature writers, is clearly embedded in their work as 'essayists'. I could still feel the reportage sitting behind George Orwell's 'A Hanging' (Orwell,

1931), or watch the columnist's intellectual argument unfold in Christopher Hitchen's reflective *Mortality* (Hitchens, 2012).

The one commonality that seemed to unite these disparate examples: even their most fervent proponents disagree about how to define the parameters of the form. Gratefully, that became my get-out-of-jail-free-card. It gave me license to write without the false confines of the easy genre box I sought to drop myself into initially.

It seemed fitting that the word 'essay' comes from the French infinitive *essayer*, "to try" or "to attempt" (Williams, 2012), as attempts to define the genre have been filled with conflicting 'tries' as the form continues to evolve. The word 'essay' was coined in the late 1500s from the work of the Western father of the essay, Frenchman Michel De Montaigne, from his seminal volume *Essais* (Montaigne, 1580). Montaigne's stated aim, to simply let his mind go freely its own way (as cited by Klaus, 2010, p. 8), has given way to others who viewed his embrace of the form with far more gravitas. Virginia Woolf would see Montaigne's seemingly unrestrained mastery of the genre as no less than an attempt to "communicate a soul" (Woolf, 2014, para.13). Woolf's assessment makes a stark contrast with Carl Klaus' humbler, modern day take of the form's inhabitants. He sees the genre as more akin to "the literature of inferiority" (as cited by Klaus, 2010, p. 20). More charitably, Klaus does give a more workable definition of the personal essay as, "The story of thought. The drama of mind in action. Thought and process united in a single text" (Klaus, 2010, p. 20). But it is Harold Brodkey's assessment that may speak for many of my fellow novices as, "this fucking intimacy" (Brodkey, 1996, p. 32) that rang true in my first shy forays into the personal nature of the genre.

Indeed, in several essays, I stopped to question whether I was writing memoir. In ‘Wonder and Crap’ (herein, p. 133), a piece about the last week I spent with a dying friend, the essay seemed to mirror what Emily Fox Gordon calls memoir’s ‘redemptive quality’ (Lopate, 2013, p. 3), particularly as I chose to end the piece with what I saw as a small, life-affirming exchange with my son to contrast the weight of loss. But did the parameters of my piece qualify with what Fox Gordon calls the memoirist’s temptation “to grandiose self-representation”? Or was the piece an essay, with what she calls “its essential modesty, [that] discourages the impulse” (Lopate, 2013, p. 3)? I will have to rely on the reader’s judgment; but gratefully, Fox Gordon’s further criteria of the essay form, the act of ‘thinking against oneself’, did seem to apply to my approach with ‘Wonder and Crap’, a work comprised of small pieces that attempt to make a larger whole:

The erratic zigzag of essayistic thinking—what has been called thinking against oneself—makes the essay proof against the triumphalism of memoir by slowing the gathering of narrative momentum. The essayist transects the past, slicing through it first from one angle, then from another, until—though it can never be captured—some fugitive truth has been definitively cornered. (Lopate, 2013, p. 3)

These ‘fugitive truth[s]’ are not always ‘cornered’ for some groundbreaking writers who are pushing the boundaries of the form further still, consciously blurring the lines of personal truth (and hence, the label of ‘non-fiction’) in service to their art. Notable is Lauren Slater’s punishing tale of mental illness, *Lying: A*

Metaphorical Memoir (Slater, 2000), a memoir that the author confesses is only half true. Its first chapter is made up of only two words; “I exaggerate.” Another is John D’Agata’s *Lifespan of a Fact* (2012), another partly truthful, yet consciously false examination of a seven-year (or not!) battle between a writer and his fact checker. Indeed, the genre seems to be pushing new boundaries past its non-fiction roots, boldly obscuring truth altogether in subjection to these new forms of personal expression.

Fictional license had never been allowed to be part of my journalistic arsenal. My meek forays into its license here were tiny indeed. Though I now understood I could choose it, I did so only in small, measured attempts. When I adapted my essay, ‘The Man Who Couldn’t Get Angry’ (herein, p. 70) from one of my old columns, I couldn’t divorce myself from using actual quotes recorded at the time. The only fictional license I gave was to my own words, reproduced from memory now. Or, in my essay ‘Pooped’ (herein, p. 213), when reconstructing dialogue with a pregnant friend, Amy, that took place almost twenty years ago, I still felt reliant on my hard-nosed journalistic definitions of a quotation needing to be accurately stated from the moment. I only felt comfortable fictionalising dialogue with Amy’s consent. Interestingly, I realised only in hindsight after writing the piece, I had conflated the memory of our conversation with the birth of Amy’s second child instead of her first. It was a strong reminder of the unreliability of memory and the subjective nature of ‘true’ non-fiction. This newer process of purposely letting go of ‘truth’, as some of the more controversial personal essayists are now testing, still felt too advanced (and uncomfortable to my journalistic tradition) for my novice first attempts.

Indeed, this simple act of trying to define the genre, ended up debunking what I thought was its essential building block, the commitment to self-revelation and personal voice. While Wendell V. Harris may find consensus from many on the personal essay as “strongly suggest[ing] an authorial personality or character, or more accurately, an undeniable persona” Harris may find less agreement on his idea that the genre “does not necessarily mean the public display of one’s innermost self” (Harris, 1996, p. 943). Compare Harris’ ideas on personal revelation to Edward Hoagland’s stark contrast, which sees, “the work of an essayist is, precisely, to pour his heart out” (Hoagland, 1992, p. 309). Somewhere in between is essayist E. B. White’s typically charming, nuanced view. In a letter to his biographer that particularly rang true to my new commitment to transcending the newspaper column, White describes the essayist as someone “who must take his trousers off without showing his genitals” (as cited by Klaus, 2010, p. 124.) Indeed, this inherent tension between revelation and overexposure would become a central question in my own work.

Balancing this new, difficult algorithm between the personal versus the public, the revealed versus the unstated, firsthand experience versus secondary information, organic feeling versus processed intellect, spontaneous discovery versus analysis, the literary versus the informational; all would become the hallmarks of my own pursuit of the elusive definition of the personal essay.

It was Virginia Woolf, in ‘The Modern Essay’ (Woolf, 1925/1966), who may have ultimately given me the most universally workable definition of the form across any era that I chose to embrace as my guide:

The principle which controls [the essay] is simply that it should give us pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end (p. 41).

III. **Unscrambling the Swearwords of ‘Personal Exploration’**

David Foster Wallace, a man who didn’t have one speck of grey in his Technicolor toolkit, described writing in a way that nailed my ugly, new process perfectly; Foster Wallace described a writer’s work-in-progress as following him around like a hideously damaged infant, drooling, defective, hydrocephalic and flipper armed (Foster Wallace, 2012, p. 193).

It was fine when I wrote and compared my columnist self to my essayist self. But when I read the stellar practitioners of the form and started to dissect their mastery, I wanted no part of my flabby technique back. I didn’t become a mimic so much as a selective stealer. There was the seamless narrative propulsion of James Baldwin’s *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* (2010), or Ann Patchett’s *This is the Story of a Happy Marriage* (2013), or James Thurber’s *The Secret Life of James Thurber* (Lopate, 1943/1994) that implored me to put more narrative structure into ‘Wonder and Crap’ (herein, p. 133) and ‘My Body in a Blender’ (herein, p. 47); There was the crazy brazenness of George Saunders’ listicles (my word, not his) in *The Braindead Megaphone* (Saunders, 2007), along with Francis Bacon’s ‘for’ and ‘against’ ‘Antitheses of Things’ (Bacon, 1623/2009) that made me curious to try a simple list format in two of my essays, ‘History’

(herein, p. 125) and ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People with the Personal Essay’ (herein, p. 40). There was even a single F. Scott Fitzgerald paragraph describing a woman holding a pitcher of fruit lemonade crossing a lawn, walking across a hundred years of history that took my breath away in ‘The Scandal Detectives’ (Fitzgerald, 1928, para. 2) that prompted me to steal Fitzgerald’s idea in its simplest, very modest form in a closing paragraph of my essay ‘Pooped’ (herein, p. 213), as I tried to assemble the small moments that may make up the arch of my daughter’s life.

The deeper I read, each writer stirred in me the ambition to write something better than my last pebble of a piece, a Sisyphean task. Reading became a two-edged sword. I wanted to feel the sharpness of other’s mastery, but found I could only lift a butter knife and that often fostered self-defeat. Indeed, Joan Didion, a personal favourite, and undoubtedly a mind-reader, told a *Paris Review* interviewer:

I start a book and I want to make it perfect, want it to turn every color, want it to *be the world*. Ten pages in, I’ve already blown it, limited it, made it less, marred it. That’s very discouraging. I hate the book at that point. After a while I arrive at an accommodation: well, it’s not the ideal, it’s not the perfect object I wanted to make, but maybe—if I go ahead and finish it anyway—I can get it right next time. Maybe I can have another chance. (Didion, 1998, p. 411)

Once I established that the personal essay doesn’t have an easily containable box to set myself inside; ironically, I still wanted the comfort of simple boxed

parameters. There was no way I was going to let myself outside my self-constructed idea of what a personal essay ‘should’ be (personal, roughly sequential narrative, first person) until I’d at least tried to practice its simplest forms first. That meant that though understandable in a novice, in hindsight, my creative choices in *Small Slaps* were particularly conservative by my own assessment. That translated into choosing subject choices I saw as broader, big picture experiences with more universal reader appeal, covering issues like childbirth (‘Pooped’, herein, p. 213), death (‘Stop the Clocks, Phone, Dog Bone, Yada Yada Yada’, herein, p. 182), or body issues (‘Body Geography: A Requited Love Story’, herein, p. 62). I left it to the modern masters in the field to tackle the minutia of specific topics; yet, even they didn’t always win my interest, no matter how revered the work. Joan Didion writing of her migraine in ‘In Bed’ gave me a headache, and not in an enjoyably literary way (Didion, 1968). David Foster Wallace’s celebrated relay of every volley of a tennis match in “Federer Both Flesh and Not” (Foster Wallace, 2012, pp. 5-36), left me love-love (sorry). I couldn’t divorce appreciation of their technique with honest boredom from subject matter that didn’t stir me.

This newbie conservatism applied to structure, and to a lesser extent, to voice as well, (the exception being my experiment with ‘Horny Literati’, a piece written as if I was the virginal girlfriend of young D. H. Lawrence) (herein, p. 205). Unfortunately, the more sophisticated the narrative structure I discovered, counter intuitively, it sent me running back to simplicity’s safety. I felt structurally adrift in the writings of the much-admired Edward Hoagland from *Balancing Acts* (1992). While I appreciated the vividness of his roaming associations, I often felt terminally stuck in the middle of a giant run-on sentence that looped in on itself, essay-sized. Just when I would grab onto a one-paragraph narrative, he was off to four others

before mid-page, like a dozen journalistic hooks, with no sinker. I was surprised by how married I was to traditional ideas of narrative. If this was dissociative thinking in action, it simply disassociated me from the text. Instead, I reverted to the safety of single or dual-thread narratives that were easily delineated in asterisk-divided sections, as in ‘Ich Bin Ein American’ (herein, p. 156) and ‘Wonder and Crap’ (herein, p. 133).

(Note: I did experiment with a piece I called ‘Invisible’, a disaster not included here. I took a series of unconnected individual narratives as examples of people’s lives becoming invisible, i.e. a runaway slave woman who had to live for years in the coffin-sized crawl space in the attic of her own home, unheard black striking garbage workers in the Martin Luther King era, to a middle aged male friend who mourned that women never look back at him in the street, among other vignettes. I purposely offered no connection between the sections. The only signal that united the narratives was the single word of the title, ‘Invisible’. Unfortunately, my disconnection between the stories left the reader emotionally uninvolved and simply confused about the abrupt change in narrative. It was a junker I may revisit when I’ve moved past my novice status.)

Parting from my love affair with issue journalism was perhaps the biggest surprise in the resulting essays of *Small Slaps*. Though my columnist’s instinct to teach, or preach, or inform, remains intact here somewhat. While *Small Slaps* wasn’t a complete divorce, I consciously tried to reject journalism’s familiar modus operandi, information transfer. Ultimately, I felt that by discarding that impulse, I cleared the way for untried techniques. It was indeed surprising how much I’d never tried—the most basic literary tools; describing a scene, even openly expressing emotion, creating a narrative (any narrative!), the list is long. Though these first

attempts at personal exploration were decidedly characterized by conservatism in my experimentation, I hope to outgrow that conformity with more experience in the genre.

IV. Process: A Whole Lot of Light and No Windows

Eschewing Process Writings

Initially, I attempted to dip into artistic process writings. My first foray was deeply unsatisfying. Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* (1992) offered me *Godspell*-laced lists with entreaties like, "We are, ourselves, creations. And we, in turn, are meant to continue creativity by being creative ourselves" (Cameron, 1992, p. 3). I stymied my initial instinct to throw myself into a lava-filled volcano and instead renewed my commitment to learn from master practitioners directly in the genre instead. Even though Malcolm Cowley's four stages of writing (ideation, incubation, 1st draft and revision) (Cowley, 1958/2014) were more targeted to my task at hand, the insight still felt obvious. William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* (2006), Carl Klaus' and Ned Stuckey-French's *Essayists on the Essay* (2012) and Phillip Lopate's *To Show and To Tell* (2013) did offer more helpful concrete examples; but ultimately, what I found most beneficial was simply reading the form in action. Reading about process didn't inform my process as well as reading masters, experimenters and even duds in the field. That has remained my most effective learning tool by far.

The Instinct for Linearity and Singular Narrative

My first attempts at being playful in ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People with the Personal Essay’ (herein, p. 40), and ‘The Land of the Long Flat White’ (herein, p. 110), may be characterized by what Harvard Psychologist Jerome Bruner calls “the antic” in creativity (Bruner, 2014). They certainly couldn’t have fallen farther from Bruner’s noble humanist goal; unearthing the excellence in man, the creative act “bring[ing] man to a new dignity” (Bruner, 2014). They were unsuccessful messes. My initial faux Montaigne-esque attempt to let my mind go freely its own way in my beginning draft of, ‘Screw You, Sally Field’ (herein, p. 92) was messy, meandering, unkempt and simply hard to read. Though, on second reading, in that mess was a need to find order, reverting to my old instincts to ‘columnise’ or order my thoughts into a linearity that had a clearer narrative thread. If I can share even a small piece of Bruner’s optimism for the creative act, that search for linearity was a search for dignifying the thoughts themselves. Moreover, it was an affirmation that my mess deserved a unifying voice on the page. I wrote in an exegesis log at the time, “Getting there is the struggle, but once birthed, maybe Bruner is onto something, some semblance of dignity for the process, at least, is restored.” In this case, the process earned more self-respect than the end product. Living with that, (until I could approach a new draft), was the challenge.

William Carlos Williams may see my instincts differently. In ‘An Essay on Virginia’ (1925/2010, p. 39), Williams felt that, “unity is the shallowest, the cheapest deception of the composition. In nothing is the banality of the intelligence more clearly manifested.” Instead he encourages essays to deal in “multiplicity,

infinite fracture, the intercrossing of opposed forces establishing any number of opposed centers of stillness” (Klaus, 2010, p. 39). Peter Elbow extolled the dissociative essay’s “cut and paste” without “trying for coherence and connectedness” (Klaus, 2010, p. 40). It raised the question for me, do I fracture further—or revert to initial instincts of uniting my thoughts in its second draft? These were new questions for me, worthy of examination in future pieces too. In ‘Ich Bin Ein American’ (herein, p. 156), I had to talk myself into *not* unifying the narrative of Berlin and the United States (via Auckland), to connect the theme of reinvention in both settings. I began to see how hard it was going to be to let the ball off its tether.

Putting Away the Need to Inform

There was another old journalistic interior voice to quell also, one that has probably been my most difficult reflex to quiet. It is what essayist Lee Gutkind calls “the information transfer” or “teaching element” (Gutkind, 2012, p. 94). A narrative requires a ‘purpose’, intones my interior columnist (translation: holding an issue up to the light). Instinctually, I wanted to dismiss writing about impressions, thoughts, joys, straight humor—the intellectual equivalent of a lettuce sandwich, at least to this devoted carnivore. ‘Meat’ meant adding the ‘substance’ of social and political issues. My most satisfying commentary work has been to argue, to teach, to expose an idea. Straight personal narrative, so celebrated in the personal essay, felt too ego-driven, too self-indulgent in my first attempts. If I am honest, it still does (‘Pooped’, herein, p. 213; ‘My Body in a Blender’, herein, p. 47; ‘Wonder and Crap’, herein,

p. 133). I was hard pressed to arrive at Hazlitt's respect for the 'familiar essay' (Hazlitt, 1822/2014), or for his modern counterpart's embrace of it from practitioner Joseph Epstein in his 1987 'Familiar Essays' (Epstein, 1987). It was not the conversational that I eschewed, it was having what I saw as a more nebulous purpose; God forbid, a stab at artfulness for the act alone. It is no wonder that in the first months of the course, the 'new journalism' of Gay Talese's 'Frank Sinatra Has a Cold' (1966/2007) or Tom Wolfe's *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965) seemed initially, at least, like a better personal fit; literary techniques applied to journalistic facts and perspective that, when assembled with skill, could produce a larger truth.

But no matter how personally comfortable I found this literary hybrid of 'New Journalism', I did consciously push against it to try to break my mold ('A Writer's Lament', herein, p. 46; or 'Horny Literati', herein, p. 205). Almost without exception, for each piece written here, I have always instinctually wanted to include other's words and works as broader teaching, but ultimately purposely rejected it (for now). Admittedly, perhaps it is an attempt to shore up intellectual shyness, giving me more mana, as in, "Look, if you don't believe me, trust him/her/them—their more eloquent, bigger voices." But mostly, I tried to deny their chorus, in the hope that it would more cleanly develop my own essayist voice alone first. I was surprised that by the end of the course, I had progressively less interest in 'issue' oriented pieces and was far more curious to try to 'play' with the form more in future. A healthy sign, I hope.

Wrestling with the Personal as Universal

This conundrum of honoring or ignoring my instincts for ‘information transfer’ (Gutkind, 2012, p. 94) featured prominently in my piece, “My Body in a Blender” (herein, p. 47), an essay on the narratives of sexual harassment and abuse that all women experience, as told from my own personal encounters. In this piece, I particularly wrestled with the authorial “universal/particular” (Good, 1988, p. 8). I had honest hesitations around questions such as: Why my fairly tame story? Should I pull in well-known, more extreme cases? What makes my experience worthy of the reader’s attention, especially since every woman has encountered this in some form? (Notably, my hesitant ego didn’t seem to buy into, *because* every woman has encountered this in some form.) If the force of my narrative didn’t cut it, maybe the depth of multiple perspectives would, I assumed, with my journalist’s hat in place.

I deferred to Graham Good’s perspective that, “ultimately, the essayist’s authority is not his learning, but his experience....Instead of imposing a discursive order on experience, the essay lets its discourse take the shape of experience.” (Good, 1988, p. 7) I chose to believe that translates into an affirmation of my particular experience as universally knowable, with the parallel entreaty that my reader will engage in, as Cynthia Ozick says, “a stroll through someone’s mazy mind” (Ozick, 1998, para. 13).

The Simplest New Tools and Simple Results

What were these initial new tools in these beginning efforts? Even the simplest technique of loosely stitching multiple narrative threads together with

asterisks, with no overt explanation to the reader, was a modest start, lifted from Siobhan Harvey's 'The Sandals Song' (Harvey, 2012, pp. 145-158). Or, for example, the importance of keeping 'hot' moments 'cool', as demonstrated by reading Raymond Carver's *Short Cuts* (1993), influenced my description of sexual molestation in 'My Body in a Blender' (herein, p. 47). If I kept my initial narrative clean, clear, with the circumstance of the moment adding the additional 'heat', I could then choose to get downright histrionic in the argument surrounding the abuse scene, (though a choice not taken). It was a modest start. Inspired by Annie Dillard's 'Notes for Young Writers' (Dillard, 2005, pp. XI-XVII), I assembled a 'learning list' of personal instructions that grew long. I filled it with incredibly simple points, obvious to experienced practitioners in the form, but still new to me, providing important finger-wagging reminders. An excerpt:

1. Understand the malleability of the idea of personal truth and choose how I want to play with, ignore or examine that within a piece.
2. Understand that though I could still use my voice with purpose, I could approach the page simply as play (yes, a fairly radical notion for me).
3. A personal recognition: I cannot abandon purpose altogether, no matter how slight.
4. 'Show don't tell' is an arbitrary and wholly overworked concept that can be embraced and ignored as needed. A reminder: the personal essay form has license to embrace the straight expository too. It can stand side by side with literary technique and doesn't have to be subverted by it.
5. If I think I am being bold, I suddenly find dozens of masters in the form far bolder. Upshot: Let go, way more.

6. Ordering narratives in time works. The reader wants to be pulled along linearly, usually their default setting.
7. Disordering narratives in time works. Unless it doesn't.

This excerpt of starter missives made David Foster Wallace's vivid warnings in 'Fictional Future and the Conspicuously Young' (Foster Wallace, 1988) feel prescient. I was the new medical student sure she has contracted *every* disease. Foster Wallace outlined:

Workshop Hermeticism: fiction for which the highest praise involved the word "competent", "finished", "problem-free", fiction over which Writing Program pre-and proscriptions loom with the enclosing force of horizon: no character without Freudian trauma in accessible past...no overture without a dramatized scene to "show" what's "told"; no denouement prior to an epiphany... (Foster Wallace, 1988, p. 2)

His words were an important reminder that becoming a 'good student' of the form was not the end goal here; new, uninhibited expression was the prize I sought instead.

What to Reveal Versus What to Conceal

I found other new demons to wrestle when I attempted to write a piece on a friend's death, 'Wonder and Crap' (herein, p. 133). Here came not only the recurring questions of ego, 'who hasn't experienced a death that is more poignant?' and 'how I can inject larger universality into personal circumstance', but now also came the much written about unreliable narrator with nagging questions on unreliable memory and 'what is personal truth'? I wanted, above all, to honor the memory of my friend, to write with Ralph Waldo Emerson's entreaty to be able to "cut these words and they would bleed" (Emerson, 1850/2012, p. 24). I originally conceived of that piece as a three-part narrative of one week from the perspective of each of my friend's caregivers (plus myself) during the last week I saw him alive. It took me some time to come to terms with understanding the piece needed to be only from my perspective, that I needed to firmly ground personal feelings into the work, something I am unaccustomed to doing in issue journalism.

In other essays, I chose humour as a welcome distancer from emotion, a kind of rebalancing, i.e. 'How to Win Friends and Influence People in the Personal Essay' (herein, p. 40) or 'The Land of the Long Flat White' (herein, p. 110). This was not only a conscious choice providing relief for the reader, but for myself too. I found I tended to write lighter pieces alternately with more serious pieces, setting up a reveal/relief duality, one assuaging the other.

For me, this addressed the heart of the personal essayist's central tension: What to reveal versus what to conceal? That question, coupled with the rack-focus nature of writing; pulling some scenes up close, while simultaneously allowing others to blur into oblivion, became one of the most interesting questions I addressed as a new essayist. Paul Lisicky addressed this well in 'The Weedy Garden' (2008), as he came to understand why a friend's memoir left out the deaths

of each of his brothers who died before their time, facts he felt were seminal to his friend's life:

And in a little while, I take in what it [this conscious omission] teaches me: that a speaker is a construction, a representative self, with definite borders; that foregrounding one incident over another makes a meaning all its own. And most important, that a narrative might need to elide, or keep something essential at bay, if it's to shudder with mystery. Fiction, nonfiction: who says they're such different animals? One story, not the whole story. (Lisicky, 2008, p. 4)

Lisicky's reminder of my writing voice as a 'representative self' was comforting. Learning how to strike that difficult balance between intimacy with a reader and choosing what can sit comfortably on the public stage wasn't easy. As David Shields adds in *TRUTH in nonfiction*:

Even when personal essayists don't flaunt their power to mislead us...we still expect essays to deliver that same Elian tension between the personal and the truly private and to tell stories that are digressive and inconclusive. Most of all, we expect personal essayists to speak to us from behind a stylized version of themselves, rather than give us the whole man—as Montaigne or Lamb's favorite devotional writers seem to do. (Shields, 2008, p. 85)

The words of Lisicky and Shields were incredibly encouraging to my

shyness of exposure, on many levels. Their declarations reassured me I have no arbitrary shield. I have the power to address how to “take off my pants and still not expose my genitals”, as E.B. White says (as cited by Klaus, 2010, p. 124). Ironically for a newspaper columnist like myself, White’s underlying assumption was that I am comfortable enough to walk onto the public stage in my underwear in the first place. That was the rub, when I removed the ‘safety’ of familiar issue-oriented journalism.

Indeed, my shyness to engage in deeper personal reflection may be one of the greatest deficits of *Small Slaps* in this first draft. But I also recognise I need to learn how to build the platform first, before I test its strength in heavier winds. I also see that though the persona of Elia is not Charles Lamb in *Essays of Elia* (Lamb, 1823/1935), paradoxically, in every way he is. That exposure is a precious commodity; one I still assiduously gate-keep. While Virginia Wolfe extols in *The Moment and Other Essays*, “If you do not tell the truth about yourself you cannot tell it about other people” in one breath (Woolf, 1948, p. 121), we know in hindsight, she assiduously kept her writing personae separate from her most intimate personal truths secreted away until her last breath. I disagree with Virginia Woolf’s view in ‘The Decay of Essay Writing’ that the essay “owes its popularity to the fact that its proper use is to express one’s personal peculiarities, so that under the decent veil of print one can indulge one’s egoism to the full” (Woolf, 1905, p. 2). Her assessment is the antithesis of what I hope for in my involvement in this genre. My motivation remains ‘purposeful writing’ in a new creative format; defining the heft and weight and shape of that purpose becomes a life’s toil.

Reverting to Your Own Voice

There was an important point in this process of finding my footing where I had to separate myself from the hallowed mentors beckoning from the bedside table and the twelfth floor seminar room. I would read Gore Vidal's 'Some Memories of the Glorious Bird and an Earlier Self' (Vidal, 1976/1994) or Nora Ephron's *Wallflower at an Orgy* (2007) and find my keyboard typing mildly nutty dry witticisms unannounced. I would haul myself back to Charles Lamb and suddenly manufacture sentences with seventeen clauses, mysteriously laced with, "it struck me not a little" (Lamb, 1823/1935, p. 365). It was gratifying to see the timelessness of the parrot conundrum that even Michel Montaigne had to address, "When I write, I prefer to do without the company and remembrance of books, for fear they may interfere with my style. Also because, in truth, the good authors humble and dishearten me too much." (Klaus, 2010, p. 9) Despite my yearlong effort to collect and study their esteemed chorus, ultimately for second drafts, it was tools down for me, too. I had to bury their voices to make sure mine could still be heard (indeed, Michel Montaigne and I are practically twins now.)

What has become so compelling (and entirely new for me) is that I am beginning to see the experiences I want to record with new eyes, with what Cynthia Ozick calls, 'the hum of perpetual noticing' (Ozick, 1998). Ozick's extension of that, 'to find a way to get others to hear' has become this essayist's daunting, but seductive new conceit.

V. Conclusion

First and foremost, the work of creating *Small Slaps* has been an exercise in finding a new writing muscle. If I haven't been able to lift much weight yet, I absolve the scrawniness of a beginner. I have no intention for this work to be published as you see it here. It was written as an exercise, a self-teaching, not with specific market intentions. That may explain why there is little balance between American subject matter and the dearth of New Zealand topics, for example, if I was going to target a New Zealand publisher. (I have written extensively on New Zealand as a columnist and, in hindsight, must have needed to express my tempestuous relationship with my Americanism herein instead.) It also means the reader of the work may feel the lack of a New Zealand face to my experience, as it stands. I have allowed myself the freedom to ignore these kinds of considerations in this first incarnation and am grateful for it. These imbalances can be corrected or changed in subsequent drafts. That is also true with the ordering of the pieces. It was done as an exercise here, knowing that subsequent new entries and deletions will change the complexion of the whole.

I am realistic in understanding I am far more likely to get an audience for this work if I send off individual pieces for publication first. My intention is to get individual essays to a publishable level, then send them out separately within New Zealand and to overseas periodical markets. I hope to retain rights after first publication for their eventual return someday, to be reassembled into what will look like a very different book by then, I suspect. This trajectory is similar to many, if not most, essay collections, even from established marketable writers, for example, recently Ann Patchett's *The Story of A Happy Marriage* (2013), a rare bestseller of the form.

In summary, the act of attempting to define the genre opened up my preconceptions and was ultimately freeing in helping me to understand: ‘thinking against oneself’ and new, expanding ideas of what the next incarnation of the genre may look like, even where it blurred the form’s non-fictive foundation making ‘truth’ controversially become more elastic. My personal exploration flourished best when reading practitioners of the form, instead of writings on process, though their mastery was often a humbling, double-edged sword I had to put down to allow my voice some clarity. My beginning steps in narrative structure, voice and form were decidedly conservative, even simplified, as a reaction to their sophistication, but I see progress in my choice of mostly eschewing journalism’s tenet of information transfer. As the year has gone on, I have become marginally more comfortable with initial hesitations, such as re-defining my writing persona, grappling with how to comfortably reveal the personal, welcoming the creative mess and the resulting dignifying need to order it, affirming the universal of personal stories, and a fresh interest in perpetuating ‘the hum of perpetual noticing’ (Ozick, 1998, para. 19). I am still steadfastly enamored with what I naively call ‘purposeful writing’ (that penchant to hold up an ‘issue’ to the light), perhaps as supplication to a shy ego, or perhaps appealing to my unrealised teacher, one who does have ample enough ego to be compelled to express the small slaps of personal insight I have tried to assemble in this collection.

It has been a compelling introduction to a new genre. To quote my new twin Michel Montaigne (as cited by Klaus, 2010, p. 7), I can now see how in the act of “painting myself for others, I have painted my inward self with colours clearer than my original ones”—in itself, a noble, deadly addictive pursuit indeed.

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Abstract/Synopsis

***Small Slaps* by Tracey Barnett**



Painting by Andrea Borsuk

If the art of the personal essay is to birth the inner workings of one's brain, be warned; this writer has just birthed a litter of teething puppies—and worryingly, a good half of them are unruly bitches.

As a columnist and journalist, the initial idea for this project was to personalize and deepen old journalism stories and issues from fairly constrained 800-word opinion columns I'd written in the past. Instead, let me introduce the mangy litter that has no resemblance to its parent whatsoever, *Small Slaps*, a work of sixteen personal essays.

The resulting collection is purposefully diverse, personal, first person and decidedly not academic in focus. Though some reportage pieces are revisited, ranging from interviewing former political prisoners along the Thai-Burmese border, to covering Obama's first nomination for president in 2008; that is where journalism left the page. This collection took an unexpected turn into the uncomfortably intimate and occasionally playful, looking at topics ranging from women's body issues, childbirth, the last days with a dying friend, to a lover's

made-up, snarky response to a D.H. Lawrence letter and twelve-steps on how to win friends and influence people by writing—yes, a personal essay, among other topics.

Attestation of Authorship

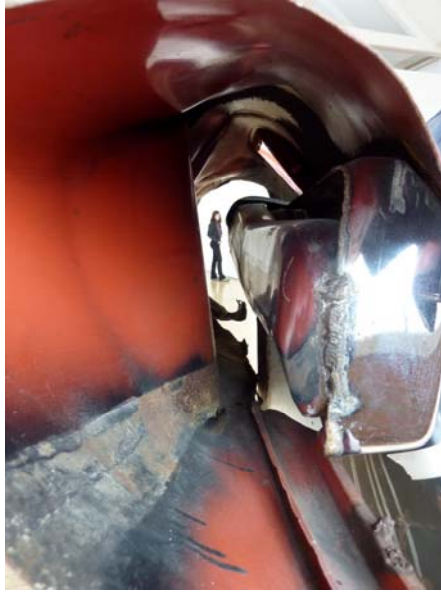


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Tracey Barnett, June 2015