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The Memoir Inside the Essay Collection: Jo Ann Beard's *The Boys of My Youth*

The structure of *The Boys of My Youth* by Jo Ann Beard draws the reader in by the unique, captivating, honest voice and hooks the reader by the relationships caught on the page. Beard reels us in and then flings us back into the water again only to hook us with a different kind of bait in the second half of the book. The book turns, like an Italian sonnet, at the Big Event, which sends us spinning in a new kind of truth held in contrast with the truths in the first half of the book. Each new detail is a tiny nibble that drives us forward to know more. The reader learns as the narrator learns. It is these suspensions of information that surprise the reader and evoke feelings of delight, compassion, understanding, epiphany, and grief; they draw the reader into the life of the narrator and the other characters; they are what make the story real and true and good and beautiful. The big events experienced by the narrator appear gradually throughout the book. The reader arrives at them right alongside the writer, with little anticipation or awareness about how this is all going to end. It is enough to be riding along with a compelling voice, a captivating style, an engaging spirit, one we trust to take us wherever she decides to go.

Using the familiar night sky image in the first half of the book and the repetition of cleaning up in the second half of the book serves to tie these essays together in a way that deepens their individual significance and heightens the reader's experience. These threads, along with the deliberate decision to structure the essays in this specific order, create the sense that this essay collection is greater than the sum of its parts, a superb memoir-in-essays.

As a collection of autobiographical essays, *The Boys of My Youth* is not bound to proceed in any particular order, nor should Beard expect her reader to move from the beginning of the book to the end. The true collection of Philip Lopate essays is assembled “so that the reader can enjoy the fluent play of a single consciousness, a single sensibility flowing through disparate subject matters” and Beard’s “collection [includes] my musings on movies, literature, friendship, sex, teaching, urban history, city form and the nail parings of daily life” (20). When one first opens up *The Boys of My Youth*, the title page warns the reader—Autobiographical Essays—thus, Beard is under no obligation, as an essayist, to find order or provide a sequence or narrative arc. Lopate insists that this is okay for the reader, “because I know the truth, which is that, deep down, you love essays. You are just ashamed to admit it. You love essays, you love essays, you are getting very sleepy, you lo-o-oveessays, the stray meanderings, the sparkle and crackle of the essayist’s voice...” (20).

So, why bother looking at Beard’s essay collection in order to assess order and structure? Isn’t it enough that the essayist’s voice sparkles and crackles? In memoir, the reader expects a clear beginning and end to the story, so the writer must build a narrative from beginning to end, linear or disjointed as it may be. The essayist doesn’t have to concern herself with a book-length narrative arc. Yet, there is always an order, even if it is stapled papers tossed in the air and reassembled.

The essays in *The Boys of My Youth* are stand-alone pieces, able to be appreciated and read individually. They do not rely on each other for meaning or context the way that chapters in a memoir must build off of each other. However, through careful structuring, the incorporation of central and repeated images throughout the individual essays, the juxtaposition of essays, and the withholding of key information until later in the collection, Beard’s collection of essays becomes *more* than a collection of essays. It is a memoir-in-essays: a collection of essays that builds in depth and complexity as the reader proceeds through the collection, giving a larger perspective and broader narrative of the writer’s life than one essay alone can provide. Through the close analysis of Beard’s collection of essays, the reader can

begin to know and understand how an essay collection can be assembled in such a way as to become a memoir-in-essays.

Order and Sequence of the Essays

To begin with, Beard's collection is not ordered chronologically, although there is a chronological progression. The first 96 pages move steadily through her childhood to her marriage, from one of her "pre-verbal memories" (xi) of Hal, Beard's male doll, through to the shooting at the University of Iowa, the "last day of the first part of my life" (88). This first part of the narrator's life incorporates a central and recurring image of the night sky filled with stars that gradually builds and shifts throughout the essay collection.

Then, beginning with the essay "Bulldozing the Baby," the chronological progression of the collection is disrupted, and the reader is back with Jo Ann and Hal, the male doll from the first essay. The second half of the book revisits the same childhood, the same youth, and the same marriage that the reader has experienced in the first half of the book, only now, instead of stars, "the sky is full of dead men, drifting in the blackness like helium balloons" (95). Just as character development places a crucial role in memoir, the recurrence of familiar characters throughout the essay collection helps to solidify the narrative thread across essays.

Beard reboots her narrative halfway through the book, thus intentionally delaying the details of the narrative. The essays that precede "The Fourth State of Matter" are exquisite in their construction and their depth; they possess a youthful innocence. Here is Beard's world, protected as if by an atmosphere, until "The Fourth State of Matter," when that layer of protection is shattered. The essays that follow each attempt to clean up what has been destroyed. This parallel structure moves the reader from innocence to experience, gradually broadening and widening the lens through which we see Beard's world. Essay after essay, the reader gasps, *ah, yes*, or *oh, no*, as she experiences events right alongside the essayist. Here again

we see Beard utilizing structure to propel her readers forward in the same way a memoirist positions key details in her storyline.

Because Beard writes primarily in present tense, the narrative rarely leans on the reflective voice. All analysis and exposition is delivered through tone, dialogue, metaphor, and scene description. It is only upon a second reading of the text that any foreshadowing can be identified, as in “The Fourth State of Matter,” loaded with these kinds of seemingly innocuous descriptions—“The Milky Way is a long smear on the sky, like something erased on a chalkboard” (74), or “Guys whose own lives are ticking like alarm clocks getting ready to go off, although none of us is aware of it yet” (75). The present tense forces an extreme first-person limited perspective. The “I” in the story can only reflect back in time from that present moment; in order to give any reflection, it must exit the present-tense mode entirely and enter future tense or past tense, yanking the reader out of the scene, or it must rely on elements of scene development, craft, setting, description, and metaphor to carry the weight of narrative reflection. These elements of craft create the suspense and provoke curiosity in the reader the same way that a memoir writer must. The gradual revelation that occurs is like a chain of daisies: each piece is its own beautiful flower, but there’s a chink in the stem big enough to slip the next daisy through. This intentional structure and order ties the essay collection together in order to create a narrative flow.

Gradual Revelation: The Way the Night Sky Changes

One device Beard employs throughout the first half of the book, and to a lesser degree the second, is the repetition of a central image: the description of the sky and the way that it changes. The universe and Beard’s orientation to it evolves throughout the first half of the book, until it shatters in “The Fourth State of Matter.” Until that essay, it is the sky and its reliable constellations, its predictable patterns and landmarks that seem to orient Beard to reality. The night sky is a central and binding image that serves as one string that ties the essays together.

Throughout the first half of the book, the essays are filled with descriptions of the night sky, often coupled with a source of comfort or a man. These begin in the Preface, where the frightening night-light of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus glows and Jo Ann turns to Hal, her male doll, for solace. Then, Beard flashes forward to riding in a car with a charming boy, the dashboard “like the control panel of a spaceship,” and then the narrator directs the reader to look out the window, “the clear night sky was suddenly visible, and the moon—a garish yellow disk against a dark wall—seemed to be looking at me funny” (xiii). Here, Beard establishes another of the connecting themes in the book: the men in Beard’s life are the navigators, and the navigators are tied to the night sky and its constellations—those reliable reference points humankind has navigated by for centuries.

The first essay after the Prologue does not reference the sky, but instead Beard presents the reader with another prevailing theme of the book: forces beyond the narrator’s control sweeping away the men in her life. On the first read, though, the reader isn’t paying attention to that; instead, the awareness of the reader extends only to the narrator’s self-consciousness. Beard is not thinking about the fact that the boys nearly died; she is preoccupied with her shorts, obsessed with the fact that the boys might be looking at her. By introducing these two parallel threads in the first two essays of the essay collection, thematic continuity is established, and Beard has two key touchstones by which to navigate the rest of the memoir-in-essays. How will the night sky change? How will her relationship to these men evolve? How will these two threads resonate with each other throughout the book? These are not the common questions an essayist asks herself unless she is looking at her collection as a whole, as a memoir after understanding. Here are some of the ways in which we see these narrative threads emerge in individual essays.

In the next essay, “Bonanza,” Beard’s grandfather has been swept away, dead now and replaced by a new man. The narrator stays overnight at her grandmother’s house, after her grandfather has passed away. As the narrator thinks about her grandmother and the lonely life she leads, she has something of an epiphany about her grandma’s life and possibly her own trajectory toward that lonely life separate from a

spouse. Here, the first-person present-tense narrator builds reflection in by using description, returning to that central image of the sky: “I’m a monkey, strapped into a space capsule and flung far out into the galaxy, weightless, hurtling along upside down through the Milky Way. Alone, alone, and alone. Against my will, I sob out loud” (14). It isn’t until Beard is situated back in the safety net of her parents’ marriage that she returns to earth: “We pull away and as we head toward home, the galaxy recedes, the stars move back into position, and the sky stretches out overhead, black and familiar” (15). This is the first that we see Jo Ann “untethered” to the earth, the first time that she floats into space, the first time she feels alone. Here, the night sky is paired with Beard’s connectedness to relationships.

In “Cousins,” Beard captures beautifully her mother and aunt’s relationship juxtaposed with Beard’s relationship with her cousin. The night sky appears again, this time in a bar in the arms of a man who is swinging her around the dance floor: “I close my eyes for a moment and it’s night inside my head, there are strange arms moving me around, this way and that, feet bumping into mine. The steel guitar comes overtop of it all, climbing and dropping, locating everyone’s sadness and yanking on it. In the shuffling crowd the dark curtain of rum parts for an instant, and reveals nothing. I open my eyes and look up at my partner” (28). These passages that connect Beard to the sky illustrate a longing to be connected to something, specifically to a man, as some kind of constant, but that longing goes unfulfilled. In fact, in many of these moments, the descriptions of the night sky paired with men are also paired with this emptiness, this “nothing.”

Later in the same essay the sky appears again, but this time it is connected to Jo Ann’s cousin, Wendell: “The night air is damp and black against my arms, like mossy sleeves. There are stars by the millions up above our heads. Wendell and I are sitting directly under Gemini, my birth sign, the oddball twins, the split personality. Part of me wants to get up and dance, the other part wants to sit with my head tipped back” (41). Here, Beard takes liberties with the sky—they are also situated under a hundred other constellations—but it is Gemini that she identifies. When dancing in the bar, the night sky reveals nothing,

but here next to her cousin, the night sky reveals her rooted connection to her female cousin. This essay is the first that establishes another thread that parallels the one of innocence to experience: the gradual revelation of the role of women in this narrator's life, often in direct contrast to the men.

In the next essay, "Behind the Screen," Beard writes the scene of watching fireworks on the Fourth of July with her family; everyone she is related to on the outside and Beard confined inside. Here, the night sky begins as a place of beauty—"A noodle skids across the sky, releasing a shower of blue spangles, jewels on a black velvet bodice. Way up there is outer space" (Beard 48) and gradually changes, becoming more ominous—

The sky is full of missiles. All different colors come out this time, falling in slow motion, red and blue turning to orange and green. It's so beautiful I have to close my eyes. ... Everything is falling away from me. I open my eyes. Black sky, dissipating puffs of gray smoke, barely visible edges of the elm tree. My father's hand is dark against the white of the dog's fur. ... I am stuck somewhere between the Fourth of July and the rest of time, the usual chaos inside my head distilled down into nothing. ... Shooting stars in the cold of outer space; one after another the missiles are launched until the sky is brilliant with activity and smoke. (Beard 49)

It is just a brilliant description of a fireworks show, but it is not *just* a brilliant description of a fireworks show. Beard inserts a reference to her father, who so far has only been a ghost of a character in the first half of the book, present but not. He is mentioned within the description of the threatening sky filled with missiles. Again, Beard's own thoughts are distilled to "nothing." The narrator is stuck in between this fireworks show and the rest of time, suspended. This shift in the way the night sky is described and presented to us moves the reader from the realm of possibility in the sky to the threats in the sky, all the while remaining connected to Beard and the relationships around her.

“Coyotes” is a strange and beautiful essay that captures the way romantic relationships tend to be. It isn’t clear how old this narrator is or whether she is married to Eric in this essay, but they are either about to be married or in the early months of marriage, based on their interactions and Beard’s descriptions of Eric. Beard references religious icons throughout the collection; the heavens are the traditional location of God, and gods are the things we tend to orbit, providing the navigational guidance we tend to long for. Here, Beard intentionally labels Eric: “Beside me, Eric is sleeping with his neck exposed and both hands lying open and empty. God” (52). As the author seems to seek a planet to orbit, a sphere or galaxy or star to hinge on, Eric is the closest option.

In terms of the night sky, this essay does plenty. Since it is the long essay that precedes “The Fourth State of Matter,” the many references to space and stars are clearly intentional, although as a first-time reader, one might simply think, ah, the beauty of a night sky. In “Coyotes,” the description of the sky continues to grow more volatile: “Ninety-three million miles due west, the sun continues to shoot off its bottle rockets. . . . There is nothing. The moon is a wide, mottled face, the countenance of an enraged idiot. The coyote runs and runs, not gasping, until there is something. . . . He holds the moment until he can stay still no longer and begins running again, away from the sky. The ground is silver, the rocks are gleaming. There is nothing” (Beard 65-66). In these passages and in this essay as a whole, the narrator’s faith in men and their ability to hold things together seems to be waning. Again the narrator affiliates the night sky with “nothing,” and here, the coyote runs away from it.

Here we see the power of the memoir-in-essays; the tension in this essay brings a sense of foreboding as it builds off of the previous essays. “Coyotes” seems to foreshadow the coming wreckage. It moves from this relationship with Eric toward solitude and then toward “the pack.” This final turn leans toward the revelations that come in the second half of the book, where the women in Beard’s life are sustaining and reliable, unlike the men; Beard becomes rooted in mother Earth instead of looking toward the sky. This becomes even clearer in the following long passage:

Way up there, satellites are parked with their motors running, and vivid rings of plasma do laps around Saturn. Way down here, there is only the terrible arch of the sky, the sagging moon, and nothing else.... I am alone down here, and up there, clinging to the spoke of a satellite, looking upward at the dark velvet, and downward at the dark velvet. There is nothing. ... In the endless black of deep space a small comet hurtles along, tossing iceballs and dirt behind it, on a perpetual path, around and around and around, pointless and energetic. Propelled by the force of its combustion, the comet passes within a light year of Sirius, burning out of control. Under the press of gravity and air, inside the earth's atmosphere, the coyote reads the signals in the ground... He begins loping again, ... until he cries as he runs, low and controlled. They are somewhere... (Beard 67-68)

The sky is dangerous here, heavy with unpredictability and inevitability. Using the sky imagery, Beard establishes the sense of helplessness.

On its own, the passage is beautiful and complex, fascinating connective tissue within the individual essay. And yet, taken with the rest of the essay collection, this night sky passage carries much more weight and substance. A few veiled references to what is coming in "The Fourth State of Matter" appear here. Early in the passage there is the reference to "satellites parked with motors running," which brings to mind the dashboard lights in the first essay of the collection as well as the Maserati shifting gears that Beard does with her dying dog in "The Fourth State of Matter." Then, Beard mentions the plasma rings of Saturn, which figure prominently in "The Fourth State of Matter." The threat of the comet whizzing within a light year of Sirius ties significantly into the end of "The Fourth State of Matter," when Beard mentions that Sirius (the dog star) is her favorite star. The narrator seems to identify with both the coyote here and the star Sirius. It is Sirius that just misses the collision of the comet, "pointless and

energetic,” as if the comet is Gang Lu from “The Fourth State of Matter,” and Beard the star the comet missed.

These connections with “The Fourth State of Matter” have no relevance to the reader on the first read-through of the collection. The night sky continues to function as the connecting thread through these early essays. The Sirius passage is followed by a segment in which Eric, whose head appears to be in the stars, instructs Jo Ann on the constellations. Eric whispers their names to her, a scene that seems to be romantic, except for this one line: “I am on planet Earth” (68). Once again, Beard succeeds at using the descriptions of the night sky and her relationship to it in order to communicate meaning. Each description of the night sky includes Beard’s position in it, whether she is observing from Earth or suspended above with the satellites.

The essay ends on the image of the coyote finding his pack. The reader can sense the narrator’s desire to feel the same “push of love,” the same yearning for connection, as the distance between her and her lover increases.

There’s a brief interruption in the sky-parallels with the essay “Against the Grain,” which sets up the fact that Jo Ann is now married to the perfectionist who is trying to fix her. This essay reveals the flaws in the construction, so to speak, of this relationship. It is a shorter essay as well, which helps to provide breathing space for the reader. The order the essays appear is important to consider here: “Cousins” showed Eric as boyfriend and lover, “Coyote” established the complex and changing dynamics of the narrator’s relationship with Eric, and “Against the Grain” delivers Phase Three, tension between the narrator and her husband. “Against the Grain” is a good transition essay into Phase Four, the vanishing husband. Each essay moves the reader and narrator forward together, deepening and complicating the characters introduced.

“The Fourth State of Matter” is the central essay in the collection. It is the essay on which all else pivots. The first sky reference in “The Fourth State of Matter” appears early in the essay: “The Milky Way

is a long smear on the sky, like something erased on a chalkboard. ... Over the neighbor's house, Mars flashes white, then red, then white again. Jupiter is hidden among the anonymous blinks and glitterings. It has a moon with sulfur-spewing volcanoes and a beautiful name: Io. I learned it at work, from the group of men who surround me there" (Beard 74-75). Even though Beard knows what is going to happen—that later in the essay, she will erase the X's from her sketch on the chalkboard and after that, the shooter will erase the men, and after that, Jo Ann herself will erase the chalkboard after a colleague comes to visit Bob's office—the reader doesn't know any of this information. Beard deftly chooses when to inform the reader about these things. These are integrated so subtly that there's simply no picking up on them the first time through.

As a result, the essay (and the book itself) up to this point has been entertaining, thoughtful, beautiful, and passionate renderings of a normal, funny, Midwestern life. All of these subtle references and connecting threads in the sky draw the reader through the first half of the book. There hasn't really been a crisis moment or big event necessary to capture the reader's interest; the reader is interested because of the quality of the language, the craft, the storytelling, and the unfolding of the narrator's life. Then everything changes. This kind of an event alters one's understanding of reality. It explodes like a speeding comet colliding with a planet, shatters life, and forces those impacted to look upon the world through a new lens.

After the shooting, the husband returns: "I realize it took quite a bit of courage for him to come to the house when he did, facing all those women who think he's the Antichrist" (Beard 95). Note that in "Coyotes," Eric's early description is followed by the single word sentence, "God," but here, "the husband" is now the Antichrist. This is also the first mention of the sky since the beginning of the essay, "I get his coat and follow him out into the cold November night. There are stars and stars and stars. The sky is full of dead men, drifting in the blackness like helium balloons. My mother floats past in a hospital gown, trailing tubes..." (Beard 95). The final sentence in this passage serves as a kind of trail marker for the reader that will come in handy later in the book, when we learn the status of her marriage with Eric,

but for now, the reader is mostly focused on the sky, which has mirrored her relationships with men, now filled with dead people, people who cannot protect her or provide that safe haven for her. Her universe is rattled.

The end of the essay draws to a close the majority of Beard's sky references, as dawn begins to arrive. Yesterday was the last day of the first part of her life; today is the first day of the rest of her life and also the end of the first part of the essay collection: "For now there are still planets and stars. Above the black branches of a maple is the dog star, Sirius, my personal favorite. The dusty rings of Saturn. Io, Jupiter's moon. ... We're in the plasmopause, a place of equilibrium, where the forces of the Earth meet the forces of the sun. I imagine it as a place of silence, where the particles of dust stop spinning and hang motionless in deep space. Around my neck is the stone he brought me from Poland" (Beard 96). The relationship that Jo Ann had with Chris seems to redefine for her the sort of man she ought to have been with and the sort of sky she ought to have been situated under. Now, though, she is in the "plasmopause," between Earth and sun, gravity and light, not of the stars and not of the earth. Soon, the night sky will disappear from the essay collection, for the most part. The essay ends here, and with it the first half of the book comes to a close.

With the conclusion of "The Fourth State of Matter," Beard resets the storyline. The narrator jumps back to early memories. She returns to Hal, she revisits childhood memories of siblings and parents, she provides new information about her father and her husband, and the reader begins to see the new focal point, the new awareness, that it is Beard and the women in her life and family who have been the stabilizing forces, by necessity or by choice, the women who have had to hold things together and clean things up when they come undone. The second half of the book shows the narrator under a new sky.

Besides a brief mention of her mom in the essay "Waiting," as an "unwilling astronaut, bumping against the thick glass of the ship, her line tangling lazily in zero gravity, face mask fogged with fear" (141), the sky does not appear again until late in the title essay, "The Boys of My Youth." As Eric and Jo Ann

drive the roads home in the dark, they turn off the headlights, “He presses harder on the gas. The sky is distinguishable from the ground only because it is blue-black, and the land is black-black. There are stars. ... I put my foot on top of his and press it to the floor. I close my own eyes and imagine myself leaning into it, certain death. Darkness and his girlfriend, Darkness, are out for a ride through the countryside in the summer night” (180). Here the earth and the sky blend together in one sheet of darkness. Earlier, in the first essay of the collection, a person Jo Ann is fond of is in the driver’s seat; here, Jo Ann presses the pedal to the floor, in control but not. Earlier in the essay “Coyotes,” Beard orients herself on Earth versus Eric’s position among the constellations. Now, it is just Jo Ann, in Key West. “As soon as it got completely dark, the glass door turned into a giant black mirror, showing a ghostly image of me sitting in a wicker chair in the dimness. My hands were folded calmly in my lap. I looked like a dark painting of barely controlled hysteria...” (182). It’s just Jo Ann now. Alone on Earth.

The way the night sky changes throughout the essay collection serves as a critical touchstone for the reader, the central metaphor that helps both narrator and reader know where they are in the emotional range of the memoir, even as individual essays stand alone.

Delayed Revelation: The Husband, The Men, The Women, The Friends

Besides the night sky as a central image, Beard makes additional choices to withhold information in individual essays that contributes to this collection of essays functioning as a memoir-in-essays. Beard knows all of the information revealed in the latter half of the book in advance, but the reader only discovers this information once Beard decides to reveal it. Clearly, Beard knows the name of her husband when she writes “Against the Grain” and “The Fourth State of Matter,” she knows, too, about her father’s car accident, her mother’s death, the shooting, the exchange of Hal for some toy vacuum cleaner, and yet it isn’t until after “The Fourth State of Matter” that these essays and this information is revealed. These sorts of decisions are deliberate. The second half of the book is as if a transparency has been laid over top the

original image and Beard has reset the lens, refocused the zoom. Now we see a new kind of truth—a delayed revelation for the reader.

The best example of this is the name of her husband. The reader is first introduced to Eric, the boyfriend, after the Eric Clapton concert, in the essay, “Cousins.” Eric appears again by name in the essay, “Coyotes,” although whether they are married or dating isn’t clear. From the end of “Coyotes” all the way until the final essay, “The Boys of My Youth,” Beard never refers to her husband by his name. This deliberate decision to withhold identity is fascinating. The reader wonders with each passing essay, “Is *this* Eric?” is this the same guy in the cornfield, the same guy in the desert, the same guy who named the stars for her? That not knowing carries a degree of suspense across essays, and this suspense is yet another string that helps tie the individual essays together as memoir.

When his identity is finally revealed, it hits with the full weight of all that the reader understands about Jo Ann’s relationship with Eric. It isn’t until page 170 that we learn her husband’s name: “This from my husband Eric, who had held my hand when they lowered my mother into the ground, who put me in a bathtub once and poured cold water on me to break a fever, who whispered the names of the constellations again and again because I could never remember them” (Beard 170). The weight of knowing *now* that it is this man, this same man, who walked through all of the other awful with her, who is leaving her and having an affair, delivers a heart-jumping-into-the-throat and stomach-bottoming-out impact. Here is the full weight of history pressing down for the first time confirmed, yes, it is this same man.

Similarly, Beard’s decision to structure the manuscript by “resetting” the timeline and springing back again to her early childhood with “Bulldozing the Baby” reveals a second, more ominous truth that perhaps can only be learned in hindsight, after the wreckage. The essay collection could have been organized chronologically, with the two Hal stories back-to-back, the family essays next to each other, gradually proceeding through Beard’s life, but it is this suspension of “and also, this” that deepens what

the narrator comes to understand about herself and the people in her life, below the surface narrative. It is almost as if she is seeing her entire childhood in a new light, in the refracted strobe light of crisis, the big event positioned at the center of the book in the essay “The Fourth State of Matter.” It is around this essay that the rest of the book orbits. The reader gets to experience this same “and also, this” revelation, seemingly right along with the writer.

The essays that follow “The Fourth State of Matter” feature women taking care of business, cleaning up messes, and trying to hold together what is falling apart. In “Bulldozing the Baby,” three-year-old Jo Ann tries to clean up Hal but instead messes him up more; her aunt takes Hal away but Jo Ann misses him terribly, so the aunt tries to retrieve him but he’s long gone. Instead, her aunt brings back a toy vacuum cleaner, broom, and dustbin. Three-year-old Jo Ann is captivated and spends all evening cleaning. If the night sky is the common thread that unites the first half of the book, it is this responsibility to tidy up that pulls the second half of the book’s essays together. In fact, the men are just plain replaced by this need for order.

The power of the placement of the Hal essay is that, through the lens of the three-year-old first-person limited narrator, Beard captures what most romantic relationships in her life have looked like: the woman tries to clean up the man, the man resists these changes, the woman is left to clean up the wreckage that remains. This essay serves to link all that came before with all that will follow. In “The Family Hour,” Beard returns us to her family unit and reveals the extent to which her father drinks and the ways in which the women in her family come to the rescue (or fail to rescue). This essay is a bit more dark and sinister than the earlier family essays. The soft underbelly is exposed, as if to say, “Look, see?” as if to provide an answer to the calls of the coyotes in the first half of the book. The essay incorporates “cleaning up” through scene—helping the younger brother after he throws up, washing the dishes—paralleled with the cleaning up that has to be done by the women: looking for the father, pulling Jo Ann out of the sewer grate, tending to the father after his drunken car accident.

“Waiting” takes a different spin. The girls are taking care of things, yes, but they are aided by two men—one, the doctor, who cannot make things right, cannot heal their mother, and the second, the funeral director, who *does* fix things, makes her mother look like herself again, but in death. Beard spends a long time describing each of these men, their uniforms and their postures, as one ushers out the dying and the other shapes the dead into an image that is *almost* life-like. Two key characters are missing in this essay: her father and her husband, whom we learn late in the book was there with her when her mother passed away. Clearly, the cleaning up is the responsibility of the daughters, but there exists this class of men in the world who seem to be *other*—doctors and physicists and funeral directors—who are capable of seeing a need and trying to fill it, men who reside among the stars.

As Beard progresses through these essays, a further refining and sharpening of the self as a woman occurs. Whereas in the first half of the book, Beard seemed to be influenced by the men, in the second half of the book she seems to be defining herself against them: they might be *this* way, but *I* am like *this*. Beard is explicit in this mode within the essay “Out There.” Beard transitions throughout the essay from caring what her husband thinks to not caring what her husband thinks to not caring what anyone thinks to caring only what she thinks of herself. Beard declares, “Who do they think they are, these men? I’ve had my fill of it,” and in the midst of the highway harassment, when Jo Ann is in a state of terror, “Everywhere I go I’m finding out new things about myself. Each way I turn, there it is. It’s Jo Ann he wanted to kill” (151). Here, Beard seems to be talking directly about the man in the lane next to her, but because this essay is also coupled with the difficulties in her marriage, chronologically before the shooting that takes place in “The Fourth State of Matter,” it seems she’s also referring to the Perfectionist (in “Against the Grain”) and the Vanished Husband (in “The Fourth State of Matter”), who is “sort of embarrassed” by her (145). That man, as well, wants to kill Jo Ann, change her and shape her into a different sort of person. By the end of the essay, Beard has found identity separate from her husband and the man on the highway.

These later essays, even though they overlap or sometimes—as in the case of the Hal essays—directly address material that came earlier, always add something new to the reader’s understanding of the characters and of the narrator. Each builds off of the previous essay; each broadens the lens wider. In this way, the daisy chain of essays continues, building upon the information received in the previous essays, deepening and complicating what is known.

The final long essay, “The Boys of My Youth,” navigates between the present-tense now-narrator and the present-tense then-narrator with ease and serves to pull all of the previous material together. Elizabeth, Jo Ann’s best friend, is the glue in Beard’s discussion of boys. Elizabeth is the common denominator from childhood memory to memory, through the boys that have gone away, and Beard uses Elizabeth to confirm or clarify the memories on the page, pulling from the then-narrator quickly into the now-narrator. The essay continues the ongoing theme of cleaning up after others, trying to fix what’s broken to pieces.

A woman friend and Jo Ann talk about having affairs, information that is given *after* Beard has already revealed to us who it is that Eric has left her for (172). This delayed revelation is a double-punch to the gut—in this short section of the essay, Beard chooses not to name the woman friend until it is revealed in the dialogue, “‘Oh, Kim, it’s not good to do that,’ I tell her,” and of course the reader already knows this Kim, this Kim is the same Kim with whom her husband is having an affair. This is yet another example of the way that the writer has chosen to delay information in order to achieve a certain effect.

It isn’t until nearly the end of the essay and the end of the book that Beard gives a brief yet detailed summary of her marriage with Eric and its unraveling. In the midst of this unraveling, the identity that has gradually formed as *woman* shows itself. “In the car on the way home I say to him in the most dangerous tone I can come up with, ‘*You have got to treat me like an equal.*’ ... He says, looking straight ahead through the glistening windshield, simply and sadly, ‘I can’t’” (203). Again, Jo Ann is in the car with Eric; Beard returns consistently to imagery that changes as she revisits it.

What surfaces in this last essay is the feminist that has been growing in stature since the world came to a crash in “The Fourth State of Matter,” since the new lenses were fitted in “Bulldozing the Baby.” Elizabeth and Jo Ann talk on the phone in the midst of Jo Ann’s Florida crisis: “I think you’re this upset because *you* want to leave *him*.’ This makes my stomach lurch in a very sickening, grain-of-truth-to-it way. ‘But I love him,’ I tell her, ‘He’s the only man I’ve ever loved’” (189). This is the crux of the story: self versus man-god, holder of the universe of love. Her world has yet to explode in “The Fourth State of Matter” (chronologically, the shooting in “The Fourth State of Matter” seems to take place post-Florida trip, since the husband has already moved out in that essay), sky blackened and filled with dead guys, until the sun rises on a new day. It’s the self that triumphs: “ ‘I can’t believe I said ‘He’s the only man I ever loved.’ I’m supposed to be a *writer*, for God’s sake.’ I might be starting to snap out of it” (189), except for the new guy, of course, which leaves the collection in a less satisfying place of conflict, the default return to what makes the world spin round: “Oh man. He’s shimmering in my living room like a genie released from a bottle. I don’t know whether to faint or kill myself. Elizabeth laughs unbecomingly. I put both hands around my own neck. We do our silent screaming routine. We are no longer bored” (208).

The sky, the men, and Beard’s relationship to them drive the essays as a whole forward to form a satisfying and complex narrative, a true memoir-in-essays. We are not the least bit bored.

Works Cited

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