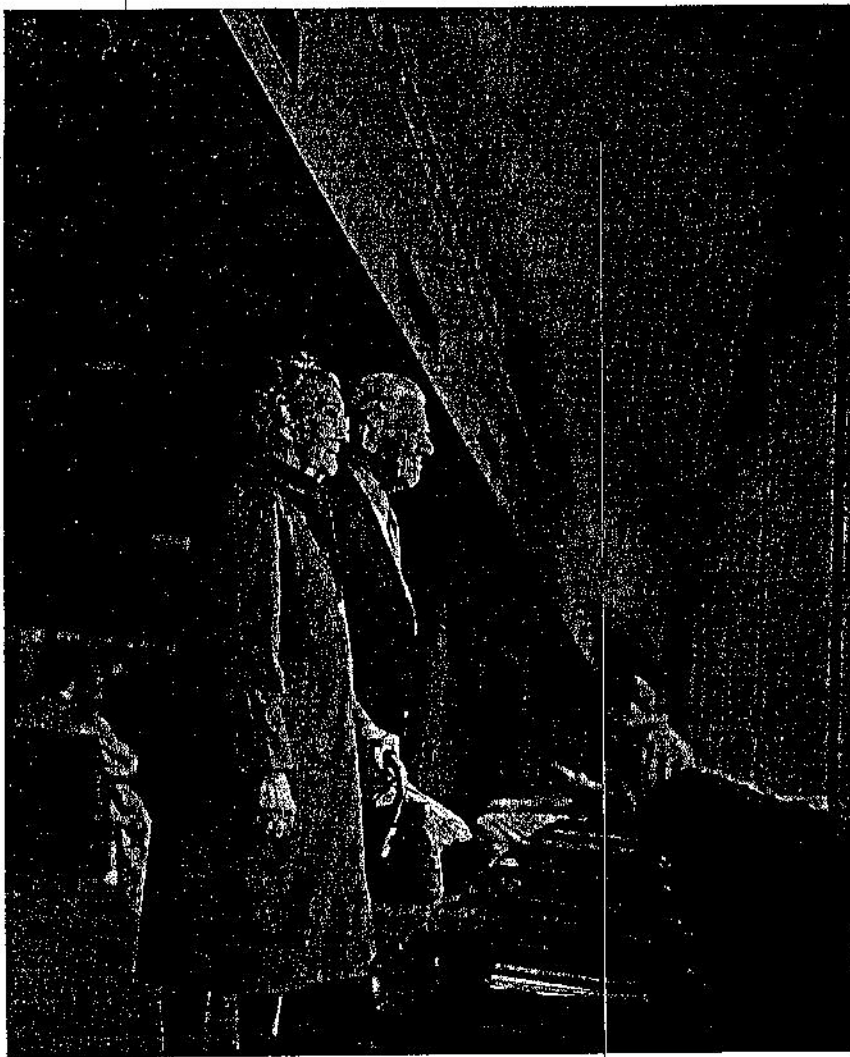


JANET BORROWAY
IMAGINATIVE WRITING
PENGUIN, 2003



Warm-up

Are these people traveling, seeing someone off, or waiting for a traveler? Who is arriving or departing? What is the occasion? Holiday? Duty? Tragedy? Is the couple united or in conflict? Decide and write.

CHAPTER FIFTE

STORY

Act I, get your guy up a tree.

Act II, throw rocks at him.

Act III, get your guy outta the tree.

Julius Epstein

Story as a Journey

The late great novelist and teacher John Carduer used to say that there are only two stories: *someone went on a journey* and *a stranger came to town*. I once ran into a poet at the Yaddo writers' colony who reduced the formula still further. "You fiction writers," he said. "Everything you write is the same: two worlds collide; a love story."

You could do worse, for a definition of a story—for when worlds (cultures, generations, genders, hoods) encounter each other there is bound to be conflict, and when human beings make connection, some form of love occurs.

In Chapter 3, I said that that a character is someone capable of change. Story is the process of that change. The change may be from alive to dead, from ugly to beautiful, from ignorant to wise, callous to compassionate, from certain to uncertain or vice versa. But the change occurs because the character confronts a situation that will challenge her/his assumptions and somehow shake up the easy beliefs—hence the prevalence, in such a formulation, of strangers, journeys, and worlds. I like the metaphor of the two worlds, too, because it suggests both the importance of setting and the necessity of discovery. The new world that the character discovers may be the house next door, it may be a different set of assumptions or the next stage of life (puberty is a foreign country, marriage is an undiscovered planet)—but the story will always end in an altered state in at

runch is countered by the awesome strangeness of the adventure. Two worlds collide, in fact.

In the conflict-crisis-resolution model, story is seen as a power struggle between two nearly equal forces, a **protagonist** or central character and an **antagonist**, who represents the obstacles to the protagonist's desires and may be another human being or some other force—God, nature, the self, and so forth. If the antagonist is some abstract force, then, like the character's desire, it will also have a very specific manifestation: not "nature" but "seven miles of white water rapids on the lower Colorado;" not "the supernatural" but "a mutant reptile embryo capable of hatching in a human middle ear."

It is crucial that the opposing forces have approximately equal force, so that our uncertainty about the outcome keeps us reading. We begin with a situation in which the power is with the protagonist or the antagonist. Something happens, and the power shifts to the other. Something else, and it shifts back again. Each time the power shifts, the stakes are raised, each battle is bigger, more intense than the last, until (at the crisis moment), one of the two opposing forces manifests its power in a way that the other cannot match.

Here is another short-short story (a lavish 232 words this time), also in a child's voice, in which the conflict-crisis-resolution pattern is intense.

Watching Joey pop the red berries into his mouth like Ju-Ju Bees and Mags only licking them at first, then chewing, so both of their smiles look bloody and I laugh though I don't eat even one . . . then suddenly our moms are all around us (although mine doesn't panic till she looks at the others, then screams along with them things like *God dammit did you eat these?* and shakes me so my "No" sounds like "oh-oh-oh") and then we're being yanked toward the house, me for once not resisting as my mother scoops me into her arms, and inside the moms shove medicine, thick and purple, down our throats in the bathroom; Joey in the toilet, Mags in the sink, me staring at the hair in the tub drain as my mom pushes my head down, and there is red vomit everywhere, splashing on the mirror and powder-blue rugs, everywhere except the tub where mine is coming out yellow, the color of corn muffins from lunch, not a speck of red. *I told you*, I want to scream, and then it is over and I turn to my mother for a touch or a stroke on the head like the other moms (but she has moved to the doorway and lights a cigarette, pushes hair out of her eyes) and there is only her smeared lips saying, *This will teach you anyway*.

"*This Is How I Remember It*," Betsy Kemper

In this classical pattern, the story begins with an **exposition**, or statement of the situation at the beginning of the action, which is typically, as here, a state of unstable equilibrium (*I laugh, though I don't eat even one . . .*). **Conflict** arrives with the mothers, and that conflict undergoes a series of **complications** involving force, blame, mistake, submission, anger, and so forth. The power

struggle between mother and daughter escalates through a change of setting. Details build the contrast between the kinds of *mom* and the kinds of vomit. The **crisis action** occurs as a moment of martyred triumph for the narrator (*I told you*) and then there is a **falling action** or **denouement** in which the mother and daughter retreat to their respective corners and settle back into what (we know by now) is their habit of being. This is the **resolution**. Some questions to consider: Why did the author choose to tell this story in a single sentence? What does the narrator want? Who wins? Is it worth it?

This very short story is very much of the twentieth century, in that the crisis occurs in the mind of the narrator and the "resolution" does not offer a "solution." The completion of the action has changed the characters not by a dramatic reversal, but by moving them deeper into their *impasse*.

Order is a major value that literature offers us, and order implies that the subject has been brought to closure. In life this never quite happens. Even the natural "happy endings," marriage and birth, leave domesticity and childrearing to be dealt with; the natural "tragic endings," separation and death, leave trauma and bereavement in their wake. Literature absolves us of these nuisances. Whether or not the lives of the characters end, the story does, and we are left with a satisfying sense of completion. This is one reason we enjoy crying or feeling terrified or even nauseated by fiction; we know in advance that it's going to be over, and by contrast with the continual struggle of living, all that ends, ends well.

Try This

Write a short story on a postcard. (Write small.) Make sure it has a conflict, a crisis, and a resolution. Send it to a friend in another place (meaning you have published it), or to yourself (when it arrives you will be able to see it fresh).

or:

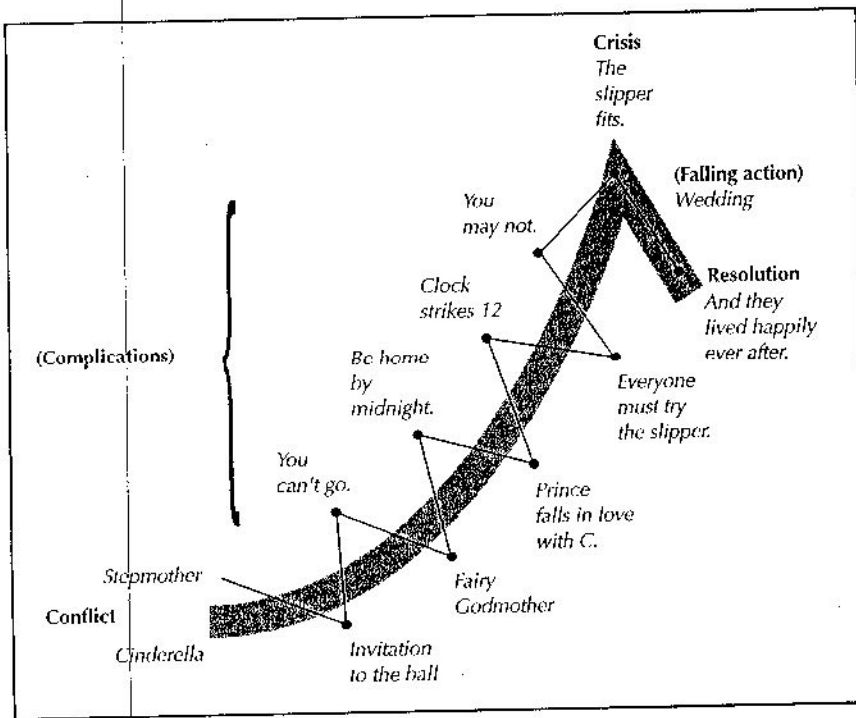
A story, a memoir, or a play: Place two characters in a dangerous setting. Each has half of something that is no good without the other half. Neither wants to give up his/her half. What happens?

Connection is human substance, the substance of story. Its gain and loss provides the emotional power.

Claudia Johnson

Story as Connection and Disconnection

Every story presents some sort of journey, literal or psychological or both, that results in a change in the central character. Every story shows a pattern of con-



At the beginning of the struggle in "Cinderella," the power is very clearly on the Stepmother's side. But the first event of the story is that an invitation arrives from the Prince, which explicitly states that *all* the ladies of the land are invited to a ball. Notice that Cinderella's desire is not to triumph over her Stepmother (though she eventually will, much to our satisfaction); such a desire would diminish her goodness. She simply wants to be relieved of her mistreatment. She wants equality, so that the Prince's invitation, which specifically gives her a right equal to the Stepmother's and Stepdaughters' rights, shifts the power to her.

The Stepmother takes the power back by blunt force: You may not go; you must get us ready to go. Cinderella does so, and the three leave for the ball.

Then what happens? The Fairy Godmother appears. It is very powerful to have magic on your side. The Fairy Godmother offers Cinderella a gown, glass slippers, and a coach with horses and footmen, giving her more force than she has yet had.

But the magic is not all-potent. It has a qualification that portends bad luck. It will last only until midnight (unlike the Stepmother's authority), and Cinderella must leave the ball before the clock strikes twelve or risk exposure and defeat.

What happens next? She goes to the ball and the Prince falls in love with her—and love is an even more powerful weapon than magic in a literary war. In some versions of the tale, the Stepmother and Stepsisters are made to marvel at the beauty of the princess they don't recognize, pointing to the irony of Cinderella's new power.

And then? The magic quits. The clock strikes twelve, and Cinderella runs down the steps in her rags to her rats and pumpkin, losing a slipper, bereft of her power in every way.

But after that, the Prince sends out a messenger with the glass slipper and a dictum (a dramatic repetition of the original invitation in which all ladies were invited to the ball) that every female in the land is to try on the slipper. Cinderella is given her rights again by royal decree.

What happens then? In most good retellings of the tale, the Stepmother also repeats her assumption of brute authority by hiding Cinderella away, while our expectation of triumph is tantalizingly delayed with grotesque comedy: one sister cuts off a toe, the other a heel, trying to fit into the heroine's rightful slipper.

After that, Cinderella tries on the slipper and it fits. *This is the crisis action.* Magic, love, and royalty join to recognize the heroine's true self; evil, numbers, and authority are powerless against them. At this point, the power struggle has been decided; the outcome is inevitable. When the slipper fits, no further action can occur that will deprive Cinderella of her desire. The change in the lives of all concerned is significant and permanent.

In many of the finest modern short stories and novels, the true territory of struggle is the main character's mind, and so the real crisis action must occur there. Yet it is important to grasp that any mental reversal that takes place in the crisis of a story must be triggered or shown by an action. The slipper must fit. It would not do if the Stepmother just happened to change her mind and give up the struggle; it would not do if the Prince just happened to notice that Cinderella looked like his love. The moment of recognition must be manifested in an action.

The tale has a brief "falling action": the Prince sweeps Cinderella up on his white horse and gallops away to their wedding. The story comes to closure with the classic resolution of all comedy: They lived happily ever after.

If we look at "Cinderella" in terms of connection/disconnection we see a pattern as clear as that represented by the power struggle. The first painful disconnection is that Cinderella's mother has died; her father has married (connected with) a woman who spurns (disconnects from) her; the Prince's invitation offers connection, the Stepmother's cruelty alienates again. The Fairy Godmother connects as a magical friend, but the disappearance of the coach and gown disconnect Cinderella temporarily from that grand and glorious fairy-tale union, marriage to the Prince. If we consult the emotions that this tale engenders—pity, anger, hope, fear, romance, anticipation, disappointment, triumph—we

of the Duke is, and that a wife is not only an object to him, but worth less than an *objet d'art*.

The form of story—in its incarnations as journey, conflict-crisis-resolution, and connection-disconnection—is so prevalent in human culture that scarcely any communication is free of it. The most casual conversation includes anecdotes of destination and detour. The company report boasts of obstacles overcome. The trip to school shapes up as power struggle between protagonist child and antagonist mom, resolved with a connecting hug or a parting blast. Awareness of these shapes can inform any genre of writing and help to bridge the gap between mind and mind, helping to achieve the first desire of any writer: connection with that intimate stranger, the reader.

Try This

Write an essay that tells a story.

or:

Write a story that can be performed dramatically.

or:

Write a dialogue that is a poem.

More to Read

Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction: a Guide to Narrative Craft*. New York: Longman, 2003.

Forster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.

ESSAY

Patricia Hampl

Red Sky in the Morning

Years ago, in another life, I woke to look out the smeared window of a Greyhound bus I had been riding all night, and in the still-dark morning of a small Missouri river town where the driver had made a scheduled stop at a grimy

diner, I saw below me a stout middle-aged woman in a flowered housedress turn and kiss full on the mouth a godlike young man with golden curls. But I've got that wrong: he was kissing her. Passionately, without regard for the world and its incomprehension. He had abandoned himself to his love, and she, stolid, matronly, received this adoration with simple grandeur, like a socialist-realist statue of a woman taking up sheaves of wheat.

Their ages dictated that he must be her son, but I had just come out of the cramped, ruinous half sleep of a night on a Greyhound and I was clairvoyant: This was that thing called love. The morning light cracked blood red along the river.

Of course, when she lumbered onto the bus a moment later, lurching forward with her two bulging bags, she chose the empty aisle seat next to me as her own. She pitched one bag onto the overhead rack, and then heaved herself into the seat as if she were used to hoisting sacks of potatoes onto the flatbed of a pickup. She held the other bag on her lap, and leaned toward the window. The beautiful boy was blowing kisses. He couldn't see where she was in the dark interior, so he blew kisses up and down the side of the bus, gazing ardently at the blank windows. "Pardon me," the woman said without looking at me, and leaned over, bag and all, to rap the glass. Her beautiful boy ran back to our window and kissed and kissed, and finally hugged himself, shutting his eyes in an ecstatic pantomime of love-sweet-love. She smiled and waved back.

Then the bus was moving. She slumped back in her seat, and I turned to her. I suppose I looked transfixed. As our eyes met she said, "Everybody thinks he's my son. But he's not. He's my husband." She let that sink in. She was a farm woman with hands that could have been a man's; I was a university student, hair down to my waist. It was long ago, as I said, in another life. It was even another life for the country. The Vietnam War was the time we were living through, and I was traveling, as I did every three weeks, to visit my boyfriend who was in a federal prison. "Draft dodger," my brother said. "Draft resister," I piously retorted. I had never been kissed the way this woman had been kissed. I was living in a tattered corner of a romantic idyll, the one where the hero is willing to suffer for his beliefs. I was the girlfriend. I lived on pride, not love.

My neighbor patted her short cap of hair, and settled in for the long haul as we pulled onto the highway along the river, heading south. "We been married five years and we're happy," she said with a penetrating satisfaction, the satisfaction that passeth understanding. "Oh," she let out a profound sigh as if she mined her truths from the bountiful, bulky earth, "Oh, I could tell you stories." She put her arms snugly around her bag, gazed for a moment, apparently made pensive by her remark. Then she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

into one trip and still call it fact? How much dramatizing may be said to reveal rather than distort the truth?

At some point every writer of memoir and personal essay has to grapple with these issues. Luckily, they don't have to be grappled with in first draft. Having accepted that the mere fact of putting something into words *changes* it, begin by putting into words as clearly and vividly as you can something that you know about, care about, or that has happened to you. Then begin to look for particular purpose. Consider how to raise the tension and the drama. There will inevitably be changes of emphasis and balance in the shaping of both rough draft and revisions. You can take advantage of the gentle permission of the essay form: you may tell as well as show; you may say in so many words what the significance is for you. Often the effect of an essay rests precisely in this, that it begins in personal experience but reaches out to a larger idea or area of thought about the human condition. As authors Carol Burke and Molly Best Tinsley put it in their book *The Creative Process*, "The continuous movement back and forth from specific instance to general significance, from fact to meaning, from the sensory and emotional to the intellectual—such is the art of the essay."

Given its qualities of fact and forthrightness, the essay is a capacious, malleable, and forgiving form. Not only does it *not* have to have the thesis–topic–sentence–conclusion form of outline we were all taught, but it can easily borrow from any form you choose: story, monologue, lesson, list, rondel, collage. The trick is to find the right shape for the idea you have to present.

Kinds of Essay

Just about anyone who gets through high school in America becomes familiar with basic forms of the essay: the **expository** that imparts information; the **narrative** that recounts events in their order; the **descriptive** that adds sense impressions; the **persuasive** that wants to influence us. An **article** is usually an essay that purports to be "objective," that de-emphasizes the perspective and personality of the writer to concentrate on the subject matter; publication in a newspaper or magazine is implied. A **feature** is a human interest story, also bound for a newspaper. An article that concentrates on a person or place may be called a **profile**.

But any or all of these purposes may be mixed, freed, and enlivened through greater attention to stylistic and dramatic devices, personal voice, and a search for range and resonance. Such essays may be called **literary nonfiction** or **creative nonfiction**, the latter being a popular (if slightly cumbersome) term to describe essays that include the personal but don't necessarily stay there. Lee Gutkind, an important practitioner and champion of the form, sees creative nonfiction as allowing the writer "to employ the diligence of a reporter, the shift-

ing voices and viewpoints of a novelist, the refined wordplay of a poet, and the analytical modes of the essayist," and he sees as a requirement that the essays should "have purpose and meaning beyond the experiences related." The techniques Gutkind describes are akin to those that Tom Wolfe co-opted in the 1960s for what he termed **new journalism**, a kind of reporting in which the reporter became a character in his report, and which relied on all the techniques of a novelist including—importantly, for Wolfe—the details of dress, gesture, speech, and ownership that reveal social status.

Creative nonfiction encompasses two sorts of essay that differ more in emphasis than in kind—but may differ radically in emphasis—and that will be the focus of this chapter. A *memoir* is a story retrieved from the writer's memory, with the writer as protagonist—the *I* remembering. Memoir tends to place the emphasis on the story, and the "point" is likely to emerge, as it does in fiction, largely from the events and characters themselves, rather than through the author's speculation or reflection. The *personal essay*, on the other hand, usually has its origin in something that has happened in the writer's life, but it may have happened yesterday afternoon, or it may represent an area of interest deliberately explored, and it is likely to give rise to a meditation on some subject that the experience suggests.

Example: I took a photograph out of an old frame to put in a picture of my new husband and stepdaughter. Because the frame was constructed in an amazingly solid way, I thought about the man whose photo I was displacing, his assumptions about permanence, how we use frames to try to capture and hang onto moments, memories, families, selves that are in fact always in flux; how we frame our cities with roads, our shoreline with resorts, our dead with coffins—marking our territory, claiming possession. In this instance a very small task led me to write about the nature of impermanence and enclosure.

Both memoir and personal essay grow out of some degree of autobiographical experience and are usually (though there are exceptions) written in the first person. The distinction between them is not always clear, although it may be said that the memoir sets up a conversation or dialectic between the writer and his/her past, while the emphasis of the personal essay is likely to be conversational, an implied or sought relationship between the writer and the reader. Philip Lopate, in the brilliant introduction to his anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay*, dissects the tone in terms of its intimacy, its "drive toward candor and self-exposure," the conversational dynamic and the struggle for honesty.

The personal essay is a form that allows maximum mobility from the small, the daily, the domestic to the universal and significant. Essayist Philip Gerard says, "The subject has to carry itself and also be an elegant vehicle for larger meanings." What makes it "creative" is that though you may take the subject matter of research or journalism, there is "an apparent subject and a deeper subject. The apparent subject . . . is only part of what we are interested in." Whereas

changed you, what moves us—it will need the immediacy of detailed action, of discovery and decision.

Just down from the mountains, early August. Lugging my youngest child from the car, I noticed that his perfectly relaxed body was getting heavier every year. When I undressed his slack limbs, he woke up enough to mumble, “I like my own bed,” then fell back down, all the way down, into sleep. The sensation of his weight was still in my arms as I shut the door.

“Images,” Robert Hass

Notice that Hass begins with a brief summary (or longshot) of the situation, then moves at once into the sensual apprehension of the action, the boy’s body relaxed, heavy, slack, while the father takes care of him.

Like a story, creative nonfiction depends on character, and the creation of character depends on both detail and dialogue. Dialogue is tricky because the memory does its own editing, but you can re-create a voice from memory no less than from imagination. Write, remembering as truly as you can, then test in your mind whether the other person involved would agree: *what we said was like this*.

Whatever looks I had were hidden behind thick cat-eyed glasses and a hearing aid that was strapped to my body like a dog halter. My hallucinatory visions would sometimes lift me up and carry me through the air. When I told my mother that I was afraid of the sky, she considered it a reasonable fear, even though she said, “Well, the sky isn’t something I could ever be afraid of.”

“Falling in Love Again,” Terry Galloway

Like a story, creative nonfiction needs the context and texture of setting. Frequently an encounter with setting is the point and purpose of the piece, whether that encounter is with an exotic foreign country or your own backyard. If you’re stuck for a way to begin, you might remember the longshot-middle shot-closeup pattern.

It’s past eleven on a Friday night in the spring of 1955. Here comes a kid down the length of Eighteenth Street in the Midwood section of Flatbush, in Brooklyn, New York. He passes the kept lawns and tidy hedges under big leafy sycamores and maples. The middle class is asleep, and most of the houses attached to the lawns are dark, though an occasional window pulses with blue-gray television light. Streetlamps shine benignly, and Mars is red in the sky. The kid is on his way home from the weekly meeting of Troop 8, Boy Scouts of America . . .

“For the Love of a Princess of Mars,” Frederick Busch

Unlike a story, creative nonfiction involves a balance of dramatization and overt reflection. This doesn’t mean that the balance needs to be the same in all essays. On the contrary, a memoir that leaves us with a vivid image of an aging relative or a revelation of an error in judgment may be absolutely appropriate, whereas a piece on a walk in the woods may need half its space to analyze and elucidate the discoveries you have made. Sometimes an essay will convey its personal intensity precisely through the force of its abstractions.

I have had with my friend Wes Jackson a number of useful conversations about the necessity of getting out of movements—even movements that have seemed necessary and dear to us—when they have lapsed into self-righteousness and self-betrayal, as movements seem almost invariably to do. People in movements too readily learn to deny to others the rights and privileges they demand for themselves. They too easily become unable to mean their own language, as when a “peace movement” becomes violent.

“In Distrust of Movements,” Wendell Berry

One part of the purpose of an essay will always be to inform or teach, either by presenting new knowledge or by combining old facts in a new way. Often the essay seduces the reader with a personal note into an educational enterprise. The nature essayist Barry Lopez demonstrates the technique again and again; he places himself in relation to the landscape, and later in the piece slips in the history, archeology, or biology. So a typical essay will begin “I am standing at the margin of the sea ice called the floe edge at the mouth of Admiralty Inlet . . .” or “We left our camp on Pingok Island one morning knowing a storm was moving in from the Southwest . . .” Later in each piece, more factual or speculative paragraphs begin, “Three million colonial seabirds, mostly northern fulmars, kittiwakes, and guillemots, nest and feed here in the summer,” and, “Desire for wealth, for spiritual or emotional ecstasy, for recognition—strains of all three are found in nearly every arctic expedition.” Lopez immediately involves the reader in the human drama, but he also wants to teach us what he knows. He exhibits the range of the impulse toward the personal essay: involvement and intellectual enlargement, both operating at full stretch. He wants to have and to offer both the experience and the knowledge.

Try This

Write a personal essay about a building you care about. Choose one of which you have strong memories, then do at least a little research about the place itself. This research might, if it’s a house or school in your home town, consist of calling people to interview them. If it’s a church or municipal building of some sort, it might be archival or library research. You will know what’s appropriate. How does your memory of the place

continued

mother, and I want to give an accurate image of her. When I try to remember the things she wore, what stands out are the unusual things, the embroidered yellow wedding coat she kept for special occasions, the pink satin housecoat that was too precious to wear often. These are in my memory precisely because they were uncharacteristic of her, whereas the kind of housedress she wore every day is a blur of composite images, a mnemonic generalization. As a writer I concentrate on this vagueness and bring it into focus in my imagination *as if* it were fiction. *She wore a cap-sleeve cotton house dress, a plaid of lavender and yellow crisscrossing on faded gray. Or: She wore a cotton housedress with piping around the collar, sprigs of lily-of-the-valley tied with a pink bow on a pale gray ground.* I don't know whether these images came from somewhere deep in my memory, or whether I "made them up." They are true to the image of my mother I am trying to capture, and therefore they partake of "essential truth," whereas if I said she wore bikinis or Armani, I would be honoring neither fact nor truth.

Fiction writers also grapple with the level of historical or regional fact that is necessary to their truth, and like essayists, they answer it differently. James Joyce wanted every Dublin bus route and ticket price accurate in *Ulysses*; E. L. Doctorow invented the events of several famous real lives in *Ragtime*. In the only historical novel I have written, I decided that I could harmlessly put an ice house in a rural Arizona town seven years before there was actually such a thing, but that I couldn't blow off the arm of a famous Mexican General two years before, historically, it happened.

The delicacy of this issue is slightly augmented for an essayist, and I think the touchstone is: an absence of the intent to deceive. A fiction writer is in the clear to the extent that a reader understands from the beginning that the story is "made up"—yet must on whatever level of reality convince us to suspend disbelief. Since a reader of essays expects factual truth, you are under some obligation to signal its absence. It can add to both the authenticity and the interest of a piece (as long as it isn't too repetitive), to say in effect: I don't remember exactly, but I seem to see . . . or: So-and-so says it was this way, but I think . . . or: I am imagining that it must have been . . .

I know nothing about how they meet. She is a schoolgirl. He is at work, probably a government clerk in a building near her school. At the hour when the school and the office are out for lunch their lives intersect at sandwich counters, soft-drink stands, traffic lights, market squares. Their eyes meet or their bodies collide at one of these food queues. He says something suggestive, complimentary. She suppresses a smile or traps one beneath her hands.

"A Son in Shadow," Fred D'Aguiar

Try This

Write a personal essay about your parents' courtship. It may be totally imaginary (in which case, that you are making it up becomes part of the subject matter and the truth of your essay); or you may write it from facts you already know (acknowledging where you fill in, leave out, or speculate); or you may "research" it by interviewing family members (in which case your research may become the subject of the essay, the family members become characters, and their interviews become dialogue). You may choose any method you like, based on whatever quantity of information you have or choose to use; but it must remain an essay; that is, with a basis in fact, so that where you invent, you acknowledge "I imagine . . . I guess . . . I'm inventing here."

"When you use memories as a source," says E. L. Doctorow, "they're no different from any other source—the composition still has to be made." Memory is imperfect; that is its nature, and you are responsible only for the honest attempt and the honest presentation. No two siblings will remember their mother, or even Christmas dinner, in the same way. One of the leaps of faith you must make to write from memory is that the process of writing itself will yield that essential truth. Sometimes clarifying a quotation, compressing several conversations or events into one, exaggerating one physical detail while omitting another, or transposing a scene from one locale to another—any of these can honor (and reveal) an essential truth when the literal truth would distort. If you get the color of your childhood wagon wrong, it will not damage that truth. If you sentimentalize an emotion, it will.

It is likely that the most troubling conflict you face as a writer of memoir and personal essay will be between your essential truth and obligation to those you know. When does honesty require that you reveal an ugly fact? Is it arrogance to suppose that anything you write is worth wounding someone else? There is no answer to this dilemma, or there are as many answers as there are works in a lifetime or paragraphs in a work. As a rough rule of thumb, I would say that the cost of honesty might be the loss of your own labor. That is: write your truth. You are under no obligation to publish it, and you may find yourself under the pressure of personal integrity not to. If you need to alter details in order to conceal a living person, let it be later. It may or may not work, but it will be easier to alter identifying details than to censor yourself as you write.