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Paul Gruchow and Brian Turner: Two Memoirs Go Cubistic

“This is one possible definition of mental illness: It is the sickness of unborn pain.”

“Suicide, when it happens, is often, although I think not inevitably, tragic, but the thought of suicide might well be a successful adaptation of the human mind to extreme emotional distress.”

“It is an odd fact that in the history of humanity that we have been dying for millennia, without exception, and yet we still cannot face the fact that this is not a tragedy.”

Sentences like these from Paul Gruchow’s extraordinary memoir (*Letters to a Young Madman*, Levins Publishing, 2012) have a monumental feel that commands special handling. Writing about big things necessitates urgency—not to hurry the story into print but to get it told right. Sometimes the need is so great that the customary ways just won’t do. Gruchow and Brian Turner (*My Life as a Foreign Country*, Norton, 2013)—as unlikely a pair of authors to appear in the same sentence—shared that literary urgency. Gruchow, essayist lost to suicide, and Turner, poet and Iraq war combat survivor—I bring them together here to look at how they turned from their usual way of doing things to make their stories into powerful memoir.

The author of six acclaimed books of essays, Gruchow suffered through periods of depression and hospitalization that eventually closed down his strong and often lyrical nature-writing voice. Emerging from his protracted dry spell, however, he began work on a book about his disease and treatment. He had accumulated pages of research, recollections of childhood, vivid tales from inside mental institutions, even poems. But how to fit it all into the elegantly structured essay style that had served him over the years had him stymied and frustrated. Enter his friend and literary confidant, Louis Martinelli, who came upon the

inspired idea of pointing Gruchow to the fragmented structure of Eduardo Galeano's books. As Martinelli says, "Paul got it right away."

On the other hand, with his reputation as a poet (*Here, Bullet* and *Phantom Noise*) firmly in hand, Brian Turner moved to nonfiction in a manner influenced strongly by his poetic aesthetic. In an interview published on *Brevity's* Nonfiction Blog (23 September 2014), he told how after his military discharge he was experimenting with *haibun*, a traditional Japanese travel-writing form that combines a brief prose section with a haiku. With no other intent ("I was simply experimenting with form and trying to discover how it shaped my thoughts on memory and travel"), he realized that an essay was emerging, an essay that would later grow into his memoir of war and soldiering. The resulting fragmented work depends, in Turner's words, on "a reader that enjoys participating in the construction of the work itself." Discrete sections of narrative from across time, expository historical sections, poetry, even a short screenplay wait to be joined by that reader's imagination.

Of course the notion of assembling a myriad of referential moments isn't new. How can any English major forget T.S. Eliot's "fragments" that he "shored against [his] ruins"? But the notion is *modern*. Remember *Tristram Shandy*? Doesn't it read, diction aside, as though it were written a lot later than the middle of the eighteenth century? It has that turn-of-the-twentieth-century feel to it—the feel of that last, great epochal intellectual shift.

In 1907, Picasso set the foundation for Cubism when he came to Paris with *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*, the portrait of five nude prostitutes, anatomically approximate but distorted beyond any semblance to an impressionist or realist nude. It fell to Georges Braque to show the real meaning of Picasso's painting, which he did in a series of landscapes that included *Houses at l'Estaque* (1908). Here he simply took apart the village visually and reassembled it as it might be seen from multiple vantages. How *does* one look at five nude prostitutes anyway? Well, look at one for a while, then another, look at parts of them that capture your eye, turn away, turn back, left eye only, right eye, notice the setting. Then think

about how all these views make you feel. Memory and imagination will do the rest. To paint that canvas would result in something more realistic than any Titian.

Cezanne declared, and Picasso and Braque echoed: Art is not nature and shouldn't try to imitate it. And just like that they rejected an aesthetic that had dominated visual art since the Renaissance. After that, there was no turning back. A painting was paint on a surface, nothing more, not a window to the world outside. What freedom.

What matters is the connection between fragmentation and memory, narrative and perception. Modernist writing went Cubist in varying ways: Dos Passos' "newsreels" and "camera eyes," William Burroughs' "cutups," the "things" of *Paterson* that contain Williams' ideas, and of course Eliot's blend of the common and the obscure. Without the traditional transitions, unconnected text has to be seen in visual terms in order to be understood, must be related in ways that correspond to shape or color or size. In other words, the organization becomes abstract, at which point the correspondence between modern painting and modern writing is quite apparent.

In addition, the fragments can be seen as metaphor, attention given to the tension their various juxtapositions create—space to be filled with something or not filled, just space to define the actual. For what the Cubists found when they dumped 400 years of rules about perspective was a new kind of space—what Braque called "tactile space," the distance between the viewer and the painting rather than the distance between the painting's objects. In this way, the viewer gains a new involvement.

Whether in painting or writing, singing or dancing, between the fragments comes space. But there's so much more—it's not merely a structural thing, emptiness created by whatever fragments or elements limit it; it is real, and it exists in time as well. As a viewer or reader experiences those surrounding elements, whatever takes place in that person's imagination becomes the space.

Japanese culture has offered a word for it. *Ma*. It is said that in nothingness, *ma* enables. *Ma* is an interval, the presence of an absence, a void waiting. And from China more than 2500 years ago,

We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want

We hammer wood for a house
but it is the inner space
that makes it livable.

We work with being,
but non-being is what we use.

Part 11 of the *Tao Te Ching*
Lao-tzu
Trans. Stephen Mitchell

Testimony to Gruchow's and Turner's artful handling of what might at first appear to be a random or self-indulgent structure can be found in the tight control with which each author manages the cohesion of his book. Each fragment has been composed and situated with an eye both to its neighbors and to its overall purpose, and an overall unity derives from continuation—of theme and time in Gruchow's case and in Turner's, of poetic and novelistic devices.

Although the overall organization of *Letters to a Young Madman*—absent the usual chapter or section demarcations—may appear arbitrary, it suggests strongly a chronological reading. A wide range of quotations from Marcus Aurelius to Nietzsche set off apparent section divisions, and each fragment bears its own title. But the quotations are best read alongside Gruchow's fragments rather than as introductions

or summations. I'm examining here a fifteen-page section of eleven fragments located between pieces titled "Hospital 1" and "A Modest Proposal" that highlight what elevates *Letters* above mere memoir: Gruchow's ultimate aim, which is no less than to reform the mental health system. The fragments vary in length from two sentences to two pages, starting with a chilling recounting of the first moments of admission for a new psychiatric hospital patient and ending with a scathing suggestion for hospital reform. "Hospital 1" describes the intake process in declarative, simple sentences, most fewer than a dozen words. The effect is haunting.

You are led down a long hallway to your room. The hallway is wide and barren. The room has two beds, a window, and one, hard low-backdrop chair. The window is covered in Plexiglass.

The floor is hard and the walls are unornamented. Everything is some shade of gray. The beds are standard hospital issue.

The voice is deliberately child-like because, as Gruchow says, "The last time you wore pajamas twenty-four hours a day, you were an infant. You have now assumed the appearance of a mental patient." The point of view throughout is second person, and the direct address is doubled when he has a nurse speak to the patient, "I'm sorry but you'll have to remove your shorts too" and then "You may pull up your shorts." You, the reader, suddenly morphs into you, the patient, and when Gruchow tells you the blankets are flimsy and psychiatric wards are chilly, you empathize because you've walked a mile in his hospital-issue socks.

"Hospital 2," written in the same, flat voice, lays out the routine. And as if Gruchow were unable to break the old transition-sentence habit, the closing sentence—"Three or four days of this routine and you are bored to the bones"—introduces three short "Boredom" chapters. Here Gruchow drops the insider voice and returns to his familiar rhythms and approach. The comments are trenchant, the sentences exact. The pieces run from three to eight lines each and have the same stabbing effect as short sentences surrounded by longer ones: "Boredom 2," for example, reads in its entirety: "Babies have pacifiers. Adults

have television. The reason the television set is in the center of the psychiatric ward life is that watching it is the only thing in life that requires less effort than sleeping.” He then stops to summarize in “Hospital 3,” a statement that should be read by anyone connected in any conceivable way to the mental health system in this country. It’s another brief paragraph, and he’s considering what the mental health system calls the “therapeutic milieu.”

Reduce an adult to the status of a child, put him in surroundings that resemble as little as possible a home, deprive him of nearly all intellectual and sensory stimuli, induce nicotine and caffeine withdrawal, and provoke a simultaneous state of insomnia and intense boredom. Perhaps there is something therapeutic in this, but I confess that I cannot see what it is. Of course, I am not a psychiatrist.

What a gem of controlled anger and clear insight.

In a longer narrative that follows, Gruchow is a storyteller; then in a concise look at psychiatric hospital design, he’s a researcher. Finally, two fragments compare and contrast hospital and prison life in traditional rhetorical ways. If read thoughtfully—by Turner’s ideal reader who “enjoys participating in the construction of the work itself”—all this jumping around, changing voices, and coming at an issue from as many angles as possible—creates discrete moments of intense empathy and comprehension broken by intervals inviting imagination and contemplation. To help the reader in synthesizing these fragments, Gruchow closes the section with “A Modest Proposal,” a satirical piece worthy of the Swift tradition. In it, he suggests that before given admission to practice, psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses must each be admitted to a psychiatric ward with a “pejorative diagnosis,” be medicated, and be given “two weeks to convince the staff, without reference to their credentials, that they are sane.” Those who fail get another chance in six months. Gruchow’s proposal is a fine piece of wit that gathers and concludes the various fragments of the section in a truly organic way.

Turner numbers his fragments but otherwise eschews any explicit divisions. He also provides blank pages that serve to separate sections as well as to create silent intervals for taking deeper breaths, waiting for understanding. The gathering of fragments considered here (29-40) focus on and emanate from the recruiter's office where Turner's military service began. Thoroughly remembered down to the "warmth of the freshly printed list of options," the scene ends with the anaphoric sentence that will function like a musical burden—a repetition of a refrain or chorus that's often associated with a bass drone: "I pointed to the list and said the word Infantry."

Why would anyone do such a thing? I can give you only an impression of the answer. In fragment 30, an eleven-year-old Turner is digging a foxhole based on specifications from his father's infantry field manuals. "I signed the paper and joined the infantry for reasons I won't tell you and for reasons I will." In fragment 32, Turner's father, involved in a nearly fatal motorcycle accident, is left with a story and a huge scar. "The scar said—that which is written in the flesh is irrefutable. This is the mark of a man. This is what it takes." In fragment 33, Turner and his father— "fighting the invisible before us"— train in a backyard dojo. "I pointed to the list and said Infantry because I wanted the man in the polyester suit to know, at some unconscious level, that I didn't give a shit what row of ribbons he had pinned to his chest." In fragment 35, Turner is making homemade napalm with his father following a recipe from *The Poor Man's James Bond*. And he's remembering stories: from his Vietnam Veteran uncle about enemy interrogations, from his father about secret reconnaissance missions.

In the midst of this collage of memory and violence, Turner inserts the screenplay of "The War that Time Forgot," a Super8 movie written, produced, and acted by him and his middle-school friends. The movie concludes when the star (Sgt. T., played by Turner), to a background of Barber's "Adagio for Strings," blows off an enemy's head—a melon "filled with sheep's blood and pig brains."

Then Turner returns to the stories. His father clinically dead from a heart attack, revives. “So what was it like, dying?” Turner asks. “That,” his father answers, “was a trauma-junkie’s delight.”

Fragment 39 describes a chilling moment of epiphany.

When we triggered the device and the napalm exploded, I felt charged and electric. We were surrounded by the cold. Coffee steamed in the cup as the entire world disappeared in fog. And for a moment, I knew—here was the great body of Death. A portion of the inheritance we all share. I wanted to see it break open in fire. I wanted the world to be shaken by it. And, most of all, I wanted to be shaken by it, too.

In the final fragment, Turner introduces even more accounting—to the background of the burden’s drone: “I said Infantry because my great-grandfather Carter was gassed during the Battle of Meuse-Argonne in the fall of 1918.” And “I said Infantry because one of my great-greats enlisted in the Union Army—15 November 1861—at Cumberland Gap.” And he signed because his grandfather survived Bougainville and Guam and Iwo Jima. “I signed the paper because I knew that on some deep and immutable level, I would leave and I would never come back.”

Of course, no definitive explanation of Turner’s choices exists, but an empathic reading is possible. It lies in the spaces between the fragments of his recollections, just beyond language but informed by it. In the same way, Paul Gruchow’s accounts of the suffering the mentally ill endure and his rendering of his own struggle with mental illness are so powerful that his words and images remain with us as we pause, engage our own imaginations, and begin to understand during his book’s indwelling silences.