

Sara Levine

## THE ESSAYIST IS SORRY FOR YOUR LOSS

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I didn't train to be an essayist, but perhaps it can be said that nobody trains—nor is trained, like seal or dog or clematis. I began . . . well, like so many others, by training to do something else, and fell into the essay by accident. It's tempting, of course, to exaggerate the unlikeliness that a person as promising as oneself would wind up practicing this littlest of genres. Once at a party, in the company of her husband, a woman told me that she'd never had any intention of dating—let alone marrying—her husband (“I was dating a *violin performance* major in college, Harry was just some engineering guy who lived down the hallway; I didn't even *notice* him for two years; then one day, what was it, at the laundromat, when I needed *quarters* . . .”). My god, I thought, doesn't she realize what she's saying about Harry?

She probably does, and yet she's baffled. Me and Harry? The essay and me?

The essay is a modest genre. It doesn't mean to change the world. Instead it says: let me tell you what happened to me. The world shrinks and the self bloats. Here in academia, people get bent out of shape about the genre. Not all people. Not the cafeteria workers, not the cleaning staff, not the administrative staff, but COME ON! Who's the university for? Forget those people. We're in the English Department now, we are cruising its halls of hallowedness, we are bumping into people at the mailboxes and saying hello. (“Hello!” “Hello! How's your book going?”) And we—a pronoun now rapidly shrinking into me—we

are trying to explain to the feminist materialist, and the queer theorist who is also marxist, and the post-colonial scholar who is also friendly, that we study the essay, a transhistorical *objet d'art*—that this, *this* is what all that fellowship money is going for.

I don't want to exaggerate here. I do want to exaggerate, I love to exaggerate, but I'll do this English department disservice if I pretend they're all against me. They're not. The head of the department waves his handkerchief at me encouragingly, the one and only linguist helps me tell a palatal liquid from a palatal glide, and my advisor is the advisor of all advisors, a guy whose heart is bigger than his nose, which for him is saying a lot, and who gives me no advice but lots of go-get-'ems, and kept me from quitting graduate school when I really, really wanted to quit, by offering me a chance to write essays—a guy who is so magical, so miraculous, and yet so (how does he do it?) masculine, I have no choice but to call him my hairy godmother. So look, this is what I'm saying: Not everyone hates me. But once we put my personality aside, and the quirks of my work, and the little ripples of excitement a well-mannered kid from Ohio managed to cause in a seminar, once we forget the shelter they built for me (because they did build it for me, it wasn't here before), we find that most people here find the essay a bad form, politically suspect, ideologically naive, too excited about language, hopelessly bourgeois, and, like a dirty Kleenex falling out of a handbag, vaguely embarrassing.

Why? I don't know. Believe me, I've pondered it.

Some of the distaste for the essay has nothing to do with the genre, but for the way the personal has insinuated itself into the academic playground. I mean lately. Used to be, all those jungle gyms were covered with theorists. Generalists swung from those bars. People from all kinds of perspectives who had one thing in common. Abstraction. Impersonality. A refusal to say publicly what happened to them in the grocery store.

Then Jane Tompkins and the Duke group started moving in, talking about their pee and their tenure meetings, and now we find, if we read such things, twenty-six letters in a recent *PMLA* devoted to “the place, nature, or limits (if any) of the personal in scholarship.” And in the reaction to this mostly awful personal writing some of its readers cast aspersions on the essay. But the personal, it has to be said, is not particular to the essay. “The personal” is a vague term which says nothing about genre or form.

A friend once told me that it is impossible to be embarrassed about something if no one else is in the room with you, but I find I can embarrass myself all by myself, and do it best that way, and in fact would prefer to do it that way always. There are lots of memories from college which produce a keen, almost dizzying

chagrin which, translated into the physical world, might be compared to being locked for twenty-four hours in a brightly lit Finnish steam bath walled with unsteamable mirrors. I am embarrassed by the pleasure I took in my hair, the violence with which I trembled at an audition for *Midsummer*, the ease with which I decided to “skip over” the readings for a course in political philosophy (something very important in my life must have been going on). I am embarrassed by the savagery I felt toward a woman who wanted to make love to me and climbed into my bed in the middle of the night; and also by the degree to which I suppressed that retrogression. (I expressed no emotion at all. I wriggled out of her embrace after announcing the need to get a drink of water, then paced the dormitory’s hallways for an hour. When I came back to bed, she was gone, and even though I saw her every day for a year, we never discussed the incident.)

I’m also embarrassed by the economic fraudulence of those years, the fact that I lived in an apartment with a dishwasher—at that age! a dishwasher! when I only had six dishes to my name—and ate two dinners if I felt like it, if two dinner parties were going on, and loaned Becky Kellum ten dollars and then sat around and stewed about the number of days, hours, seconds, milliseconds it took her to pay it back. I don’t think I needed that ten dollars. I think I needed the moral high ground and needed Becky to owe me, *loved* that she owed me, loved that something to me was due. Could somebody dim these lights, please?

At college I was considered a kind of sharpie. Pointed at. Big man on campus. Big man off campus. Not a man at all but nobody seemed to notice. Was winning prizes and making speeches and somebody hung up a flyer that denounced me and my feminist politics. Groovy! They thought I was a man-hater, which I wasn’t, but I made the *Chicago Tribune*.

Money was monopoly money then, life was school and I was trying to claw my way through it, not out of it, still trying to cope with the fact that there were boys who were prettier than I was and girls who were smarter than I was, and I think it was no accident that Adrienne Rich was everything to me then. Her essays reduced the world into a gender problem I could squeeze in my fist. Also she writes earnestly, and at that age I was learning how to take myself seriously for the first time.

Then I came to graduate school. Something stopped—probably the attention. Also a sense that things could be done easily, that things could be done. Melancholy, as Burton says, battens when it’s just you and a stack of books. (No more girls slipping into my bed, no more rallies on campus, no more Becky Kellums from whom to extract a pound of flesh.)

In the midwest girls walk around in bright colored parkas and plastic boots to match. In the East the girls don’t seem to walk at all; they wisp by you like their own cigarette smoke. They weigh less.

That first year of grad school, I walked around campus in cheap shoes and missed my dog, a very fine mutt who, the following year, would die an unexpected death three days before my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Because his corpse was small and furry and because our anticipated losses were large, that mutt didn’t get the mourning he deserved. But I am talking now about the time before his demise, when I wasn’t mourning him, just missing him. Walking along the soggy grass in my cheap shoes, I would think wistfully of what I had left behind in the midwest, to come to a fashionable school in the East, and I would also think of the heavy dumb even love that dogs will give you, despite the fact that you don’t understand—say, oh come on, just say, this is strictly hypothetical—the construction of power in Foucault.

I went home for Thanksgiving and my father said, “Your shoes are cheap. Why don’t you buy another pair of shoes?”

Academics, in my experience, are not inclined to be generous to essayists. They are suspicious of humanism, nervous about too much style, and wary of public celebrations of the personal. They assume defensive postures and query: do essayists believe in uniqueness? Once, at a meeting to plan a graduate conference in literary studies, the kind of meeting where inclusivity is the aim, and the group spends three hours and forty minutes worrying about getting enough wheelchairs, ramps, crutches, hearing aids, tofu, baby-sitters, etc., to make “everyone feel welcome” but especially those people who never really are; once I suggested we open the calls to papers to include creative writing on the conference’s theme, and people looked at me as if I had requested a naked boy be hired to roller skate in and serve me cotton candy. Essayists are thought to be indulgent.

Which means lenient, messy, loose.

This essayist? Undisciplined? Able to set a perfect table but unable to arrange three consecutive thoughts? One might tackle these accusations in a methodical way, or only pretend to.

The essay seems disorganized, I think, because it has a stake in pretending not to know where it is going. Putting on its hat, heading for the door, it seems to follow the random movement of the mind itself. This looks like laziness, but it smells like epistemology. Because essays offer a way of thinking—a dramatization of process as opposed to a curtain unfurled on the final product, all

scrubbed and clean as the newborn on TV. Unlike articles, they give form to the streakiest mental processes. I like to call the essayist a sketch artist for thought, since artistry is an important part of the package. Yes, yeah, right, my thoughts don't really bump along this way, but they do bump somehow, and it's more honest—more pedagogically useful, more truthful—to arrange them in a loose, disconnected, provisional way than to deliver only the conclusions.

Another thing that makes the essay seem like a mess is its refusal to decide the things it feels it cannot decide. The essay is willing to harbor contradictions. Like a hotel for disagreements, like a pillow on which discrepancy can rest her rumpled head. The article likes contradictions too but it starts with them and tries to resolve them; or it starts with something that doesn't look like a contradiction at all, and methodically shows it to be one. Either way contradictions are cunningly displayed in such a way that the contradiction appears to be located outside—outside in a text, outside in the culture, most importantly, outside of the author.

Often an essay ends without any contradiction solved. Often an essay doesn't even push towards resolution. It thinks it is interesting without a big bang.

Like essayists themselves, academics learn to quote E. B. White's self-deprecating remarks about the essayist's self-centeredness, only they quote them without irony. Sometimes they quote them before breakfast. Sometimes in an argument my brother quotes them at me. Personally I can't stand how considerate academics are willing to be. They are clock-watchers and word-counters, all of them! They buckle at the sight of a hasty generalization. They make transitions frank as any handicap. And I know one professor who never considers an article complete until he has checked to make sure all the paragraphs are the same length. ("But why would you want them to be the same length?" I wanted to ask.)

In exchange for the reader's valuable time academics compress their unwieldy thoughts into some sturdy pill the reader can swallow or take away with him, fingering it in his hand, deciding whether or not he should swallow. The essay is not a pill; it is an unwieldy mass; it is fat slime (the phrase is John Donne's) some part of which may stick to the reader's hands, some part of which may evaporate. And this is O.K., I tell myself, since the essay sees all knowledge as provisional.

Imagine a war outside your window and a careless companion who sits with a stack of albums in his lap: "And here's another snapshot of me!" That is a caricature of the essayist, although not a fair one. Some essays move very close to the short story in which the narrator himself is the protagonist. Other essays are personal simply because they move in unconventional ways. They are mum

when it comes to life stories. But they digress, they land like a prize frog on the least likely lily pad of a word, they skateboard off into the horizon when you expect them to hop on the horses and ride. The essayist's persona quickens in direct proportion to the reader's inability to predict the next word, argument, mood, or scene.

Essayists get drunk on language. What makes a good essay may have less to do with truth and more to do with what kind of work-out the nouns and verbs get. Art is valued, ease is valued. Because the essay is pessimistic about everything but language. *Life is hard, life is hard*, it says, over and over, like a depressive who fails to fill her prescription. The only thing we can feel good about is the fact that we can talk well and amusingly about how hard everything is, how useless, fleeting, depressing. We rearrange the sounds of our distress. Maybe you've noticed, there are no good *cheery* essayists. When too much optimism comes in, the essay falters. Nancy Mairs writes a convincingly ambivalent description of herself as a cripple, but ruins an essay when she claims at its end, like some sunny Tiny Tim waving his crutch, that she wouldn't exchange anything for "sound limbs and a thrilling rush of energy." She's "getting the hang of being a cripple," she says; that's the essay's last line, in case you didn't hear the music swell or see the credits rolling. Easy resolutions stain the essay, spoil the print of its pessimistic fabric.

Outside the academy, people read essays without apology. They pay money for them. In hardback, softback, in newspapers, quarterlies, magazines. Stephen Jay Gould recently read a few essays at a bookstore in Providence, and the store was mobbed. I, a well-dressed graduate student who studies the essay, couldn't get in.

I could get as far as the bookshelves. Gould was beyond the books, in the basement, a room that is usually the temporary housing for the Brown University Computer Store, if anything temporary can be said to be usual, and upstairs seventy-eight science nerds were milling around (I know because I was the seventy-ninth nerd who counted them). We were blinking at each other, through rain-smearred glasses, trying to determine if there was any way we could combine our collective brain power to get down the basement stairs. There was no cordon, but every once in a while an employee would rise up the stairs, like a flame licking the path, a dragon guarding the Gould, and we the nerds stepped fearfully back. I went and hid in the lit section.

And found there one of those huge comprehensive anthologies of literature, the sort of thing which, on a bad day, can induce an inferiority complex, quick as ipecac. But today was a good day. Every author in the book was a familiar, if not an acquaintance, and I felt the professionally heady sense that academia

encourages, the sense that I was learning my field. Not just learning it but coming down on it, as elegantly as a linen on a table. This, by the way, is the strategy of the academic article: to cover the field. Or to cover your ass in the field. To point out, with a tick of the tongue and a beam in your eye that the field, in fact, has not been properly covered. In *The Observing Self*, Graham Good explains that the spatial image of covering the field “corresponds to the temporal idea of progress”—as if gradually all the gaps in a discipline could be filled in, as if theoretically (if people didn’t have careers to make; if truth didn’t keep pursuing them like a doppelgänger) the discipline could be declared “finished.”

So there I was, kneeling in the bookstore aisle. (Kneeling is just the first move, an early sign of commitment. Body drops to the floor and then if the pages look good, body is rolling, spreading soft as butter, oozing like oil onto the carpet, never mind the traffic, never mind that oldster with the walker. I’m an uncomfortably comfortable customer, a religious reader—you don’t interrupt a girl who is praying, do you; you don’t step on a person whose fingers are wrung in prayer?) Perusing this book, this doorstep of a book, which, excluding its index, runs two thousand eight hundred and twenty eight pages long, and professes to be an anthology of American Literature, I find that it includes no essayists besides Emerson and Thoreau. Published in 1996, this book includes no twentieth century or contemporary essays at all.

Because of the Harper American Literature and books like it, because most creative writing departments teach playwriting, fiction, and poetry; because it is raining in Puerto Rico and the cheese has been badly wrapped and the line at the bank is long, and all sorts of other more insidious reasons which I leave you to supply, a cry is sometimes raised to defend the essay. Prick up your ears, as O. B. Hardison says, and you may hear a rumor “that the essay is an endangered species. There have even been calls to ‘save the essay,’ as there are calls to save whales and condors.” Who is O. B. Hardison? Good question. He’s a critic at some university. No doubt he is more than that, but we have no time to inquire. Who are the people making the call to save the essay? Another good question, extremely bad timing. I don’t like to unfold a long bibliography. I like to play this game like a house game of Scrabble—with a minimum of proper nouns.

Consider Foucault’s repressive hypothesis. What Foucault did for sex, I’m doing for the essay. Foucault said we talk on and on about sexual repression and fail to see how much we actually talk about sex. In the academy, people are yacking about whether or not the essay belongs. Our thing is the article, they say. To write essays is to smell of the country; to carry the impression, if not the reality, of being connected to a large sum of money. And yet Derrida writes essays, Cixous writes essays, bell hooks and Leslie Fiedler and Harold Bloom and Jane Gallop and Henry Louis Gates write essays. Basically (correct me if I’m

wrong, I don’t read everybody), top-ranking tenured academics write essays, and less secure or successful academics write articles.

I am on a date, a blind date. Lodged in some terrible mistake of a sports car, careening on I-95 headed for Newport, with a graduate student in astrophysics who is quizzing me to see what I know about the moon, the stars. I am studying for a Ph.D. in English Language and Literature. That must be Orion, I shrug and give him a smile that means fuck off. Later when the car is parked and the moon is shining its educational glow he will blurt into my ear and out of nowhere, “*I don’t spell very well,*” and I will understand why the date had to be an astronomical quiz. (Casting his mind to the orthographical oopsies of his *billet-doux*, he was already worrying about writing “sieve” for “seize,” “beasts” for “breasts,” fearing I would red-ink his dyslexic letters and return them.) Hoping the reply will be taken as a field-related willingness to articulate a position and not as a sign that I am encouraging him to lean, wet-lipped, across the car, I tell him: “Most people don’t spell well. Look at F. Scott Fitzgerald’s letters. He couldn’t spell worth a damn.” People approach writers, assuming we pull a perfect text out of our nose each time (well spelled). Spelling is the least of it.

Academics worry that essayists are naive when it comes to the self—which they call “the subject,” to show that they are not naive.

Although it’s true you can learn about yourself while writing, the discovery racket, the voyager motif, the Go-Inward-Young-Man conceptualization of the self as a land that you’ve got to explore, ought to be shelved. Or as the academics say: reexamined. Because it’s hard to separate what you are learning from what you are making up along the way. I know—and who am I? One makes discoveries about oneself but more often one makes up discoveries. One does not pull thoughts from the head as easily as laundry from a dryer.

And don’t essayists know this? Forget real live personalities, forget interviews, confessions, and intentionalities. I’m extracting the Essence of the Essayist, I’m reading what the essayist knows through the form itself. The essayist knows there is no such thing as a coherent self because the essayist writes short pieces. He does not, as Phillip Lopate points out, write one long autobiography, a book form, with a master narrative. We might say the essayist breaks his life into pieces, but then we would miss the essayist’s role in making—as opposed to simply reflecting and shaping—that life. Rather than break his life into pieces the essayist assumes there is no real life, but makes one. Again and again and again. And doesn’t worry too much about the contradictions. Never mind Janus-faced, the essayist is a decahedron. I should have ten faces in this essay alone, and at some point each dissolving, like a monster in a movie.

Still, the essayist is often recognized by her voice. "Voice-print," I've heard it said. I am willing to wager that I could tell never-before-read snatches of Edward Hoagland from never-before-read snatches of Joyce Carol Oates, but voice is a linguistic matter. Grammatical habit, tics of diction, penchant for pronouns, a way of winding up the sentence or letting it loosely unravel. If the essayist defines herself by style, then style—a broad term that means the way you do the things you do—for her means deviance. The way you refuse to do the things that everybody *else* does. Even if an essayist is writing as impersonally as Susan Sontag (who unlike Annie Dillard never has a cat on the windowsill or a leg of lamb in the oven), she finds a way to violate the norms of everyday language. Of course you can't deviate the whole nine yards or you would be perfectly incomprehensible. But essayists tend to shudder at anything that sounds conventional, even when they are aiming for an accessible—say, "familiar"—persona. So much so that they often exasperate our patience. Edward Hoagland writes, "For the time being the preludes of sex bore me—the whole repetitive preoccupation with the next pair of bobbledoos." I only know vaguely what those bobbledoos are, and if there weren't a pair of them, I wouldn't have a clue.

Academics have their own style, which accounts for the ease (but not the rancor) with which they are parodied. I know a professor who considers herself a stylist even though every argument she writes begins, "If the blah blah blah, then the blah blah blah." "Trust me," she says (not explicitly; only schmucks and theatre teachers and boyfriends who are about to rob you of your virginity explicitly say "Trust me"), but implicitly: trust that the voice on the page knows whereof it speaks. This professor flashes her style like a policeman flashing a badge. Conformity is a key term here. An academic wants to sound like every other academic—with just a hint of personality (an amusing epigraph, a wry aside, something unexpected, perhaps, put in the expectedly unexpected footnote), but nothing to rock the boat, nothing that suggests there is an ego here who must be heard, whose self-importance is more important than the quest for knowledge, or the subject itself. It takes style to be this self-effacing.

It takes a similar kind of linguistic restraint to write a good sympathy note. *There's* a genre where sincerity counts, where ego really must be broken. Much better to write a formulaic "I am very sorry to hear . . ." than to show how interesting you can be with your prose style. But maybe I'm saying that because in the face of disaster, I often find the inkwell dry. In the last year I have written two letters of condolence. The first was to a woman whose father died after a long slow illness I hardly knew anything about. She is a private type, not one to indulge in window-gazing or acute glances, and never let me know her father was ailing. After he died she spoke of him freely and cheerfully: she showed

me toys he had made for her as a kid, displayed his picture proudly on her desk. It was as if *now* he were alive. But I understand that, the relief she must have felt when he died. Because when my own mother was in chemotherapy I used to fantasize about her dying, not because I wanted her to die but because every hour of the day I felt like I was on the edge of a great grief, and it was the edge that was unbearable, the pitch and sway between despair and relief. I longed to be completely a wreck or completely grateful to the medical profession that saved her. I was too tired and selfish to feel something complicated in between.

So this occurs to me: style-as-deviance is all right in the essay because the essay means to be upfront about the self and *complicated*. When you write a sympathy note you've got to deliver the sympathy in a solid way, without ambivalence, whole hog, or you're a jerk who shouldn't have written a note at all. O.K. Well, the essayist is a jerk. The essayist is tactless. "I am so sorry to hear about the death of your father" becomes, in an essayist's hands, "I am so sorry to hear about the death of your father, even though all those years he wallowed in depression, refused to take his medicine, and drained your mother of what little spirit she had . . .")

The essay doesn't give its reader the relief of life or death, innocent or guilty, he was a good father, he was a bad. A stubborn skeptic, it refuses to let the chips finally fall. That the essay aims for art is what its critics often miss. The best art, said Nabokov, is fantastically deceitful and complex.

Actually, Nabokov never said anything he said; he wrote what he said, erasing many times.

Although critics have been unable to determine the essay's constituents in the precise and practical way that they can tell a poet to make a sonnet out of fourteen lines, they can say, after years of deliberation, and on pretty good authority, that the essay is like a coat of fur, or Proteus in chains, or a syllable-filled spirit, and has more in common with the German cockroach than the Tennessee snail darter. The essay is like a journey, they say, or a walkabout, or a loose sally of the mind. Because my grandmother wears her blouses unbuttoned, and her name is Sally, this last has always been my favorite definition. My grandmother is a lovely woman, half-cocked, and generous. She seduces indiscriminately. She loves her body, she loves *the* body, and I think it's fair to say (although the deathbed thing tends to distort one's view) that she relates to people through food and touch, as opposed to, say, conversation. Most family pictures feature her in a bathing suit, straps knocked off her shoulders, as if they had just fallen down. Once on the beach she stroked my shoulders and told me how lovely I was. To a kid who wasn't used to being touched, her touch felt strange. "Do I bristle? Do I purr?" I think, because I was young and dull, I acted casual.