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Discovering the (W)hole Story: On Fragments, Narrative, and Identity in the Embodied Personal Essay

Running on a trail with my mother through the mountains of Colorado, we are searching for the story of my father. My mother and I don't know the whys of my father. *Why* he was so depressed. *Why* he never got better with medication. *Why* he couldn't stay sober. And the big one, *why* he never asked for help, even when we were begging him to get it. These are some of the questions we ask each other and ourselves, the questions we are uncertain will ever be answered, the questions that we discover in our associative process of telling stories about my father as we run on mountain trails. Through these runs punctuated with disparate memories, we are creating the story of my father.

During our dad-discovering hikes, the story of my mother is of a traditional, straightforward structure. She runs in front of me, following the continuous trail of our time spent together, which will come to a definitive end. I follow her, follow her body and the story of that body—of how she brought me into this world, and of how she brings me to a different understanding of my father as we hike, discuss. The story of my father, though, is of a lyric structure. A memory revisited as we cross the creek, a metaphor for his existence discovered as we hike up hills, an opinion on him stated as we pause to look at Pike's Peak. Our reckonings aren't continuous, but associative and consist of many holes. I'm also learning *about* my mother in the context of her relationship with my father, while I discover and consider his story *with* her. But for now, as we begin the hike, I follow her, her narrative.

In her memoir, *The Other Side*, Lacy Johnson questions what, exactly, is the story of how her boyfriend kidnapped, raped, and tried to kill her. Johnson writes:

There's the story I have, and the story he has, and there is a story the police have in Evidence. There's the story the journalist wrote for the paper. There's the story The Female Officer filed in her report; her story is not my story. There's the story he must have told his mother when he called her on the phone; there's the story she must have told herself. There's the story you'll have after you put down this book. It's an endless network of stories. This story tells me who I am. It gives me meaning. And I want to mean something so badly. (183)

In Johnson's work, as is true for all written work and even life, the ways in which a story is told develops its meaning. After all, meaning is created by the reader's impression and understanding of the story, by her reading experience. If a writer decides to tell her story within a traditional structure, such as a straightforward chronology going from point A to B, then the reader will discover meaning through the narrative's lead by following the story. In the lyric essay, however, the reader discovers meaning by taking the leaps in thought that the narrator challenges her to take. The reader is still following the narrator, but it's a different type of following. It's about association, juxtaposition, and making the connections the narrator hints at. It's about following the story that's not on the page, and reading a language that can't necessarily be seen.

Through implication and subtext, the lyric essay nudges the reader around many different topics and craft techniques in order to tell a larger story. Where the lyric essay is a type of exploration that leads up to an ending that isn't necessarily the end of the story, a linear narrative moves the reader directly through beginning, middle, and end. Along the way, the reader picks up information and details that accumulate to

present a complete story. In Brenda Miller's essay "Body Language," for example, it is through the narrator's own linear process of telling a chronological story of her body that she reveals what elements her body's narrative consists of—grief, failures, unexpected outcomes, and, ultimately, understanding.

"Body Language" starts with a description of a book Miller and her friends were obsessed with in college. Her opening line immediately pulls in and orients the reader to a certain time and place. She begins, "For a brief time, when I was in college at Berkeley, *Body Language* was all the rage. My roommates and I passed around the dog-eared copy of the popular book by Julius Fast, thumbing through it with a fervor decidedly lacking in the rest of our studies" (3). Here, a scene is established; the characters, theme, subject matter, and setting are given to us immediately. In a sense, the narrative is born. Similar to how her friends were initially interested in reading body language and excited about its possibilities, the opening to Miller's essay is also an introduction to the possibilities of how the story will be read—as a progression of experiences and scenes. "For a brief time" signals to the reader a starting point and implies that something will come after it—that the body and this essay are just beginning their forward narrative movement.

Miller continues to describe how during that time they were all "sprawled on the tweedy chairs in the parlor," and how they would analyze each other's body language, every "tilt of the head, each wave of the hand" — how they gave away "either boredom or sexual excitement" depending on the positions of their bodies (3). In other words, they were reading meaning in their physical selves. This is where the narratives of their bodies begin to accumulate meaning—like the essay itself—as it moves the reader forward. Continuing to create a sense of linear time, Miller states, "Several years later—post-college and still searching for an apt livelihood—I enrolled in massage school and learned a new type of body language" (4). With "Several years later," Miller confirms the trajectory of the narrative arc, and guides the reader through the next scenes of learning massage therapy. Ultimately, the way in which Miller has come to understand her body is the same structure she uses to invite the reader to understand her story.

One example of how Miller's content creates form is the scene in which her massage therapy teacher touches Miller's stomach to show the class different techniques and aspects of their profession. When her teacher places a palm "with deadly accuracy, over the scar left from two miscarriages I'd suffered when I was twenty years old," and makes the comment that the way in which Miller's body responded to the touch reveals that something was dampening her emotional life, it is in this moment that the narrator allows the reader to fully understand the complicated facets of her story—the backstory of her body, in essence.

She explains to the reader, "I felt the ache in my lower back—a dull pain, I realized then, had needed me for years....These pregnancies had torn me apart, bodily and emotionally, but after a few months and a little counseling I'd convinced myself I'd gotten over it. Now,"—and here's a shift, a moment when she moves through her different past selves seamlessly, it's a transfer in thought, but not in narration, not a disruption but a continual trajectory of experience—"...I placed one hand on my belly and kept it there, regarding my body with a strange mix of curiosity, anger, and dismay" (5-6). Structuring the backstory in this way, Miller brings more of her life experience—and even more complexities of her body—into the scene, which helps to propel the story forward towards its conclusion of how her body has and always will speak. Although she's momentarily moving backward in time, the theme and meaning of the essay moves forward with this flash of a flashback—the body remembers, the essay digresses, the narrative grows with meaning which fuels the story forward. Miller is able to do this without breaking the pace or flow of the story, because she does so in a very subtle way. Which is to say four specific words lead the essay back to the scene she was in pre-backstory. First, she says "I realized then." This phrase indicates a continuum in experience. Something happened, she realized it, and "Now" (the fourth specific word) her understanding of her body shifts, and the actual narrative and structure of "Body Language" mirrors this.

But narrative is not her only tool to create structure. Miller also uses reflection as a way to transition between different events and scenes. Consider this section:

For weeks, we gazed at each other with frank assessment, taking in all the cues that now, once revealed, would clarify all our efforts at communication. And communication, for us earnest, young college students, meant everything—*everything!* We craved truth in all its various forms, and while we knew we could dissemble easily enough with language, the body always gives us away. Perhaps that’s why we latched on to this fleshy lexicon in the first place, knowing our spoken words served as paltry vehicles for all the truths we longed to express. We stayed up late in the night, burning candles and incense, and watched our bodies offer hints from our pasts or clues to our murky futures. (Miller 3-4)

Here, after identifying the place, time, and characters in this story of her life, Miller then allows herself to not just look back at, but to also analyze and interpret those past events *and* she does so at no sacrifice to the story’s flow. Miller does this throughout the essay with phrases such as “though it all seems rather pedestrian now” (3) and “this could only last so long” (4) that indicate to the reader this narrator has an understanding of and is processing the past. We are learning *about* her history, not discovering it with her. Miller’s narrative doesn’t provide space for the reader to create her own connections between body and language, because she has already created those connections and is presenting them. Rather than enticing the reader to figure out how our bodies speak for our emotional selves, Miller teaches and explains this, guides the reader through the meaning and concepts in her essay—her body, basically.

Along with how Miller keeps the story flowing forward with small transitional words (“Now,” “Sometimes,” “I remembered,” “each time,” and “often”), she has written the story of her body through its own transitions—discovery, learning, practicing, fluency, re-discovery. In the beginning, Miller discovers the existence of body language with her college friends as they “gleefully lit into this language like children with secret decoder rings” (3). Then, Miller commits herself to learning the language of her body as she takes massage therapy classes and begins to fully learn how to “read the body the way one learns to read music, a language of esoteric notation decipherable only to those with talent and proper training” (5).

From here, Miller’s understanding of body language grows in her class as her and her peers “practiced these moves on each other” (7). Then, Miller takes ownership of body language as she graduates and gets her own clients, “each with its own difficult history, its puzzle of a heart” (7). Finally, the trajectory of this narrative arc brings Miller to discovering a new language—writing. She explains how she gave up massage therapy in order to become a writer—“a work no less tiring, really, and requiring the same inclination to listen with a hand pressed to the holy bone, to hear the thrum of the body and all it longs to tell” (8). The essay contains a sense of progression and tension built through a traditionally-structured story—from beginning to middle to end—in order to convey how the history of her hands and body has grown through her responses to and experiences in the world, ultimately connecting to the ways in which Miller is now a writer.

All of this creates a narrative arc that guides the reader through the story. Like a runner on a path, the reader follows the narrative’s lead. In this sort of linear narrative essay, the reader knows that the author is going to bring her to an end. In fact, the main point of this type of essay is to reach that end where something changes or is revealed—that place where the reader can sense some semblance of closure. How the reader gets there doesn’t fully matter. It’s like running a marathon: they aren’t pretty and they sure are painful, but all of it is to reach that glorious finish. Miller’s narrative arc leads the reader to the reward of knowing the outcome of the story line, to see in what ways her body has learned to speak—and how she has learned to listen.

I’m still following my mother on the actual, visible trail—not eroded, corroded, washed away or broken up in untraversable chunks. Her story has a clear, chronological narrative arc—one that keeps her moving forward, even as she speaks of the past, which she is about to do.

“What was he like when you first met him?”

“Your father? Oh, my God, Chelsey. He was *so* funny.” My mother’s short but strong legs pump her up and down hills as we pad our way over ridges, and zigzag down the switchbacks of Barr Trail. We’ve ran on this trail together many times before, have had similar conversations about my father many times before these trails, too. Our bodies know how to follow the path, though our minds are still trying to learn and understand the different elements and fragments of my father’s life. Her stories of his sense of humor, his wry way with the world, and quick wit bring him a bit more to life for me. “He joked his way out of speeding ticket once. Watch your ankles!” she calls as we hit a section of uneven rocks. “He knew how to make people laugh, and not with dumb things, but he was smart and used what he knew of people and the world to just crack everyone up! Don’t you just remember laughing with him in Wyoming?” She turns the top half of her body around to look at me, her feet still propelling her forward, taking charge of where we’re going.

She’s talking about when I was younger. And yes, I do. I was born in Laramie, and all that I can recollect of that time is a lot of snow and a lot of laughing. We scramble up some brutal hills, stopping our conversation momentarily. As we get back on the main path, my body continues—as it always has—to follow my mother’s form, her stories.

“Once he got sober, your father told his own dad that he wouldn’t let him see his granddaughters until he stopped drinking. Your father didn’t want you girls to have to be around a bunch of drunks.”

More hills. More switchbacks. We continue to weave our way around this forested area, looking up when we can to see a brilliant blue sky.

“Something happened when he was a kid. They were all in the car and his dad got in a wreck. And then soon afterwards they moved, and your dad said grandpa just wasn’t the same after that.”

“What does that mean?” I ask as we reach a clearing through the pine trees, our rocky trail turning into soft sand for a few strides.

“I guess that he just, I don’t know, was less dad-like after that.”

I know exactly what she means—how the narrative of a life he created through work and family eventually crumbled with depression and alcoholism. How my dad became less of what I had known him to be as he retreated to suicidality. How eventually I came to experience my father only through fragments, nothing solid, no set trajectory of who he was or would become, then end. Not everything can be understood as the straight movement from Point A to Point B. There are times we must construct structures that more clearly mimic a life, an experience.

Through an essay, whether traditional or lyric, we see that there is something worth questioning, worth discovering. A traditional essay writer will lead us through that discovery process, the movement of a writer's mind on the page. What happens when we take out the narrative arc from our expectations of a nonfiction piece? What happens when I take out the linear storyline of me following my mother on a trail? We're left with different moments of my father—images, memories, facts, the language we use to try to create him. Without a narrative arc, we are left with imagery, metaphor, punctuation, and essentially just the words we choose to use in order to relate a story. Judith Kitchen explains how a lyric essay is “the mind at work, spinning something that, in the end, is pure sensibility” (119). A lyric essay is its own discovery process, where the reader has to engage with the text in order to discover its possible meaning. This, perhaps, at its heart is the difference between a traditional essay and a lyric essay, the expectation of the reader (or the writer) to create or discover meaning in disparate moments, experiences, or ideas.

Connecting details and hints at different statements, and reading the story that is told through subtext and white space, the reader becomes an active participant in the lyric essay—another person who's yearning to discover, to understand. Because sometimes we don't know how to get to the meaning. Sometimes we don't know the story. Sometimes, an experience can be so complicated, so intricate, so hard to understand, that it can't be related in any sort of chronological, uninterrupted way—like the body and its traumas and all of those significant moments that combine to constitute who we are. Grief and celebration, love and

hate, injury and healing. And more. Sometimes, we have to learn how to create our own narrative arcs by piecing together the fragments of our lives.

“Your father never wanted any children.”

Then, later, on a different run: “I was his second wife.”

Then: “He loved you, but wished you were a boy.”

These are the things my mother tells me during our hikes. They’re all a moment, a fact, a statement that jolts my curiosity, catches my interest, makes me want to follow the jumps of my mother’s memory of him, her mind at work.

In the lyric essay, there are two minds at work—the writer’s and the reader’s. The reading experience Eula Biss creates with her essay “The Pain Scale,” reflects how she conceives of her body and invites the reader to reflect on her own conceptions of the body. Opening statements about religion and numbers jump around each other—frog on a lily pad-like. Biss immediately challenges the reader to traverse her narrative not with any sort of a continuous map of a story, but through making her own map in the white space between statements and moments. The reading experience is wholly an associative process, filling in the holes, making the connections, and eventually understanding Biss’s relationship with her body. Since her body is in pain and feels fractured, the lyrically segmented structure of “The Pain Scale” is a natural reflection of her experience, her body’s language.

Both the topics and leaps Biss makes are paced and intentional, which creates a different sort of guiding practice. Biss uses juxtaposition, comparisons, and a combination of science and personal story in order to look at her experience of chronic pain—a fixed point in her life. The fragmented relationship she has with her body is reflected in the way in which she tells her body’s story: “Although the distance between one and two is infinite, it contains infinite fractions. This could be said of the distance between my mind and my body. My one and my two. My whole and its parts” (9). In other words, rather than a

progressive narrative of Biss's experience with pain—like Miller's experience of body language—what she offers the reader in this lyric essay is a framework with which both she and her reader can try to figure out (together?) a narrative of pain.

Throughout “The Pain Scale,” Biss discovers the structure of her body's story. “Suffering is the story we tell ourselves of our pain,” she writes (22). Quoting James Chase here, she understands how to use this quote and then apply it as a way to explain what it feels like to live in a fractured body. Biss hasn't discovered the meaning of why we live with pain, but she has found a way to question how it is that we try to rate and compare it. She has created her collage of chronic pain through making the reader question and draw her own connections between each juxtaposition, to create “story” out of disparate ideas, emotions, thoughts, and experiences.

Where a more traditionally-structured essay may start out with a paragraph that introduces the reader to the characters, narrator, and setting, or provide any other important information about the context of the essay, a lyric essay tends to open with a fact or a statement that jolts the reader's curiosity and interest. Obviously these methods are not universally true. But when we compare how Miller begins her essay about the body to how Biss opens her story of corporeality, what we see is that the narrative structure and strategy that each author is going to use is laid out in their opening sentences.

Miller: “For a brief time, when I was in college at Berkeley, *Body Language* was all the rage.” Time, place, character, and possibly even theme or concept are set up in this opening sentence.

Biss: “The concept of Christ is considerably older than the concept of zero.” Interesting statement. Now what?

This: Biss continues as she curiously goes from Christ to zero in her essay, then touches on Dante's *Inferno* and later the Beaufort scale, and through this all is a running (though fragmented) narrative of Biss's experience with chronic pain. Here is a body that doesn't understand itself, that offers no certainty of a painless future. And here is an essay that challenges the reader to understand it, to make the

connections in order to create some sort of ending—which is uncertain. Biss drops hints, not fully blazing the trail of a narrative like Miller. It isn't until the seventh paragraph in "The Pain Scale," for instance, that the religion/number statements and narrator come together. After stating different concepts and relations to zero, Biss admits: "I'm not a mathematician. I'm sitting in a hospital trying to measure my pain on a scale from zero to ten. For this purpose, I need a zero. A scale of any sort needs a fixed point" (5). From this, the reader now has a fixed point. Biss is intellectually dissecting the concept of zero in order to tell one of her life's narratives—a body in chronic pain.

For the duration of the essay, all the way to the very last sentence, zero is a constant referential that reverberates through each page. Even though there are numerous sections in which the number zero is not discussed, the concept of Biss's zero remains a constant. Her wonderings about and issues with zero are perhaps the fixed point of her essay. Sprawling out (though in a contained way) from zero are a number of continuously re-visited themes. But like zero, not every reference is made on every page. Biss introduces the Beaufort scale on page ten, but then doesn't return to it again until seven pages later. Christ, too, fades away, though Biss uses Dante as a way to continue to look at what's whole and measurable, and what's fragmented and unacceptable. The reader, at times, has to be patient as she moves through the essay, having to wait for Biss to reveal a connection between one point and another. White space doesn't distract or disrupt, but creates.

Reading a lyric essay creates a similar feeling—that one must trust in the narrator and believe something will come from all of this. Why, for instance, would Biss bring in the Beaufort scale, only to not mention it again for seven pages? As we reach the end of "The Pain Scale," though, we discover a connection that deepens our understanding of Biss's relationship to her body. After explaining some of the research she found on people who commit suicide because of their chronic pain, Biss ends with "The description of hurricane force winds on the Beaufort scale is simply, 'devastation occurs.' Bringing us, of course, back to zero" (25).

With a lyric essay like “The Pain Scale,” the reader’s relationship with the text is that she is discovering its meaning. Biss knows the story she wants to tell, but she doesn’t give the narrative arc to the reader like Miller does. Instead, Biss tells the story of her body in pain through a fractured and segmented form. As is true with “Body Language,” here, content creates form. And form creates the reader’s experience of the story, which, in turn, continues to create all of the different meanings and understandings of the content. Like Biss’s opening and closing sentences where the concept of zero is first constructed and then re-constructed at the end, content and form circle around and back to one another.

There are times when I have had to follow my mother for seven miles’ worth of memories in order to arrive at her point, or at least an association between various statements. When my mother talks about Valentine’s Day right after she has finished a story about how my father used to come home drunk all the time when I was a kid, I’m curious as to what the connection is between these two apparently disparate thoughts. To arrive at an understanding, I trail my mother, trust that the bits of her stories will create a mosaic of my father. I’m rewarded for my patience as she eventually makes for me the connection between a Hallmark holiday and an addiction:

“When you were five, your father was too drunk to remember where he hid your Valentine’s Day present, so he rushed to the Walgreens to buy some stuffed animal.”

My mother tells me my father might have been abused when he was a kid—a story we won’t ever know the truth to, though I will always wonder if his depression and alcoholism were caused by how his body held within it the emotional and physical memories of a traumatic past. A few steep hills later, we’re now remembering, both of us, the time he fell in the pool in our backyard while he was trying to clean it. We then discuss his mental illness. The alcoholism, too. His numerous suicide attempts. I trust that one day these bits will lead me somewhere—hopefully to an understanding of my father.

To my own story of who he was.

To the story of who I am as a result of him.

Ahead of me, my mother slows down to march up one of the last hills near the end of this trail, and mentions how she thinks my father's doctor changed the cause of death on his death certificate because he felt guilty. I am confused by this statement and ask her, "If it wasn't heart failure, then what did Dad die of?"

"Wait, you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Chelsey, do you really think that someone who has been drinking alone for three days straight and died of a 0.46 blood-alcohol level wasn't thinking about suicide?"

The steep grade of the incline makes it hard to breathe. We continue our climb in silence.

Like the space our breathing provides, white space in a lyric essay also gives the reader time to think, digest, and prepare to make another jump—a technique that creates reader-involvement in a lyric essay that a traditionally structured essay doesn't provide. In a fragmented essay such as "The Pain Scale," the reader has to do some work in order to create the narrative Biss is gesturing towards. In the first section, for instance, Biss jumps from Christ to zero to math to temperature to Dante then back to temperature and ends on the image of slitting a chicken's neck, all the while weaving in a scene of her at the hospital and being asked to rate her pain on a scale of zero to ten. It's the reader's job, then, to figure out what a chicken hanging upside down about to get its neck slit has to do with the concept of *zero*—*and* what that has to do with Biss's pain. The reader has to do some work to understand the essay, and therefore she also must draw her own conclusions.

In his essay, "On Fragmentation," Steve Fellner complicates this concept as he challenges writers' assumptions about narrative and understanding:

It seems that more and more people are structuring their essays into piecemeal sections. Little bits. Sometimes enumerated, sometimes not. Sometimes titled, sometimes not. When you ask them why they structured the essay the way they did, they'll say something like, "I want the reader to draw their own conclusions." Which always sounds like a cop-out. Isn't that why you became a writer in the first place? To draw someone else's conclusions for them in an artful, honest way? (Fellner 176)

The lyric essay has become a language of space. Through pauses and section breaks, through sentence structure and asterisks and the visual look of the essay on the page, the lyric form does, indeed, challenge the reader to draw her own conclusions. Though this is true for the traditional narrative essay as well. Yes, in a linear structure the narrator is leading the reader towards a conclusion. The essayist knows the story she is telling, and tells it fully in order to ensure that the reader understands what it is she wants to say. But a linear narrative doesn't guarantee that the reader will draw the same conclusions the writer intended. The reader will know the whole story, for sure, but knowing all of the details doesn't mean drawing the same conclusions. What one reader takes away from an essay will invariably differ from another reader.

Fellner argues that the writer's desire to write is to present something to the reader in order for the reader to gain understanding. But, as is true for a linear narrative, the writer can't ever control how the reader understands the story. The traditional narrative assumes that she does, but the lyric essay isn't trying to force an understanding on the reader. Rather, the lyric essay presents questions and possibilities. From this, the purpose of the lyric essay isn't the ending, but the journey to it. Fragments are the stepping stones that the author offers for consideration, then proceed towards more questions that more fragments present. White space is key to all of this.

White space, in and of itself, is a type of language—and is perhaps a language that most clearly reflects body language. It is through the pauses and juxtapositions, through the sentence structure and punctuation that the lyric essay can speak just as loud to the reader as the printed words. Similarly, the

body is heard not just through vocalization, but through those silent mechanisms of gestures and poses, movements and subtleties. In his comparison of segmented essays to triptych paintings, Robert Root states, “This is what the spaces say: arrange the viewing of the panels so that you see their relationships and juxtapositions rather than a unified unbroken whole.”

Our bodies, likewise, are read through the same aspects of viewing. The physicality of our relationships to the body, the juxtaposition of emotional and physical experience—all of this creates our disparate experiences of our bodies, those parts of us we don’t necessarily understand, but know that they create us. This embodied knowledge ultimately informs how we structure our writing.

Root answers Fellner’s question about why lyric essayists so often choose a fragmented form to tell our stories: “in the hope of achieving some better understanding of the actual through writing.” The fragmented essay isn’t about the end, but the process towards it (like life is more than about our deaths)—what the reader is confronted with and how she reacts to it with her own engagement with the text. As he presents excellent points to explore this question and practice, ultimately Fellner, like Biss and her experience, is interested in how and if a fragmented thing can ever feel whole: “When you’re writing an essay-in-fragments, should each fragment be a complete thing in and of itself” (179)? If we accept the challenge of really discovering narrative in segmented texts, then we allow the essay (and our experience of it) space to gesture towards more complexity.

“What is complexity but a lot of simple things strung together?” Fellner questions (177). And what is more complex than identity, a person’s story—that intersection of experience (fragments of memory) and self (the story we tell of ourselves)? Miller reckons her body’s past by understanding it in a different language. Biss felt fractured by her pain and created a narrative to reflect how she was torn about putting a number to it. But experience is more complicated than the duality of fragmentation or whole. We don’t just have a narrative that we put to our stories or a collection of images that create who we are. Perhaps we can take form and content in an essay in a different direction. Allow for something new. What if we were

to discover a place where not only do fragments create the whole, but where the whole—the linear narrative—is allowed to be experienced as fragmented? What about our stories would we discover if we allowed ourselves to understand our bodies as one whole narrative composed by many scenes of ourselves, or journeys on more than just one path? What if we took leaps beyond one cluster of stepping stones?

In the car now after our hike, our conversations of my father have stopped. My mother and I are tired. Out of breath. In the silence, a narrative forms. What I see is that the story of my father is all of these things. I know of my dad through my mom. Her story and his fragments combine to make a semblance of meaning, of being. It is both whole and filled with holes. The white space speaking to the continuous arc of our grief, understanding, eventual acceptance. This is not about a re-hashing of past pains and their complexities; it's about coming up with a new understanding; it's about me.

“It is not about you.”

This quote is a line revisited many times in Marya Hornbacher's essay, “Strip.” Although the phrase snowballs with complexity each time she uses it, the essay itself begins simply enough.

My stage name was Caitlin. It was a name I liked, I liked it better than Sapphire or Starr or Mercedes. My backup name, for when they said, “Come on, tell me your real name. Tell me what your mama calls you. Come on,” was Mary.

“Mary?” they said, laughing. “Oh, that's fucking classic. *Mary*? Seriously? A stripper named Mary?”

Uh-huh, I said, and smiled.

No, you dumb fuck. Of course it's not.

Buy me a drink? I said, leaning over the table. And they did. (Hornbacher 71)

From this first segment, we learn the narrator is a stripper with a strong, keen voice, and this essay will potentially be about the customer/stripper relationship, names/identity, or perhaps the general experience of what it's like to be a stripper. Similar to Miller's opening, we are immediately given an introduction to plot, character, and setting. The narrative arc has been established.

But then Hornbacher gives us, sequentially, the following: a statement, a narrative, an extended metaphor, a Nietzsche reference, a philosophical theory, and then a concluding statement, all within one paragraph. These leaps in thought and theory challenge the reader to begin making connections. More than just fragments trying to make a whole, though, Hornbacher's linear and fragmented moments work together to push towards an experience of the body.

Similar to "The Pain Scale," Hornbacher also has a concept/short phrase that steadily beats throughout the essay from beginning to end. Biss has her zero, and Hornbacher has her variations on "this is not about you." Biss brings in Dante's *Inferno* to tangentially look at pain via the concept of hell, as Hornbacher integrates sections of TS Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to engage with the concept of self/other.

One of the ways in which she engages with this duality, is to include moments of comparisons throughout "Strip." Predominately, she uses negative theory (defining what something is by what it is not). Within a few pages, Hornbacher establishes what this essay will be about by stating the opposite, "Here is what this essay is not about" (72). She lists: "The sexually and physically empowering qualities of stripping. Strippers as regular gals. Strippers as proto- post- or anti-feminists. Why strippers should be called dancers.... It is not about the green-and-pink concrete strip club called Déjà Vu at the north edge of Minneapolis.... It is not about your intimate knowledge of the brands and shades of face makeup that can be used to cover the tracks on your arm" (72).

This isn't the only instance of negative theory in the essay. In fact, throughout Hornbacher's construction of a narrative arc, she repeatedly uses variations of that one truncated thought: "This is not

about you.” Throughout “Strip,” Hornbacher creates an extended and shifting sort of litany with this phrase in order to convey her thoughts on the female body and the concept of self/other. Appearing in a number of segments, Hornbacher claims, “It is not about you,” (73), “But this is not about you” (75), “This is not about you” (79), and “This was never about you” (84). In this last example, she is referring to her own position and role within the actual essay. How she could never be the subject of her own essay, because she (and, ultimately, her body) is one of the strippers in it—the Other. This was never about her.

All of these sideways steps into story, the ways in which Hornbacher approaches the narrative from many different angles and voices, how she wrestles with what the main story of her essay might actually be (“this was never about you”), the different fields of thought and literature referenced in small segments make it reasonable—if not easy—to call “Strip,” a lyric and segmented essay. Like other fragmented texts, Hornbacher’s segments construct the whole. But where Biss’s “The Pain Scale” is successful because of the way the author is able to get the segments to speak to one another through juxtaposition and metaphor, Hornbacher’s segments steadily grow *with* one another in order to create a narrative on the fractured aspects of embodied identity. She does all of this through fragments of thought—philosophy mixed with metaphor mixed with culture mixed with negative theory—woven in with a narrative thread of an actual scene. The fragments, then, create a progression of meaning as they build up around the linear narrative. The reader is learning *about* Hornbacher (the linear narrative of the plot line), while also discovering *with* her the concept of identity (the segments of philosophy and theory). Through this, Hornbacher establishes the story of her female form as both a linear and fragmented narrative. This concept gains momentum through each fragment, adding layers of complexity to the fact of a naked female body. She clothes the holes. Makes them whole. This essay was never about stripping.

Through the ways that Hornbacher creates a larger theme of body and identity, “Strip” could be considered a traditional essay because of the ways in which the tension progressively builds, though it could also be considered a lyric essay because of the unconventional structure and the variety of fields of

thought and concepts that Hornbacher weaves throughout it. We discover identity *with* Hornbacher (lyric) as we learn *about* her experiences (linear). So which is it?

Perhaps we need a new name for this type of essay—one in which the topic demands *both* a traditional and segmented narrative form.

The (w)hole essay?

“(W)hole,” as in how I’ve created a new narrative for my father. He is no longer completely fragmented in my mind, and yet he is also more complex than the birth-to-death chronology of his life. His story is cumulative—having to do with the recognizable trail: his history of mental illness and addiction—and also fragmented; having to do with the chaotic and disparate ways in which I understood him. Bringing these two structures of my father’s story together to create a whole narrative of who he was, his identity, and how I identify him as my father. My identity in relation to him—fatherless. My whole identity is perhaps based on the fact that there is a father-shaped hole in my life.

There’s poetry in our pauses, our considerations. But there’s also the language and narrative qualities of how my mother and I progressed through discovering the meaning of my father. These are the elements of life, the lyric space of living.

I understand my father’s story differently now. More than just creating his meaning from the flashes of past father experiences, my thoughts on my dad are now constructed with the narrative arc of the hikes I take with my mother. There’s a type of combination here. A culmination. Her stories and moments of memories colliding, merging, creating, birthing a new narrative of my father. It’s a lyric narrative, one that is forever jumping around bits of memory, yet still progressing forward as I follow the trail towards meaning. Towards him.

Towards me.

This was never about him.

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