Flash & Furious: Creative Nonfiction Bursts

There may be no more potent form than short Creative Nonfiction, which "the writer's experience of the world makes small and large at the same time." Our excursions into short Creative Nonfiction ask us how real, how raw, how precise and unforgettable we can get in 2,000 words or less. What story or stories are you ready to excavate? What worlds exist within you, what discoveries might you make among your compatriots? How can you invite others to join you? In this generative workshop, we invoke the authorial stance of the lived experience to build intimacy with the reader, engaging in a friendship that—in the words of Philip Lopate—"is based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship" & "confides everything from gossip to wisdom." And we do it all in a little over a page.

Our session offers scaffolded writing prompts, mentor texts, collaborative exercises, and opportunities for sharing. This workshop is designed for participants who want to play, as well as for those hoping to walk away with a draft towards publication.

Creative Nonfiction Bursts

Flash >1500 words
Sudden > 750 words
Micro >100 words
Dribble/Mini-Saga > 50 words

Agenda & Exercises

1. ***Smith* Magazine's Six-Word Memoirs**
2. ***The New York Times*, 36 Questions to Fall in Love**
3. **Barrie Jean Borich, "Writing into the Flash/On Finding Nonfiction's Decisive Moment"**
   - **a.** Paired w/ *Brevity*—p. 6-7 **Diane Seuss, "I hoisted them."**
   - b. Additional readings from *Brevity:* (16) Abigail Thomas, "Forgetting," (17-19) Sandra Gail Lambert, "Poster Children."

   Flash Nonfiction Exercise: Return to a draft (or start a new one). Determine your central image, question, or mood. Make a list of 10, choose your favorite, share it with a partner.

4. **Sue William Silverman, "Writing Through Innocence and Experience: Voices in Flash"**
   - **a. Paired with bell hooks**
   - b. Additional readings from Brevity (33) Joey Franklin, "Girl Fight," Anna Vodicka "Girl/Thing," (159-161), Deesha Philyaw, "Milk for Free"

   Flash Nonfiction Exercise: Using the Voice of Innocence, describe one image of your childhood hometown. Next, using the Voice of Experience, continue to describe this [experience] in such a way that it metaphorically coneys how you feel about it, reflecting back, incorporating knowledge and language you lacked in the past.

5. **Carol Guess, "On Carnival Lights, Compression and Mice"**
   - a. Paired w/ *Brevity*—(42-43) Deborah Taffa, "My Cousin's Backyard"
   - b. Additional readings from *Brevity:* (70-72) Thao Thai, "Counting Bats," (151) Jaquira Diaz, "Beach City," (204-205) Roxane Gay, "There Are Distances Between Us"

   Flash Nonfiction Prompt: Capture someone who raised you: parent, guardian, swim coach, minister, math teacher. Compress a life's worth of memories.
   And/or **What They Taught Me/Didn't Teach Me**

6. **Tig Notaro & the power of vulnerability**
7. **Publishing Our Flash CNF! & Resources (*Brevity, Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*)**

Six-Word Memoirs: Life Stories Distilled

“Revenge is living well, without you.”

Author Joyce Carol Oates

“Fight, work, persevere -- gain slight notoriety.”

Comic book writer Harvey Pekar

Talk of the Nation, February 7, 2008 · Once asked to write a full story in six words, legend has it that novelist Ernest Hemingway responded: "For Sale: baby shoes, never worn."

In this spirit of simple yet profound brevity, the online magazine *Smith* asked readers to write the story of their own lives in a single sentence. The result is *Not Quite What I Was Planning*, a collection of six-word memoirs by famous and not-so-famous writers, artists and musicians. Their stories are sometimes sad, often funny — and always concise.

The book is full of well-known names — from writer Dave Eggers (*Fifteen years since last professional haircut*), to singer Aimee Mann (*Couldn't cope so I wrote songs*), to comedian Stephen Colbert (*Well, I thought it was funny*).

The collection has plenty of six-word insights from everyday folks as well: *Love me or leave me alone* was scrawled on a hand dryer in a public bathroom; *I still make coffee for two* was penned by a 27-year-old who had just been dumped.

Larry Smith, founding editor of *Smith* magazine, and Rachel Fershleiser, *Smith*'s memoir editor, talk about the experience of capturing real-life stories in six words — no more, no less.

Fershleiser's six-word memoir? *Bespectacled, besneakered, read and ran around.* And Smith's: *Big hair, big heart, big hurry.*

Excerpt: 'Not Quite What I Was Planning'

Edited by Smith *magazine*

After Harvard, had baby with crackhead.
- Robin Templeton

70 years, few tears, hairy ears.
- Bill Querengesser

Watching quietly from every door frame.
- Nicole Resseguie

Catholic school backfired. Sin is in!
- Nikki Beland

Savior complex makes for many disappointments.
- Alanna Schubach

Nobody cared, then they did. Why?
- Chuck Klosterman

Some cross-eyed kid, forgotten then found.
- Diana Welch

She said she was negative. Damn.
- Ryan McRae

Born in the desert, still thirsty.
- Georgene Nunn

A sake mom, not soccer mom.
- Shawna Hausman

I asked. They answered. I wrote.
- Sebastian Junger

No future, no past. Not lost.
- Matt Brensilver

Extremely responsible, secretly longed for spontaneity.
- Sabra Jennings

Joined Army. Came out. Got booted.
- Johan Baumeister

Almost a victim of my family
- Chuck Sangster

The psychic said I'd be richer.
- Elizabeth Bernstein

Grumpy old soundman needs love, too.
- Lennie Rosengard

Mom died, Dad screwed us over.
- Lesley Kysely

Painful nerd kid, happy nerd adult.
- Linda Williamson

Write about sex, learn about love.
- Martha Garvey

The New York Times | https://nyti.ms/1BWQijj

FASHION & STYLE

The 36 Questions That Lead to Love

한국어로 읽기 | Read in Korean

点击查看本文中文版 | Read in Chinese

Modern Love

By DANIEL JONES JAN. 9, 2015

UPDATED: You can now hear the essay "To Fall in Love With Anyone, Do This" read by the actress Gillian Jacobs in Modern Love: The Podcast. Look for the "play" button below or subscribe on iTunes or Google Play Music. To try the 36 questions described below, download our free app for your phone, tablet or other device.

In Mandy Len Catron's Modern Love essay, "To Fall in Love With Anyone, Do This," she refers to a study by the psychologist Arthur Aron (and others) that explores whether intimacy between two strangers can be accelerated by having them ask each other a specific series of personal questions. The 36 questions in the study are broken up into three sets, with each set intended to be more probing than the previous one.

The idea is that mutual vulnerability fosters closeness. To quote the study's authors, "One key pattern associated with the development of a close relationship among peers is sustained, escalating, reciprocal, personal self-disclosure." Allowing oneself to be vulnerable with another person can be exceedingly difficult, so this exercise forces the issue.

The final task Ms. Catron and her friend try — staring into each other's eyes for four minutes — is less well documented, with the suggested duration ranging from two minutes to four. But Ms. Catron was unequivocal in her recommendation. "Two minutes is just enough to be terrified," she told me. "Four really goes somewhere."

Set I

1. Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?

2. Would you like to be famous? In what way?

3. Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? Why?

4. What would constitute a "perfect" day for you?

5. When did you last sing to yourself? To someone else?

6. If you were able to live to the age of 90 and retain either the mind or body of a 30-year-old for the last 60 years of your life, which would you want?

7. Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?

8. Name three things you and your partner appear to have in common.

9. For what in your life do you feel most grateful?

10. If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?

11. Take four minutes and tell your partner your life story in as much detail as possible.

12. If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what would it be?

Set II

13. If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, the future or anything else, what would you want to know?

14. Is there something that you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?

15. What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?

16. What do you value most in a friendship?

17. What is your most treasured memory?

18. What is your most terrible memory?

19. If you knew that in one year you would die suddenly, would you change anything about the way you are now living? Why?

20. What does friendship mean to you?

21. What roles do love and affection play in your life?

22. Alternate sharing something you consider a positive characteristic of your partner. Share a total of five items.

23. How close and warm is your family? Do you feel your childhood was happier than most other people's?

24. How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?

Set III

25. Make three true "we" statements each. For instance, "We are both in this room feeling ... "

26. Complete this sentence: "I wish I had someone with whom I could share ... "

27. If you were going to become a close friend with your partner, please share what would be important for him or her to know.

28. Tell your partner what you like about them; be very honest this time, saying things that you might not say to someone you've just met.

29. Share with your partner an embarrassing moment in your life.

30. When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?

31. Tell your partner something that you like about them already.

32. What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?

33. If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?

34. Your house, containing everything you own, catches fire. After saving your loved ones and pets, you have time to safely make a final dash to save any one item. What would it be? Why?

35. Of all the people in your family, whose death would you find most disturbing? Why?

36. Share a personal problem and ask your partner's advice on how he or she might handle it. Also, ask your partner to reflect back to you how you seem to be feeling about the problem you have chosen.

Barrie Jean Borich

WRITING INTO THE FLASH

On Finding Short Nonfiction's Decisive Moment

I am thinking of a staircase, a bicycle, a resonant suspension of breath.

Chances are you've seen the iconic black-and-white photograph I have in mind, "The Var department. Hyères. 1932," a work of twentieth-century French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson.[1] The slope of an iron railing. A mottle of pavement stone. The gradual curve of a curb. The blurry wheels and back of a boy on a bike. A flash of motion, by which I mean not the pop of flash photography but rather the photographic image's internal burst, abstracted by gray scale, leaving us with the lingering impression of a moment. "For the world is movement," Cartier-Bresson wrote in *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographers*, "and you cannot be stationary in your attitude toward something that is moving."

When I consider the term flash nonfiction, I think of the nonfiction writer's job of rendering the movement of the world, yet the word "flash"—the part of the definition meaning a sudden, bright, glint of understanding—does not lead me into familiar protracted forms of literary narrative. Rather I turn first to a visual understanding of artistic composition akin to a certain kind of photography, such as that documentary attempt to convey the impression of actuality that Cartier-Bresson, working in a nonliterary discipline decades before the more calculated manipulations of the digital age, called the photograph's "Decisive Moment."

Barrie Jean Borich is the author of *Body Geographic* (2013), published in the American Lives Series of the University of Nebraska Press. Her previous book, *My Lesbian Husband* (2000), won the American Library Association Stonewall Book Award, and she was the first nonfiction editor of *Water~Stone Review*. She teaches at Chicago's DePaul University, in the MA in Writing and Publishing program.

We use the term "flash" to describe short short prose forms not only because our experience as readers of this work passes in a flash, but also because of the flashiness of the form's nature. The flicker, surge, and lyric flush of flash nonfiction comes not from the plot of action across time, nor from the exhaustion of observational, intellectual, exploration. Nor is the short short made entirely of linear narrative's opposite: the spare space, breath, and architecture of minimalist poetics. Flash nonfiction, or short shorts, or short lyric impressions may contain all of the above, but the best come to the reader in their entirety, needing no context nor familiarity with formal tradition, more like a photograph of the Cartier-Bresson sort, in which a telling experience or happening is not just expressed but masterfully and intuitively framed.

Most short shorts are not written in a flash. If we are essayists, our first instinct may be to keep adding more, making more connections, applying yet another angle on a metaphor. If we are literary nonfiction writers who've come to prose from poetry we may have taken up creative nonfiction in order to inhabit more space on the page than is usually possible with a poem. As storytellers we may wish to bring forward backstory, wander into history and context, proceed into what happens next, next, and next. Flash nonfiction allows us no such luxuries. Consider again that a short short's flash of literary actuality may expand, occupy our visual field, fill a whole horizon, a whole page even, in a snap, but we won't really comprehend until the movement moves on, a shadow burned into memory.

Human understanding is often burst-like. Lives flash, mesmerizing in the moment of ignition, the same movement that later takes much longer to remember and interpret than it took to live. The Decisive Moment in literature is not just the rendering of some small space of time, but also some slant verbalization of all that the moment conveys. Cartier-Bresson's bicycle evokes so much within the limits of the photographic frame—human hurry, the passage of time through a day, the tension between observation and action, the wheels and cut stones and other

[1] Cartier-Bresson, Henri. "FRANCE. The Var department. Hyères. 1932." Magnum Photos. Web. 28 March 2012. http://www.magnumphotos.com.

simple technologies of cities, the accidental beauty of human making. Cartier-Bresson was both constrained and gifted by his tools and traditions—the street photographer's discipline of finding the image in the camera lens rather than later in the darkroom.

The question then becomes: How do writers accomplish that flash on the page?

The writing of a short short begins no differently than any other writing project, yet the required combination of intuition, discipline, and willingness to work within the limited space of a small frame may be as physical as it is mental. The piece may begin with an image, or idea, or question, or wish—anything to get words on the page; first words that are, more often than not, the wrong words. But from the morass comes the promise, some internal flush that tells us yes, we approach the decisive point of focus.

Perhaps we knew we were writing a flash piece when we began, or perhaps it is this pending discovery that tells us so. More textual compression will come later, in the editing, but the primary tightening happens now, in the full-bodied moment of concentrated composition. We know at this juncture not to progress into story or interpretation or further rumination. Nor do we wish to compress all the way back into poetry. Instead we break to white space, or a list, or an object, or some other surprise we don't want to be able to preordain, because this is where the writer's voice comes in, figuring out not just when but what to do.

In my essay "Dogged," in which I write into my memory of a dog I saw once running toward the Calumet Expressway on the south side of Chicago, I knew I had arrived at the flash of the nonfiction when I was able to break from narrative into image. This was the moment I found myself lingering in a description that came from outside of the moment I thought I was writing, a contrasting image of a dog running for joy, an idea that did not come to me fully until a late draft. I knew from the beginning of my work with this hazy-yet-haunting memory that I wanted to write something akin to a photograph, but every draft was bogged down by industrial or political or familial history, not to mention the sadness I had long assigned to that [illegible] works we often don't know nearly enough about our subject but in shorts we often know too much. I had to step back far enough from my first attempts to come upon not a continuation but an association, not a decision but an intuition.

When I fell upon a description conveying the opposite of what I thought I was describing, I was surprised to find I was writing about *not* my compassion for a particular creature I may not even remember accurately, but rather the meaning I made of this memory 25 years later, and this opposition led me to the essay's subtext, lifted me from the narrative geography of my material, carried me into *my* Decisive Moment. Such compositional decisions, the "aha!" of finding deep subject, are part choice and part implosion, no words invited but those that are needed. Part dream, part craft, part word count, part embodied immersion. Too much forward motion and I would have written into a full-blown essay. The trick is in the timing.

Describing his notion of the Decisive Moment, Cartier-Bresson wrote, "It is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as the precise organization of forms, which gives that event its proper expression."

The flash nonfiction writer's version of the Decisive Moment comes of noticing, and accepting a subject small and precise enough to be contained in such a brief container. We write into this flash of new understanding, then we gather up and get out before the flash fades.

A FLASH NONFICTION EXERCISE

Return to an unfinished draft or fragment of a short you've been unable or unwilling to finish. Try to determine your central image or question or mood, even if imprecise. Free write, focusing on some concrete image or action, something the opposite of what you have already written. Then, in one sitting, compose the essay again, from scratch. Keep in mind that 750 to 1000-word perimeter (as an upper limit, or a cap you will have to edit back down to) as in this new draft you attempt to incorporate both extremes.

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I hoisted them, two drug dealers, I guess that's what they were,

by DIANE SEUSS • September 3, 2015

11 Comments

crackheads, I exiled them is what I did, from my son's basement apartment, they'd come to feast off of what was left of him, his entrails I guess, he'd moved into that apartment with such high hopes even though it was on the bottom floor, and no light, or very little light, there was a girlfriend, she moved in with her two dogs and then they picked up a stray pit bull they named Svetlana, they were into all things Russian, and the girlfriend didn't believe in housetraining dogs, like making them go outside in the yard was hurting their feelings or something, well she'd moved out, took the few things of value and left behind a concrete floor full of dog shit, and he, my son, I gave birth to him in 1985, it was a hard labor in a small town hospital and they had to cut me open, don't knock me out I yelled, after all this I want to be awake when you lift out the kid, and I was, I was awake and they lifted him out, his skin painted with blood, his hands looked too large for his body, and he spread them out, and his arms, well, all babies wail so he wailed, and I hoisted those two dealers, I excised them, I pulled them like two bad teeth, and I didn't have to use my hands, the smoke from the crack draped in their hair like cobwebs, I knocked on that black metal door, I knocked and they answered like it was their house, half-smiling like I was selling Girl Scout cookies, but what the hell they were fucked up, they didn't know any better, and with my voice alone, with my eyes that I intentionally made keen like a hawk's, I ordered them out, I threw their stuff out in the yard, in the rain, dog shit was everywhere, like pinecones or apples in an abandoned orchard at the end of summer, they rode away on bikes like children, like my sister and me when we were kids after a big storm and the drains were clogged on the streets so the water was up to our knees, riding our bikes through that water which must have been full of shit, my son, he was nowhere to be found, I didn't see him until, what was it, later that night or the next day, he showed up at my house and put his hands on me, he didn't hurt me but it was moving in that direction, and something in me rose up, like a deer I once saw that stood up on its back legs and roared, I ex-communicated him, hoisted him, my will by then was like a jackhammer or a God, or one of those queens who wears a dress made of stone, so don't ask for my touch is what I'm saying, don't ask me to now walk among the people.

—

Diane Seuss's most recent collection, *Four-Legged Girl,* is forthcoming in October 2015 from Graywolf Press. Her second book, *Wolf Lake, White Gown Blown Open,* won the Juniper Prize and was published by the

Forgetting

by Abigail Thomas

You know how you find yourself in the kitchen and you can't remember what you're doing there so maybe you put your hands on the cold sink and look out the window but it doesn't help? What works is to go back to the living room, sit down again on the chair you got up from, then retrace your steps back to the kitchen and somewhere in the hall you remember oh! Cheetos! Of course! Then there are the times you get in the car to go somewhere and even before you put the key in the ignition you get this funny physical feeling, and it means you're forgetting something. Amazing! Where does it come from? What part of our body remembers we are forgetting something? I love it! Maybe you forgot to put water down for the dogs. You left your wallet on the mantel. You didn't bring your passport, checkbook, credit card, birthday present for the party. You can't proceed until it comes back to you, but it almost always does.

But now how about dying? Dying is no longer a never or even a when, but a how, because maybe you're 75, like me. What if I get that funny feeling just before I make my final exit? Then what if I have to come back, because if I've forgotten something, it means I'm not done, and I don't want to return, at least not as a human being. I'd rather be a tree, or a bunch of kudzu, or even a moth. I'd rather be a school of fish. "A whole school?" I can hear my sister asking. "Why not just one fish?" Because one fish in a school is the same as the whole school, but different, and I want to know what that feels like. Plus I love the way they swim in gestures.

Poster Children

by Sandra Gail Lambert

1.

We're in single file, led by an American flag with stars in the shape of a wheelchair, and headed to the convention hotel that I still think we're going to picket. I can't keep up. Someone steps behind me and pushes. I'm jealous of Eleanor on her scooter. We arrive and the driveways are blocked by police and hotel security. I wonder where it is we're going to picket. Everyone starts moving fast. A police van screeches to an angled stop in front of me. The man pushing my wheelchair jumps me over a curb and steps back. I whip around, and my footrests bump into a waiting police officer. "Excuse me," I say automatically. I move to the left. He does as well. There's a shout beyond us. The police officer and I look toward the front of the hotel. Some people are being handcuffed, but a bunch of us have made it through. I see Eleanor headed for the front door. Her scooter must be on its power-surge setting because her hair is blown back by the speed. My cop goes after them. He leaves the way open, and I know I have to follow Eleanor. I grip my wheels and lunge forward. I feel wind in my hair.

2.

Eleanor had called to say the ADAPT action was happening, and I should drive the two hours to join them. ADAPT is a group of disability rights activists. Eleanor said the plan was to picket a nursing home convention, disrupt a bunch of CEOs using their monopoly on Medicare funding

to guzzle poolside parasoled drinks. I found the Orlando hotel where ADAPT was staying. The lobby glittered with chandeliers as if to greet heads of state. Under the glow were 200 people in wheelchairs. Electric models with space-age controls scurried past hospital clunkers. Some were manuals exactly like mine. There were electric scooters of all sorts. People moved themselves all sorts of ways. Palms leaned on a pad, mouths moved a stick, gloved hands gripped wheels, fingers clutched a bar, elbows shoved against a plate, or maybe someone was pushing the wheelchair, but they were all moving. A grizzled, sullen, toothless old man with what hair he had left pulled back into a grey string of a ponytail drooled without shame. He wore the same red "Free Our People" T-shirt that Eleanor did. "We sprung him from a nursing home and into home care just before they killed him," she said. "He's our poster child." We laughed. She and I both had polio young and were once the adorable girl type of poster child. A bull-horned shout told us to line-up.

3.

Our cell is bright. Fluorescent tubes hang from the ceiling. They and the cameras stay on all night. The bunks are a freshly painted yellow. The vinyl mattresses are green, and the toilet in the corner is a silvered chrome. The blankets are shades of gray. So are the sheets. We are all in blue, the guards in beige, and the nurse in white. Jennifer's wheelchair is Day-Glo pink.

Caroline is telling her jailers how to touch her, how to put her in bed. Her body is small. Her chest bone is large and bowed. She has movie-star eyes, and her arms make delicate gestures. I'm watching from the next bunk.

"Don't lift me by my arms or shoulders. Reach around my middle and then under my rear end." Her fingers point around her body to emphasize her instructions.

The guards shift this way and that to search for a less awkward angle. Their legs set in place, and Caroline's body disappears into their arms

as they reach over her wheelchair with great care and lift. They step to the bed and lay her down. From behind them, I hear her.

"On my side," she says. "I need pillows to brace my legs."

"No pillows in jail," one of them states and then folds a blanket and holds it up.

"That will work." Caroline's voice reaches out of the sheets. "Put that one between my legs and get another for behind my knees."

The rest of her instructions are quiet and practiced. The guards bend lower over her bed.

"I'll need to be re-positioned later."

The women cover her with a blanket and turn toward me to leave. Their faces, one brown and one white, are wide open with emotion. Not pity or disgust or resentment—I can recognize those. This is less familiar.

Sue William Silverman

WRITING THROUGH INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

Voices in Flash Nonfiction

The "I" in creative nonfiction is a literary device used to enhance and explore complicated truths. Just as we are complex people in life, we must be equally complex personas on the page. One way to accomplish this exploration of self is through the use of voice—but not one's everyday voice. In real life, for example, I don't speak or write e-mails using carefully crafted language. When talking to friends, I'm not particularly mindful about word choice. I don't use sensory imagery or think metaphorically. My speech meanders, full of half-developed ideas. In other words, a spoken, informal voice, though it can be breathless or intimate, is rarely as artistically structured as one that's literary.

Using my flash nonfiction piece "Archipelago" as an example, let's say that, at the time of the actual event (years before I wrote the essay), I confided in my sister as to why I didn't want to leave the West Indies. I would probably have said something like: "I hate leaving. I don't want to live where it's cold." This brief explanation, while sincere, provides little insight or depth.

Likewise, a diary "voice" can be intimate, but it doesn't shape life into art, either. Here is a diary entry I could have written the night before leaving the island: "I'm going to miss everything about St. Thomas. I hate even the thought of returning to the States, where it's so gray and cold."

Sue William Silverman's memoir *Love Sick: One Woman's Journey through Sexual Addiction* (2001) is also a Lifetime Television original movie. Her first memoir, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (1999), won the Association of Writers and Writing Programs award series in creative nonfiction, and her craft book *Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir* was published in 2009. She teaches in the MFA program at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

These sentences are heartfelt, but abstract, lacking sensory imagery. They don't bring the reader inside the experience.

Neither of these voices, though they are authentically me, would work when writing flash nonfiction.

So who, then, narrates an essay? It's both me and not me. It's an artistically created "me" comprised of two different voices that work in conjunction with each other: the Voice of Innocence and the Voice of Experience, labels loosely borrowed from the poet William Blake. Briefly, the Voice of Innocence describes the event. The Voice of Experience interprets and reflects upon it. Through the use of these voices, a writer maintains a cohesive narrative, while also journeying into the core of self-discovery. In other words, the voices used in creative nonfiction artistically craft what you've lived, in all its dimensions.

Here is a fuller description of these two aspects of the narrator's voice:

The Voice of Innocence relates the facts of the story, the surface subject or action. It's the voice that tells us, "first this happened, then this next thing happened." Additionally, the Voice of Innocence reveals the raw, not-yet-understood emotions associated with the story's action by portraying the person you were (and what you felt) when the sequence of events actually took place.

The Voice of Experience adds a more mature voice or persona that, in effect, explains and deepens the Voice of Innocence with metaphor, irony, and reflection. This voice offers the progression of thought in creative nonfiction by examining what the Voice of Innocence (facts and raw emotions) means. This more complex viewpoint interprets and reflects upon the surface subject. Say, for example, the Voice of Innocence describes feeling lonely; then, the Voice of Experience seeks to understand why you're lonely, what it means. What are the ramifications of past occurrences and behaviors? What are the metaphors that deepen the events? With this voice you transform the lived moment, rather than merely recollect it.

Generally speaking, these two voices are flexible and can be introduced at any time during your essay, as needed. Now let's see how they actually work within a piece of flash nonfiction.

In "Archipelago," I begin with the Voice of Innocence in the first para-

graph, where I state in a straightforward manner that I'm boarding a plane to leave the West Indies. In the second paragraph, I use the Voice of Experience when I reflect upon how, living in the States, I anticipate feeling "static," as if "suspended in ice," waiting to "melt into spring." Because this voice allows me, the author, to go beyond mere facts, I'm able to construct the idea of cold and ice into a metaphor, thus enabling the reader to understand that, when living in a cold climate, I fear feeling trapped.

After the opening of "Archipelago," I contrast St. Thomas with New York City, the Voice of Innocence once again conveying factual images, what I—that young girl—observed at the actual time of the event. Next, through the Voice of Experience, the author "me" recasts these images metaphorically to show how I try to "carry" my island warmth and colors with me to the States.

In other words, the Voice of Innocence states what I see before me (the Marlboro Man, lights on a bridge, Horn & Hardart, chicken, apples, etc.); the Voice of Experience, meanwhile, conjures these items into the magic I actually felt at the time, but was too inchoate to express. The final paragraph of "Archipelago" is fully written in the Voice of Experience as I deepen the entirety of the experience by reflecting, finally understanding how, metaphorically, I've always carried the island with me, wherever I've traveled or lived.

This exploration is more interesting than the facts by themselves. We write creative nonfiction to discover the story behind the story—what we didn't understand or know at the time of the event.

As you write, pretend to toss a stone into a lake or river. Through the Voice of Innocence, write the compelling ripples of life you see on the skin of water. Then allow your gaze to follow the stone as it slowly sinks. Through the Voice of Experience, you'll discover what ebbs and flows below the surface as you peer into the metaphorical depth of you.

A FLASH NONFICTION EXERCISE

Step 1: Using the Voice of Innocence, describe one specific image of your childhood hometown. For example, you could begin by writing: *Walking to school during an ice storm, I slide from one sidewalk to the next.* This sentence conveys a straightforward rendition of what happened, typical of the Voice of Innocence.

Step 2: Next, using the Voice of Experience, continue to describe this wintry day in such a way that it metaphorically conveys how you feel about it, reflecting back, incorporating knowledge and language you lacked in the past. *Icicles spike down from rooftops and cover window panes like jail bars. When I walk to school during the storm, the air smells blank, scentless, as if the whole town is encased in ice. How will I be able to chip through winter and breathe, as I wait for spring?*

By using words such as "jail bars," "blank," "encased in ice," I show the reader what this town, and winter, felt like, what it meant to me. I am able, in short, through the Voice of Experience, to bring the reader inside my cold, icy world.

A FLASH NONFICTION ESSAY

Archipelago

When I'm thirteen, my family and I leave our home in the West Indies. On the day of our departure I pluck a red hibiscus, putting it in the pocket of my madras skirt. Now that I've finally absorbed the wealth of island colors, I don't want to leave. I lag behind my family as we walk from the tin-hangar airport, cross the tarmac, and climb into the sweltering cabin of the Caribair plane.

Even though I was young, in second grade, when we originally moved here from the States, my skin still remembers the chill of asphalt-gray mornings, frigid hands and feet. All winter, bleak trees longed for green. *I* longed. Static, as if suspended in ice, I waited to melt into spring.

Only here, on my island of mimosa charms and sunny amulets, I feel transfigured into endless days of warmth.

But the move is decided. My sister, now in high school, is too old to attend the Antilles School. She has to continue her education in the States. My father, a banker, secured a new position outside New York City.

After liftoff, I press my forehead against the window. I seem to see all my Caribbean life far below, in one glance, as we arc toward the horizon. For years, I walked up/down volcanic mountains, sandals slapping and scuffing Calypso rhythms. Our cook, Sylvanie, twisted chicken necks, voodooing them into dinner. I slept frothed in a mosquito net, stars and moon bluing the reflected viridian sea. I waded into dolphined waves, seaweed haloing my hair.

Now, the airplane itself seems gusted by trade winds, propellers spinning like silver doubloons through an operatic sunset—a chorus of ibis, bananaquits, blue-crowned euphonias. The sky is a blizzard of bougainvillea, poinsettias, flamboyants, before birthing an emerald-drop dusk, staining fields of sugarcane. Wanting to carry all of my green memories with me, I take a deep breath and strap my seat belt tighter across my stomach. I want to contain each ginger flower, each blade of fever grass. If only my suntanned skin would last all year long. Enough color, enough warmth... enough to last.

We land a few hours later, like magic, at Idlewild airport. On the way to the hotel, speeding across the city in a sun-yellow taxi cab, I press my face to the window. Times Square marquees blaze red and white, like neon frangipani petals, fluttering. Skyscrapers soar high as volcanic mountains. The Marlboro Man, tanned golden as a pirate, puffs halos of smoke—almost like my breath fogging the window. Rising above Riverside Drive, Yale Truck tires spin billboard lights, around and around, as our taxi crosses diamond-studded suspension, bridging water frozen by alchemy. Snowy clouds mystically cape stars and planets.

Later, when we leave the hotel, my new penny loafers strike steel-drum percussion on city streets. At Horn & Hardart, dinner is conjured behind little glass windows—an apparition right here at 182 Broadway. Roast chicken, seaweedy spinach, banana cream pie. Rich island-bean coffee pours from dolphin-head spouts. Here, a fistful of silver coins buys paradise, warm and perfect. Green and crimson apples glow as delicious as sunsets.

That first winter I barely feel the cold. Nor do I sense the waiting, month after month, for summer. Rather, I see warm tropical afterimages as if I only, just then, turned my head from the window of that airplane. For years, whenever I'm about to touch down in another port—no matter how far inland—I feel as if trade winds reverse, tugging me back. Always, at this moment, I see that long chain of islands I live in still... its outline, its history, its secrets of flaming abundance.

—Sue William Silverman, from *Brevity*

BONE BLACK

MEMORIES OF GIRLHOOD

bell hooks

2

WE LIVE IN the country. We children do not understand that that means we are among the poor. We do not understand that the outhouses behind many of the houses are still there because running water came here long after they had it in the city. We do not understand that our playmates who are eating laundry starch do so not because the white powder tastes so good but because they are sometimes without necessary food. We do not understand that we wash with the heavy, unsmelling, oddly shaped pieces of homemade lye soap because real soap costs money. We never think about where lye soap comes from. We only know we want to make our skin itch less—that we do not want our mouths to be washed out with it. Because we are poor, because we live in the country, we go to the country school—the little white wood-frame building where all the

country kids come. They come from miles and miles away. They come so far because they are black. As they are riding the school buses they pass school after school where children who are white can attend without being bused, without getting up in the wee hours of the morning, sometimes leaving home in the dark.

We are not bused. The school is only a mile or two away from our house. We get to walk. We get to wander aimlessly in the road—until a car comes by. We get to wave at the buses. They are not allowed to stop and give us a ride. We do not understand why. Daddy says the walk to school will be good for us. He tells us again and again in a harsh voice of the miles he walked to school through fields in the snow, without boots or gloves to keep him warm. We are not comforted by the image of the small boy trudging along many miles to school so he can learn to read and be somebody. When we close our eyes he becomes real to us. He looks very sad. Sometimes he cries. We are not at all comforted. And there are still days when we complain about the walk, especially when it is wet and stormy.

School begins with chapel. There we recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. We have no feeling for the flag but we like the words; said in unison, they sound like a chant. We then listen to a morning prayer. We say the Lord's Prayer. It is the singing that makes morning chapel the happiest moment of the day. It is there I learn to sing "Red River Valley." It is a song about missing and longing. I do not understand all the words, only the feeling—warm

wet sorrow, like playing games in spring rain. After chapel we go to classrooms.

In the first grade the teacher gives tasting parties. She brings us different foods to taste so that we can know what they are like because we do not eat them in our homes. All of us eagerly await the Fridays when the tasting part will begin. The day she brings cottage cheese I am not sure I want to try it. She makes me. She makes everyone try a little bit just in case they might really like it. We go home from the tasting parties telling our parents what it was like, telling them to buy this new good food, better food, better than any food we have ever tasted.

Mama tells us that most of that food we taste isn't good to eat all the time, that it is a waste of money. We do not understand money. We do not know that we are all poor. We cannot visit many of the friends we make because they live miles and miles away. We have each other after school.

3

HERE AT THE country school we must always work to raise money—selling candy, raffle tickets, having shows for which tickets are sold. Sold to our parents, neighbors, friends, people without money who are shamed into buying little colored paper they cannot afford, tickets that will help keep the school going. The people with lots of money can buy many tickets—can show that they are "big time." Their flesh is often the color of pigs in the storybook. Somehow they have more money because they are lighter, because their flesh turns pink and pinker, because they dye their hair blond, red, to emphasize the light, lightness of their skin. We children think of them as white. We are so confused by this thing called Race.

We learn about color with crayons. We learn to tell the difference between white and pink and a color they call

Flesh. The flesh-colored crayon amuses us. Like white it never shows up on the thick Manila paper they give us to draw on, or on the brown paper sacks we draw on at home. Flesh we know has no relationship to our skin, for we are brown and brown and brown like all good things. And we know that pigs are not pink or white like these flesh people. We secretly love pigs, especially me. I like to watch them lie in the mud, covering themselves in the cool red mud that is like clay, that is flaming red hot like dirt on fire. I like to watch them eat—to feed them. For some weeks now I have been feeding them the coal that is our way of keeping warm in winters. I give them little pieces at a time to hear the crunching sound. I want to give them all the tickets to eat so no one will have to sell them, so mama will not have to complain about the way it adds to her worries that she must now sell tickets. The pigs are disgusted by the tickets. Even when I prod them with a stick they only turn away. They would rather eat coal.

I must sell tickets for a Tom Thumb wedding, one of the school shows. It isn't any fun for children. We get to dress up in paper wedding clothes and go through a ceremony for the entertainment of the adults. The whole thing makes me sick but no one cares. Like every other girl I want to be the bride but I am not chosen. It has always to do with money. The important roles go to the children whose parents have money to give, who will work hard selling tickets. I am lucky to be a bridesmaid, to wear a red crepe paper dress made just for me. I am not thrilled with

such luck. I would rather not wear a paper dress, not be in a make-believe wedding. They tell me that I am lucky to be lighter skinned, not black black, not dark brown, lucky to have hair that is almost straight, otherwise I might not be in the wedding at all, otherwise I might not be so lucky.

This luck angers me and when I am angry things always go wrong. We are practicing in our paper dresses, walking down the aisle while the piano music plays a wedding march. We are practicing to be brides, to be girls who will grow up to be given away. My legs would rather be running, itch to go outdoors. My legs are dreaming, adventurous legs. They cannot walk down the aisle without protest. They go too fast. They go too slow. They make everything slow down. The girl walking behind me steps on the red dress; it tears. It moves from my flesh like wind moving against the running legs. I am truly lucky now to have this tear. I hope they will make me sit, but they say No we would not think of taking you out of the show. They know how much every girl wants to be in a wedding. The tear must be mended. The red dress like a woman's heart must break silently and in secret.

Girl Fight

by Joey Franklin

Marty Manzoni's mother was fat. We all knew it, and we all knew better than to ever mention it, but that day in the school hall before basketball practice we were waiting for Coach to show up, and we got to talking about girls, as boys do, and someone mentioned Heather, a girl with sandy blond hair who carried her bulk around on ballerina tip-toes and told me just yesterday, above the noise of the bus, that she liked me—a girl with whom, against my better sixth-grade-judgment, I had secretly agreed to "go out."

Marty Manzoni, whose mother we all knew was fat, had been bouncing a ball in the hallway when he turned to me, smiling.

"She's a fat girl," he said. "Why do you like a fat girl?" And the boys around us laughed because my secret had gotten out that day, as secrets do, and they had all been wondering the same thing.

I might have said that Heather and I rode the same bus for years, that we both liked football and sang along with Boys II Men, that we shared the kind of easy, endless conversations that later in my life I would recognize as the first signs of a good, healthy crush. I could have said I liked the idea of a girl liking me and I could have said that he was ruining it all with his questions.

Instead I chased him, as he must have known I would. I chased him down the hall and out the school's large double doors. I chased him for Heather and for my stupid, boyish pride. But mostly I chased him for the giggling boys around us who left me no other choice, for making

clear what I'd already figured out, that I couldn't love a fat girl, that no one can love a fat girl.

Marty ran across the parking lot and onto the school's large, green lawn, finally stopping beneath the flagpole, basketball tucked under his arm. I stayed at the curb and watched him standing there, his chest heaving, and then I opened my mouth and said the only thing a sixth-grade boy could say in a moment like that. And before the words—"Not as fat as your mom!"—left my mouth I knew that insult would hang in the air, as insults do, and make the other boys gasp and shudder as it slowly settled into the ground around us.

Marty stood by the flagpole. Boys who'd spilled out of the double doors to watch chuckled. I turned, still breathing hard myself, and rejoined my teammates as if nothing had happened at all, as if my girlfriend wasn't fat, and I hadn't just breached some sacred boys' club boundary. But Marty inched forward to the edge of the asphalt and lifted the basketball. It hit me on the ear so hard I fell to the ground, my head ringing, and I cried louder than I have ever cried anywhere—an indignant, fearful cry, a where-is-my-mother-cry—and the boys around me backed away, as if afraid they might catch something.

Then Coach pulled up in his car and stepped out, looked at me sprawled and bawling on the concrete, and then at Marty who walked past us both, picked up his basketball, and disappeared into the school. The other boys followed Marty in a mute procession past my body, and Coach held the door open to follow behind them. "Get up," he said in a voice that meant, "You're acting like a girl."

I lay on the ground, half hoping that Heather might drive up with her mom and see me on the ground and screech to a halt, jump out of the car and come kneel at my side and take my head in her arms; and the other half of me was hoping she would never come to school again, that I might die right there on the asphalt, and this story along with me.

White Lies

by Erin Murphy

Arpi, a Lebanese girl who pronounced *ask* as *ax* no matter how many times the teacher corrected her, must have been delighted by the arrival of Connie, the new girl in our fifth grade class. Connie was albino, exceptionally white even by the ultra-Caucasian standards of our southern suburb. Only her eyelids had color: mouse-nose pink, framed by moth-white lashes and brows.

We had been taught that there was no comparative or superlative for *different*. Things were either different or the same, the teacher said. Likewise for *perfect*—something was either perfect or not. But surely Arpi thought of Connie as *more different* than herself. Arpi may have had a name that sounded all too close to Alpo, a brand of dog food, but at least she had a family whose skin and hair and eyes looked like hers. Connie, by comparison, was alone in her difference. She was, perhaps, *most different. Differentest.*

This was confirmed by the ridicule, which was immediate and unrelenting: *Casper, Chalk Face, Q-Tip*. Connie, whose shoulders hunched in a permanent parenthesis, pretended not to hear the names or the taunting questions: *What'd ya do, take a bath in bleach? Who's your boyfriend—Frosty the Snowman?* She sat in the front of the classroom, and if she felt the boys plucking white hairs from her scalp, she didn't react. The teacher, who was serving the last nine months of a 30-year sentence in the public school system, spent the bulk of each day perusing magazines and L.L. Bean catalogs in the back of the room. As far as I know, she never intervened.

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Girl/Thing

by Anna Vodicka

Because I needed the cash, because it seemed like the girl thing to do, I took a certification course in babysitting to learn the essentials of diaper changing, of getting a baby to take the Gerber's off the spoon, and of infant CPR, which we practiced on naked, rubbery dolls. But they didn't teach us what to do when the job is done—when the littlest one, who screamed all night, is finally asleep in the crib, and the baby's father drives you home slurry at the wheel, and he slides a roving hand across the divide and onto the space that used to be known, seconds ago, as your innocuous upper thigh. "You're growing up so fast," he says. And sitting in the car—now a vehicle for ugly things like upper thighs, glassy eyes, and the rot-breath of intoxication—you think about how bullshit this all is, that you're growing up at the same rate as every other goddamned girl in that babysitting class who paid 25 bucks to have adults critique her in the art of child-rearing. A certified screw. But you can't do anything, because they've already taken your money, and this man is at the wheel, and your body *is* changing fast, so fast you don't know anymore if you are a girl, and if that noun means you are a person, place, or thing.

Milk for Free

by Deesha Philyaw

Item: "Did anybody touch you down there?"

Down there, I understood, referred to the mystery below my waist, between my legs. A place where my mother said no one should ever, ever touch me.

My mother asks me this question, nightly, as she undresses me for my bath, until I learn to bathe myself. What I learn—besides the fact that no one should ever, ever touch me down there—is that this burden is mine. I have to be the guardian of down there, as well as the giver of the daily report of any errant touching that happens down there. I don't like it. It's too much, and I don't even know why.

Item: Old ladies in the neighborhood would watch us inside their spotless houses during the day while our mothers worked. Then, when we were old enough to stay home alone and play outside unsupervised, they would watch us from the shadows of their front porch, or from the slit between the curtains in their front window. One of them, Miss Maybelle, would come outside without her teeth, smack her lips, and say, "Don't let the boys fool ya. Why they gon' buy the cow if they can get the milk for free?"

Item: Hide and go get it!

The game was like hide and seek, except the boys looked for the girls and "it" was whatever a girl allowed a boy to do when he found her. And sometimes it was what he did to her whether she allowed it or not.

Item: In sixth grade, the grown men would come to Cyprana's house while her mother was at work. One day, her mom came home and sat down on the couch next to some white stuff.

"What's this?"

"Curl activator," Cyprana said.

Did your mother believe you? we asked her.

Cyprana shrugged. The men sometimes gave her money. Sometimes she gave some of it to her mother.

Item: *What if you want to give the milk away for free?* The summer after sixth grade, I have my first real boyfriend. We do things below the waist that leave me wondering if I'm still a virgin. My sex education, courtesy of Jackie Collins novels and biology books read while sitting on the floor in the Children's section of the public library, doesn't offer me any clarification on the matter.

I think that this is what love is—sweaty, sticky, forever—until the next time.

Item: Go back, way, way back. At the time, I don't have the words for all of it. But then the memory comes back, and here it is: I'm two years old. Maybe three. It's the early 1970s. A white woman—a detective—is on our front porch asking my mother questions. My mother is sitting in the old wooden rocking chair that I like to pretend is a rocket ship. She's crying. Her shirt is pushed up and her belly is exposed. She has stretch marks; I did that. They remind me of sun rays.

My mother was walking home from work through the field between Darnell Cookman School and our house. A shortcut.

There is a word for this. *Rape.*

Item: Mick Jagger sang, "Black girls just wanna get fucked all night..."

Item: "Old enough to bleed, old enough to breed..." Of course, the men who say filthy things to me when I walk home from the bus stop aren't thinking about pregnancy, or any consequences really. They never cross the street to where I am, and I cling to this. As long as they don't cross the street, I'll be safe.

Shorty Hall, the neighborhood drunk, doesn't cross the street. But one time, he does this thing with his tongue and his hands and I run. I run all the way home.

My mother calls the police. The officer writes down everything I say. My mother is frantic, yelling, crying. The officer keeps looking at his notepad. He asks me again if I'm 11, like he can't believe it. I know what he's thinking because it's what everyone says: I'm "big for my age."

"Ma'am, there's nothing we can do."

No one can protect me. If Shorty Hall doesn't rape me, it'll be because he chooses not to.

Item: When asked what the position of women was in the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, activist Stokely Carmichael replied, "Prone."

Good girls don't. Black girls will. Keep your legs closed. Don't let the boys fool ya. There's nothing we can do.

There's nothing we can do.

Carol Guess

ON CARNIVAL LIGHTS, COMPRESSION, AND MICE

My father loved mice, but he also loved me. What I understood of his vocation was a room like my childhood bedroom, filled floor to ceiling with books and baby animals in cages. I don't remember how I came to understand that the mice my father studied were injected with disease. But on the occasion of a dinner party for his colleagues, my pet mice disappeared.

"It's a secret," I told my mother, refusing to divulge their whereabouts. "Don't tell Daddy's friends or they might steal my mice and make them sick."

Childhood was a world of fine lines, careful distinctions. My father and I had mice, but they weren't the same mice. My father even had his own cartoon characters, but their seriousness was never in doubt. There was a t-shirt emblazoned with a giant chicken, the words "POX BUSTERS" printed below. It looked like the t-shirts I wore in grade school, but represented his work on the chickenpox vaccine. As I grew older, I stole his sweaters and tattered corduroys. I stole his gestures, so in photographs we are sitting at the same angle, our arms and legs crossed the exact same way. As a girl, I wanted to emulate my mother—the model, the gifted hostess—but that veneer always wore off, revealing the awkward introvert beneath.

My father the scientist had an uncanny ability to move toward a fixed point—the beautiful solution—with blinders on. He moved with speed—ambitious in the best sense, meaning ethical—driven by both curiosity and empathy. He moved undeterred by distractions around him. And if

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by distractions I mean me, I also mean corruption and cruelty, pettiness and bureaucracy. He had integrity, my father, and street geek style. He arrived at meetings in mismatched socks, threadbare sneakers, and corduroys he'd purchased in high school. He often ate family dinners standing up. He had eaten standing up in the Navy and the habit stuck, plus it allowed him to read.

My father the mathematician moved unswervingly toward the elegant answer, toward numbers so bright in the distance that he forgot to look both ways for cars.

"You must," said my mother once, "look both ways for him when he crosses the street."

And so I became Janus, their New Year's baby, a good girl with one bad girl foot off the curb.

My father's work in science and math is often described by his peers as elegant. Often that's the one aspect of his work that I can understand. It wasn't for lack of trying that I did poorly in math and science. No matter how many hours he spent helping me with my homework, I couldn't separate numbers from the fingers I used to count, or stop terminology from sliding, words losing meaning as they rolled toward music.

After years spent trying to choose between conflicting interests, between the elegant abstractions of math and the inelegant but ethically-motivated drive to heal humankind, my father reconciled them in epidemiology, which allowed him to live in the beautiful, poised world of numbers while striving, still, to heal the sick. To cure the flesh without touching the flesh—to tell the story without telling a story—to express emotion without actually feeling—my father wanted the essence of the thing without the dirt. He wanted the view from a window, a smooth pane of glass between the world and his gaze.

My father was prolific in each of the fields he entered, writing articles that engaged with, and often generated, the questions of his day. But he did not write books. Books are rare in his field, a field where speed and wide distribution are necessary for advancement.

"Medicine," he said, "doesn't wait for the book."

Because he and his peers did not write books, they had a fascination with, and maybe envy of, writers who produced them. My father spoke with bewilderment and awe of a colleague who had published several books. When I pointed out that his books weren't serious—weren't groundbreaking and intellectually challenging like my father's articles—my father shrugged.

"But Cal, they're books. You can hold them, set them on the table. You can wrap them in paper and give them as gifts."

When at last my father co-edited a book, he and I both found it funny that the subject of the book was placebos. For years my father and I had engaged in a running joke about medical conference souvenirs, each of us trying to outdo the other by thinking up garish, inappropriate themes for tote bags and mugs. The joke began when my father arrived home from a conference on prostate cancer bearing an enormous coffee mug embossed with a multi-colored image of an oversized prostate.

My mother was horrified, and begged him to get rid of it. I saved it from the garbage that day, and from then on my father delighted in bringing me the most ridiculous freebies he could find. My favorite was a gold pen with "VIAGRA" printed in bold letters, which I use in faculty meetings when I'm having a tough day.

"You're lucky I didn't get you a luggage tag," he told me. "The stats on stealing luggage with Viagra tags are pretty high."

When *The Science of the Placebo* was published, my father joked about what sorts of freebies might accompany its distribution.

"How about a coffee mug without a bottom?"

"How about pens with invisible ink?"

My father was proud of his book, although he never said so. Pride was high on his list of sins. I could tell only because he gave me not one but two copies of *The Science of the Placebo*. The book is hot pink, and I'll admit the cover is not the most attractive thing about it. It has two profiles juxtaposed on the front, presumably to suggest the notion of ghosting that placebos embody. Inside, the articles tend to the topic of medical ethics with seriousness, but also grace. I sense my father's presence as an editor simply because I can actually read the articles and make sense of them.

My father hated jargon. He loved simplicity in language: clarity, com-

pression. He co-edited this volume with a Kleinman, a Kusek, and a Engel, and I wonder if they shared not only his integrity about the eth ics of scientific inquiry, but his obsession with clarity and compression as well. Sometimes when I miss my father I am tempted to try to talk to Kleinman, Kusek, and/or Engel, to ask them for anecdotes, odd little bits about his character. Instead I open the book at random and find words like: "deceptive administration," "voodoo death," "equipoise." My father would have liked these words, too, and we'd have punned around with them, creating new meanings.

I inherited both my father's introverted nature and his obsession with the aesthetics of compression. They seem related, concerned with shutting things out. It gives me great pleasure to pare sentences down, to make stories smaller, more private, contained. I feel so much—too much most days. I prefer being alone to almost anyone's company. The world is a great carnival of flashing lights, whip cracks, and popcorn smells that trail me home, stuck to the hem of my skirt.

When I write, and especially when I revise to make things tiny and perfect, I make amends for my introversion and awkwardness. I am forgiven my unwillingness to socialize. When I write, I take the overwhelming world and winnow it into a window, from which I can see you, but you can't see me.

Of course, there is no craft without content. There is no relation to compression without a relation to release. Compression is the opposite of excess, which means that an emphasis on compression's precision, perfectionism, and delicacy is haunted by traces of its reckless, garrulous, sexy sibling.

Compression, meet Passion.

But that is an essay for another time.

A FLASH NONFICTION PROMPT

For now, short and to the point: pare it down to yield new meanings. Not only the sentence itself, but the subject. Here I condense my

father's life, and my complex relation to him, to the required word count of below 2,000 words. Compression is the art not only of crafting minimalist lines, but also of capturing a long story by honing in on a moment or detail.

Your assignment is to capture someone who raised you, whether overtly or in stealth, whether well or badly: parent, guardian, swim coach, minister, math teacher, bad girls on the stoop. Capture them by describing a telling moment or detail. Compress a life's worth of memories; allude to the gifts they gave or the damage they did. Give the reader a flash, a glimpse, a photograph. By compressing your story, which self do you reveal?

A FLASH NONFICTION ESSAY

Little Things

My mother's dollhouse has become a constant reminder of something—what?—in the time we spend with her, if it could be said to be spent. At 89 she remembers very little. She does not so much talk as chime, like a clock with a surreal burden: Do we have anything to eat for dinner? Yes, chicken. Do we have anything to eat for dinner? Yes, chicken. For dinner? Yes yes, chicken. Do we have anything. Yes. There's something we have.

This however explains nothing about the dollhouse, which I bought her 30-odd years ago, though she has no idea anymore that that's true. It's a nonce fact from the haze of our family, the kind that only one of us knows, and therefore no one does. She wanted a dollhouse badly though I don't recall how I knew that; she has always been an amazingly taciturn woman. Though my son is 12 and disgusted by all things girly, before we come my mother guards against him by wrapping a bungee-cord all the way round the dollhouse. My mother's decor—Victorian, with teeny candelabra, petit point chairs, a grandfather clock with real brass—reflects a taste as far from her own house as the regal Victoria would be from one of our own lewd and ineptly corrupt politicos, an Ensign or a Sanford. My parents' house in northern New Jersey screams 1970s: flocked wallpaper, shag carpet made of

Counting Bats

by Thao Thai

I tell you we've got bats.

Not just one, which might be extraordinary—or two, which could be cute—not even three, a vaguely threatening almost-gang. But four. Four of them perch on the mosquito netting above me, claws gripping the fine, flossy strands that wind protectively around my head.

Four are points on a pirate compass, ready to plunder.

You should know that these bats are not even a little ordinary. They came from the deep recesses of my childhood home in Vietnam, a thin, rectangular house on stilts, with rushing sewage below. My grandparents hired a man from the village to remove the squat toilet so that they could install a new, Western-style one for my benefit. For my convenience.

I find this place terribly inconvenient.

With the last clank of sledgehammer on porcelain, the bats emerged from beneath, angry and whitened by cement particles, their wings stuck together from lack of use. They took to the walls, they took to the ceilings. They fled into the dark.

My family gaped at one other. We thought we knew everything about this place.

The four bats are so close now I could reach out to touch their furry bodies, to poke them each in a beady eye. Bats can't bully *me*. Instead, I shake the mosquito netting. I create myself a little tempest. They rollick back and forth and still they stay fastened. Their eyes bore.

Is this blame? Is this retribution? I told them my comfort was more important than their home and now they are here to get me. Sweat gathers in the crease of my elbow. I'm feverish.

Beyond my makeshift bed, my grandparents sleep in their tightly enclosed bedroom. Beyond that, my village sleeps, and beyond that—the entire country of Vietnam. There's no sound except for the bats' slow progress across the netting. They switch positions. They're trying to find a break.

There is none, I say, shaking the netting a little more. Don't you know this house has no windows. They lose grip. Or I lose grip.

Count with me now.

Three days ago, I was in Saigon, city of honking mopeds and steaming street food. City of distended stomachs and rats and the damp heat of tropical summer. Seven days ago, I was in the States, typing frantically at a coffee shop in the cooling Midwest. Twenty years ago, I was here, in this house—wasn't I?—with bats scrambling beneath the bed where I slept. Now the bats are on top.

My grandfather promised that he would kill them in the morning, when they'd least suspect it. He said I could help. I imagine us with torches and nets, the flap of a wing close to my ear. What drives a bat out of hiding?

What drives a woman out of hiding?

The bats cross one another overhead, dignified, almost prancing in their delicacy. They think they are on their way to the opera. Hello, how are you. Hello, excuse me.

I'm the ground upon which bats tread. They aren't trying to get *at* me. They're trying to get *past* me. That difference is riveting. I am suspended between terror and its accompanying shadow, wonder.

Let's start again.

Four bats. Three days in the village. Two hours of sleeplessness. One woman in one small country one whole ocean away from one home that sits calm and safe and quiet at the bottom of one green, blessedly familiar hill.

What comes before one?

Without warning, the bats loosen their claws and take flight.

I could unhinge myself too and fly with them, already hollow and high, in another place, another plane of unfettered existence. Somewhere along the way, I might ask, Where is the sky, that dark, dimpled ceiling of my world?

Nowhere, I tell you. Nowhere comes before one.

over, I explained. No one said anything as Mary closed the car door and led me inside. What was there to say? All girls have sleepovers.

Mary's father sat in the living room reading a newspaper and listening to Woody Guthrie. Mary's mother sat at the dining room table grading tests. They looked up as we came in, glanced at their watches. Good time? They asked in unison. Mary said yes and led me upstairs. No one said anything. What was there to say?

Later, our nightgowns tangled about our bodies but not off our bodies, Mary whispered in my ear all that I could do if I wanted, and I wanted, but never would have dared if Mary had not confessed her secrets to me. Outside her big yellow house, streetlights illuminated the snow on the frozen ground but blurred out the stars in the sky above. Inside, Mary's brothers slept in rooms across the hall, Mary's sister slept on a cot in the attic, Mary's father snored so loudly no one could have heard what we were doing.

Much later, when our gowns had fallen entirely away and we were still awake, after the streetlights had blinked off, and the big yellow house had begun to yawn, my English teacher's family readied themselves for 10 o'clock mass at St. Leo's in the better part of town. I lay on top of Mary and felt my heart explode from terror and from joy.

A year later, it did explode. Mary went to confession and told the priest everything. Then she went to the bars where soldiers from the Army base drank on Saturday nights. She went through a whole regiment that year, that's what they said, or a whole regiment went through her—a penance of her own invention, an offering that would never be good enough to a god she did not even love.

My sister and her best friend offered me the details of Mary's bold hips in envious whispers and mostly fear. Good thing you stopped hanging around with her, they said. She's getting a bad reputation.

In all the neighborhoods in my hometown—the better parts and the worse parts—there were names for girls like Mary. There were names for me, too, only I didn't know them yet.

Mary went to confession.

I never did.

Beach City

by Jaquira Díaz

We talked about Miami Beach like it belonged to us, convinced that the tourists who came down to swim in our ocean and dance in our nightclubs were fucking up our city. We were 17, 18, 19-year-old hoodlums, our hair in cornrows, too-tight ponytails, too much hairspray, dark brown lip liner, noses and belly buttons pierced, door-knocker earrings, jailhouse ankle tattoos. We didn't have time for boys from Hollywood or North Miami, busters who drove their hoopties with the windows down because they didn't have A/C, calling out to us trying to get phone numbers as we crossed Washington Avenue or Lincoln Road, our chancletas slapping the sidewalk.

What did they know about surfing during hurricane winds, fucking on lifeguard stands, breathing under water? What did they know about millions of stray cats pissing in the sand dunes, entire flocks of rogue seagulls dropping shit torpedoes, about refugees and kilos of cocaine and bodies washing up on our shores?

We were the ones who knew what it meant to belong here, to be made whole during full moon drum circles, dancing, drinking, smoking it up with our homeboys. We knew what it meant to bloody our knuckles here, to break teeth here, to live and breathe these streets day in, day out, the glow of the neon hotel signs on the waterfront, the salt and sweat of this beach city.

There Are Distances Between Us

by Roxane Gay

The interstate highway system in the United States is the largest and most sophisticated in the world. It is named for President Dwight D. Eisenhower. There are two points and between them, a distance between you and me. These two points are connected in ways we will never fully understand but they *are* connected. You are there and I am here. We are red stars on maps protected beneath hard plastic in highway rest areas tired travelers touch to make sense of where they are. I have counted the miles, yards, feet, and inches between us. There are too many. When I was young, my father had an atlas I liked to study, bound in leather, worn. I traced tiny lines with my fingers and said the names of cities like Waukesha and Cody and Easton and Amarillo. I once came home to a canopy bed. That summer was long, hot, terrible. Before I left, there had been an incident involving some boys who broke me right down the middle and, after, I couldn't pull myself back together. I simply stopped talking. My hair started graying. I stayed in my room. My parents fretted. A change of scenery, they decided, would be good. I went to Port-au-Prince, the city of their birth, stayed with an aunt and uncle I hardly knew. Each time we needed to flush a toilet or take a bath or brush our teeth, we carried huge buckets to a well and carried those buckets back, warm water sloshing everywhere all to wash ourselves clean in some small way. It was never enough. I never felt clean. I only felt those boys. When I returned home, I walked into a perfect bedroom. The wallpaper was covered in little cornflowers. There was a canopy bed covered in gauzy material, draped perfectly. I loved to stare into the canopy and forget about all the ways I felt broken. Whenever we went on vacation, my father would study his atlas to find his way across America. My brothers and I sat in the back of our 1974 Grand Prix, bare legs sticking to the leather seat, hot and irritable, often bickering, forced to participate in my father's endless exploration of how far he could go. He often said the United States is a great country because with enough persistence, with enough patience, a man can travel from one end to the other. He said he never wanted to take for granted that he could not be kept from any place he wanted to be. Every morning, when I wake up, I think your name. I think, "Marry me," over and over and over. It shocks me, the clarity of those words, the intensity and depth, how the emotions behind those words defy logic, possibility. I do not say the words "I love you" often, not to anyone. Those words mean something. They shouldn't be used carelessly. In a photo album there is a faded Polaroid of my dad and my middle brother and me at the Grand Canyon before the third child came. We are painfully young, the four of us. I have no recollection of this trip. Behind us is our car and on the roof, the atlas. My father stands with one leg on a rock. My brother and I hug his other leg, hold hands. My father smiles. He is not a man who smiles easily. There is a gravity to him. When he speaks or acts, he does so with purpose and sincerity. I have spent the past several years trying to become like him so when I say, "I love you," *you* can know I mean it. My father is a civil engineer. He is always concerned with infrastructure, the strength of holding the world together. He has always filled my head with information about highways and tunnels and concrete. I've retained little. The ingratitude of children is staggering. I do know this, however: if nothing else were in the way, we would always be able to reach each other. We could close the distance between our two points. We could point to a place on a map and say, we are here.

Writing Prompt: Things I Was Taught/Things I Was Not Taught

To elicit fresh and surprising insights into your relationship to family, friends, community, and the world.

1. Choose an individual who has been enormously influential in your life (perhaps a parent, sibling, or friend).
2. Create a list of the things that person has taught you. The list might be entitled "Things that X Taught Me."
3. Create a list of the things that person did not teach you. This might be entitled "Things X Didn't Teach Me."

The following piece was written as a response by Clare Doman:

Things my father taught me
How, if you're sick, it's your special day. Your mother makes tea with lemon and a dash of whiskey that she hides in her bedroom closet and your father unplugs the small black-and-white television he keeps in his workroom and allows you to watch cartoons in bed.
How to walk in the woods after a rain and think of nothing but the smell of eucalyptus and pine.
How to let the mud dry on your shoes so you can knock it off with a stick the next day.
That you're allowed to make an absolute pig-sty of your car, and throw coffee cups, candy wrappers, and half-eaten apples on the floor with abandon. When it gets too disgusting, you take it to the car wash and pay extra for the attendants to haul away the garbage and deodorize the moldy carpet.
How to drive to Half Moon Bay and choose the best live crabs and lobsters from the tank. You let them crawl around on the backseat because they don't have long to live and must be allowed to enjoy the little time left to them. You listen to them scream when you throw them into boiling salted water, then you crack them open and eat them with melted butter and lemon, but only when your father is out of town, because why go to all that trouble for something so tasteless? You must have Hostess Hohos washed down with milk for dessert after you eat a freshly killed lobster.

Things my father didn't teach me
When it's best to ignore that your wife is deeply unhappy; when you should bring her a glass of water, but be careful not to touch her; how to sit in the same room as her, but not so she has to look directly at you; that you shouldn't notice tears, or muffled phone conversations at 3AM, or whether the other side of the bed has been slept in when you wake up in the morning.
When it's appropriate to continue to embrace your wife even though she struggles at first; when you should not allow her to watch David Letterman because she gets too depressed at how heartily the audience laughs when he mocks his guests; when it's okay to get in the car next to her and let her drive 100 miles north, then 75 miles east before turning the car toward home, all without saying a word
How to stop drinking before you have to spend the night on the couch of people you barely know and who don't like you.
How to keep spare light bulbs around the house so when one goes out you can replace it immediately.
How to wash your infant son's genitalia in the bathtub without feeling ashamed.
How to cheer with just the right balance of enthusiasm and irony from the bleachers at Wrigley Field when Ernie Banks hits a homer.

LaPlante, A. (2009). *Method and madness: The making of a story*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Writing Prompt: What Everyone Knows/What I Know

Practicing using narration to move from public knowledge to private knowledge.

1. Think of a place, person or event (something that happened) that you are intimately familiar with (if possible, something you have intimate knowledge of that no one else does).
2. Next, do a free-write using the first sentence "What everyone knows about X is…" where X is the person, place or event.
3. Now write a second piece beginning with the sentence, "But what *I* know about X is…" where you reveal your special private knowledge or unique perspective.

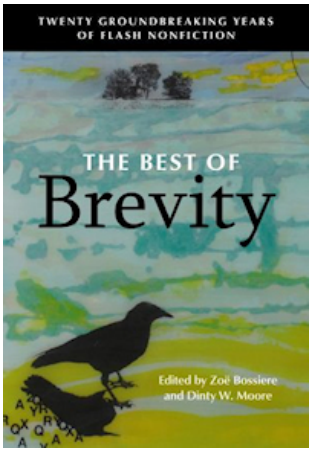
The following was written by Jenna Philpott:

What everyone knows about her is that she buys expensive shoes and wears them. Tod's. Gucci. Choo. Her boss and her underlings all know her quip, "The pain of a beautiful three-hour shoe can keep you awake for a twelve-hour day!" She calls her nanny at 10AM and 4PM and rubs her sore feet during those calls. She gives a generous bonus to her household help each Christmas and summer vacation. "I'm not cheap." Cocktail hour has returned after the birth of her child, "Weekends at four if you can make it!" Everyone knows they haven't really been invited and won't ever go.

What I know is that her daughter is deaf and blind. No pictures of the girl beside the woman and her husband. A grin for Aspen! Two grins for Tahiti! A kiss for Iceland! Her daughter lies on her back on the floor surrounded by toys she can neither see nor hear. The infant starts to squirm when the cleaning lady vacuums an arc around her. The vibrations stir something in her brain, "Others are near!" I also know that the woman's vacation days are her daughter's surgery days. This Friday her daughter's right eye will be removed, its pressure too great for a brain to develop. If the child recovers well, heart surgery is on the docket the day before Thanksgiving.

LaPlante, A. (2009). *Method and madness: The making of a story*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Where to Publish Flash Nonfiction



This list, though extensive, is in no way exhaustive. Many literary journals will consider short prose whether they advertise that fact or not. But these links lead to journals that have expressed a specific interest:

***82 Review**
100 Word Story

Arts & Letters
Atlas + Alice
Atticus Review

Baltimore Review
Barren Magazine
Bending Genres
Booth Review
***Brevity* Blog** (Craft Discussions, Essays on the Writing Life)
Burningwood Literary

Catholic Digest "Last Word" essays
Cincinnati Review (micro contest)
Citron Review
Cleaver
Craft Literary
Cutbank

decomP
Deep Wild Journal
Diagram

Ellipsis Zine
Empty House Press

Fairy Tale Review
Feed
Fugue

Gigantic Sequins
Gordon Square Review
Guernica (fewer than 2,500)
Gulf Coast

Hippocampus
Humana *Obscura* (nature focused)

SEARCH

THE BREVITY BLOG

What's the Point of Writing?
I'm a Developmental Editor – These are the Five Biggest Issues I See in Memoir Drafts
Wait—Did That Really Happen?
The Craft of Chewy Words
Google Gets Me

Ilanot Review
Indiana Review

JMWW
Juked

Long Leaf Review
Lost Balloon
Lunch Ticket

Monkeybicycle
MoonPark Review
Mslexia (UK based; "for women who write")

New Delta Review
New South Journal
New Orleans Review
NY Times Modern Love (a bit longer, 1500-1700 words)

Passages North
Pidgeonholes
Pithead Chapel
Porter House Review
Proximity

Quarter After Eight

River Teeth (Beautiful Things)

Sidereal Magazine
Sleet Magazine
Smokelong Quarterly
Sonora Review
Split Lip
Spry Lit
Stonecrop Review
Sundog Lit
Sweet: A Literary Confection

Tahoma Literary Review
The Adroit Journal
The Christian Science Monitor's "Home Forum" section ('upbeat' essays)
The Florida Review
The Forge
The Offing
The Palisades Review
The Pinch Journal
The Sun's "Readers Write" section
TriQuarterly Online

Unbroken Journal
Under the Gum Tree

Waxwing
Wildness
WOW! Women on Writing

X-R-A-Y

Further Resources

The Best of Brevity: Twenty Groundbreaking Years of Flash Nonfiction