



Bailey M. Boyd

An Interview with Jericho Parms

Jericho Parms's 2016 essay collection, *Lost Wax*, is one that weaves reflections of childhood and young adulthood with meditations on famous pieces of art; the essays contained within the collection vary in length and form, yet are all unified by Parms's distinctly, lyrical voice. I met Jericho when she read from *Lost Wax* at the University of Missouri in 2017, which led to this extended conversation about her work.

Bailey M. Boyd: One of my favorite essays in this collection is “Honey” – the stillness before chaos that you capture is gorgeous:

I don't know how long it took for us to realize something was amiss, to register the fiery iridescence of his eyes, the wet fur around this paws, the odd incongruity that hung from his mouth—something more brightly orange than he: a boiled carrot, a wedge of clementine, a crescent of cantaloupe.

But in fact, it was my goldfish that the cat dropped like an offering before us: the wet squish of its body falling to the floor, the splat as it landed, the flash of orange light, limp and lustrous against the white linoleum tile floor. And then the world spiraled into action— (10)

This is one of the shorter pieces in this collection. It not only shows, but also performs, the importance of one moment in a lifetime of moments. “Honey” isn't the only short essay; you include others throughout this collection. Have you always been drawn to the short form essay? Are there certain challenges you face in the short form? Freedoms? How do you think about the short essay's place in the current conversation about creative nonfiction?

Jericho Parms: I'm not sure I've always been drawn to the short form essay, but I've always been drawn to the concept of brevity in one way or another, with respect to both process and potential material. It was poetry, after all, that first drew me to writing—reeling me in through the use of imagery, demonstrating the efficacy of language even in the smallest doses. While I often write in bursts and binges, I tend to revise in long stints, my attention settling into the process of reworking content, language, and form. Sometimes that leads to building an essay out—a process of developing and expanding. Other times my writing takes on the practice of chiseling away, distilling a moment down to the elements worth lingering on that can serve as a portal or foray toward greater significance.

When it comes to the short form, in the absence of prolonged exposition, meditation, scene or character development that a longer essay would afford, something has to hold ground in a piece whether that's highly stylized form, image, or metaphor. This is to say that the short essay, while reliant on a greater economy of language is no less beholden to making meaning. Compression is a powerful literary tool that speaks to such challenges while allowing for some freedom in the writing process. Ryan Van Meter's "First," a gorgeous essay describing a childhood crush, is a great example of compression used with respect to space (two boys in the back of a station wagon) and time (one leg of a car ride home) to achieve narrative and emotional tension. Grace Paley's "Mother," a short story, does this beautifully as well, by portraying character through the repetition of gesture and dialogue. Compression raises the stakes of a piece and can artfully illustrate the how single moments, images, gestures, can speak to universal themes.

The essay "Honey" was, as you point out, an attempt to play with the notion of stillness (or stalemate) in everyday life and the slippery, chaotic nature of loss, while considering how small moments can take on an all-of-a-sudden momentum and morph into something larger that persists and lingers.

I've been excited to see short form essays take off within the realm of creative nonfiction. I see it as a relevant call to greater awareness and attention, a refusal to take for granted the nuance and details that compose experience, but also a call to listen more closely and acknowledge the potential power and potency of the words we use, which feels more important than ever.

BMB: This book clearly reflects your love and respect for art, color, poetry, philosophy, home. Music is also a very strong theme throughout the book. You have three essays in the book that are three sections within one title: "The B Side." In the first, you reminisce about your early recording sessions with your father, in the second: one night watching *Jeopardy*—Rock N' Roll with him, and in the third, you return to recording with your father, this time as a young adult interviewing him on tape. Each are underlined by a song that is significant: "*The Hammer Song*," "*Somewhere*" and "*Blackbird*." In one of the essays that divide these three sections of "The B Side," you also foreshadow your parent's divorce with Graham Nash's "Our House" that "ran as a looped, almost inescapable, melody in my mother's head that summer" (17). What was the narrative choice behind splitting the three "B Side" essays in this way, with separate essays in between each section? How did you think about music in conjunction with poetry, sculpture, and painting in your book as a whole?

JP: The decision to split "The B Side" essays was driven in large part by a rare appeal to chronology. I say "rare" only because many of my essays tend to favor meditative qualities and idea-based inquiry over narrative. That said, when pulling together the

essays in *Lost Wax*, it became clear early on that a certain chronology might serve the first section of the book in order to establish a few childhood events and the roots of perspective that, while it develops and changes, carries through and informs subsequent essays. Separating “The B Side” into its three sections and placing them intermittently throughout the first section allowed for some foreshadowing and weaving of other events (most notably my parents’ divorce). We often talk about “connective tissue” in the craft of essays and how we can use both white space and other craft elements to create throughways in a piece. In this case I was interested in exploring how that might work, not just on the scale of an individual essay, but when structuring the essay collection as a whole. In what ways can an essay (written independently, as stand alone piece) serve as connective tissue when placed within the section break of an equally autonomous three-part essay? In what ways can a three-part essay become a through line or strand in the larger braid of a collection? Another factor that led me to separate the piece, to speak back to your previous question, was a simple desire to break up one of the longer essays in the book. Presenting “The B Side” in its entirety (that is, uninterrupted) felt unnecessarily burdensome, too much to digest at once. Rather, I was more compelled to present the reader with the experience of dipping back into a story, revisiting my relationship with my father and music at different stages, in much the same way as I had experienced it—a little more time having passed each time, a little more perspective having been gained.

While I have often credited visual art for having the greatest influence on my writing process, music is a vital part of that process as well. For me, viewing art is an exercise of attention, a process of giving myself over to observation and allowing ideas and associations to surface as a result. The act of listening is equally fruitful and I’m often struck by just how much we tend to miss on a daily basis due to a lack of close listening. As a writer I love to feed off of other surfaces, colors, textures, rhythms and sounds, lyrics, gestures, movements. Art in all forms serves as a reliable origin point for me, a vehicle through which to glean a new idea, a line of language or description or memory—a place where the writing begins.

BMB: *Lost Wax* is a book that embodies the lyric essay. Poetry abounds in its pages, both by reference and by your rhythmic, lyric voice. As someone that bridges the divide between poetry and essay with ease, when are you most conscious of that divide between the two? What do you feel poetry can teach the essay? And vice versa?

JP: I don’t believe there is much that poetry *can’t* teach us. Poetry has been a consistent and often grounding presence in my life and serves as influence in much the same way that visual art and music do—specifically in its capacity to call a reader to attention, to underscore the nuances of language. There is a lot the essay as a form shares with poetry just as one might argue there is a lot the essay shares with fiction, too. And yet,

we often stubbornly hold fast to genre distinctions and perpetuate the divide between forms. After all, I don't identify as a poet, nor would I ever claim to write poetry, but I wouldn't be a writer without it. While much of contemporary creative nonfiction derives from and focuses on extraordinary experiences, the essay has always had an affinity for the quotidian which is one of the reasons I'm so drawn to the form. The essay seeks significance in incidents large or small, is unabashedly and insatiably curious, attentive to detail, willing to meditate on the mundane and associate toward greater meaning. These are not revolutionary concepts. Rather they are, in my opinion, what connects great writing and, in turn, allow us to connect to the human experience, genre notwithstanding.

BMB: In your essay "Practicing," you say that you felt like you could easily fit in many worlds feeling out of place but also belonging in them: "I realized that I can move inconspicuously between worlds: black and white, urban and rural, between privilege and lack thereof. I would spend many of the next formative years feeling out of place yet managing to belong" (145). How have these experiences of feeling out of place, but managing to belong, affected or influenced your writing career?

JP: Great question. Feeling out of place yet managing to belong—I'm not sure that feeling has (or will?) ever gone away. But I do think my perspective has changed such that now, I'm not sure that I ever want it to. Duality is an important theme in my work and stems from my experience between racial, cultural, and regional identities, and personal sensibilities that have led me to filter between urban and rural spaces, between a vicious drive toward independence and solitude and an appreciation and dependence on partnership and community. I like to think that, while there exists an inherent tension between such extremes, such tension—discomfort, even—often open up lines of inquiry and leads to greater understanding.

In many essays I'm interested in confronting the tension between such and I would further list among those extremes: past and present, tradition and modernism, idealism and reality, stillness and movement, chaos and grace. Such concepts provide thematic momentum that grounds me as a writer and encourages me to move beyond retelling or theorizing toward interrogating experience. I think you are right to mention "Practicing" as an essay that embodies this approach. I often think it is the same young self in that essay that I write for—a girl trying to comprehend the world around her, a world that she feels both a part of and apart from.

I would say this applies to other aspects of my writing career as well. In teaching, for example, I love pushing students to develop their own writing process while also challenging them to become engaged readers and critical thinkers who interrogate their own perspective and seek language to convey their lens on the world. More generally, the decision to be a writer and the commitment to publishing work requires a certain

willingness to be uncomfortable, to lay bare and risk vulnerability. But the return, the ability to connect with readers and convey experience can be profoundly worth it. It's no wonder we often marvel at the irony of introverted writers coming together at conferences or other literary events and assuming the extroverted role of working an audience or promoting our work. It is a challenge to put oneself out there, a challenge that often feels akin to playing in one of my first violin recitals—ripe with insecurity yet managing to fit in line with the other girls bowing in relative tune. I've found, however, the more I put myself in those positions the more I learn, the more it gets easier, and the more I believe that comfort is vastly overrated.

BMB: One of the many things I admire about your essays is how you place personal moments in conversation with artists, intellectuals, and other writers. One of the essays that demonstrates this is “On Puddling” in which you weave facts of butterflies’ puddling with Nabokov’s study of butterflies and also with the memories of an acquaintance who died while she was hunting for butterflies. (There are other places of course, “A Chapter on Red” and “Mirror, Mirror” both come to mind as essays that employ this same braiding.) I’m curious about your attention to research—what role does it play for you in your writing? Secondly, in regards to process: does your research spark a thought or memory or does a memory or scrap of life lead you into research? Or is it all less structured than I am making it? Do you collect all of this information until you’re ready to start writing or does the essay begin in a different way for you?

JP: My writing process often begins with a question or idea, an image or observation that leads to further inquiry until (in the best cases) a raw curiosity drives an essay forward. My interest in the personal aspects of writing carries limitations. This speaks again to the ways in which I tend to favor idea and association over narrative. I grow easily bored by my stories; I grow easily restless when writing purely from memory. I am inevitably drawn to seeking external information and events to hold the personal up against. When we place our experiences in the presence of others (past or present) or in proximity to objects and artifacts, science and nature, I find that it increases the potential to make meaning in a piece. Whether or not researched material makes it into the final version of an essay, some form of research typically feeds my writing process. I have deep respect for the research and the way it can peel back layers of my curiosity, reveal deeper preoccupations or obsessions. So, yes, I think research often leads to sparks of writing, and in turn those sparks can lead to further research.

In the case of “On Puddling” I wrote that essay very much in conversation with the research I was doing at the time, and it came together in bursts and snippets, like a collection of field notes, some of which I literally jotted down while stopped along the side of a dirt road, some of which I shorthanded in the margins as I reread Nabokov’s memoir, or articles related to his scientific theories on butterfly migrations. The essay grapples with the death of a friend who died from a fall, which led me to wonder how Nabokov died. I read accounts of Nabokov hunting in the field with his net, which led

me to imagine this friend bounding through a field chasing insects. The science related to the puddling behavior of butterflies led to meditations on how as living creatures we often need to extract from the surfaces around us in order to feel nourished and grow strong. And so on... Often I think of the relationship between research and my writing process as a dance where information that exists in the world at large and the thoughts and images in my own mind act as partners trading moves, trying to strike the right rhythm and balance while striving toward something meaningful.

BMB: The first essay of the book, “On Touching Ground,” is a reflection and contemplation on youth, accessed by Edgar Degas’s sculptures. The last essay, “Immortal Wound,” about a dying moth, seems to pay homage to two writers, Virginia Woolf and Annie Dillard: “I envied Woolf’s day moth zigzagging against a windowpane; I envied Dillard the candlelight that singed her moth’s wings, its body burning like cinder through the night. I envied these women, each witness to their moth’s expiration, each in her expressive brevity embalming those dying wings” (151).

You’ve talked about this book as a “pilgrimage” and “journey” elsewhere (*The Rumpus*, 2016). Is this trajectory, from conversations with a sculptor and painter to conversations with two writers, a significant aspect of this journey for you?

JP: While I have thought of the book as a form of journey or exploration, I’m not sure that I’ve ever thought specifically about the opening and closing essays as bookends in that journey, with respect to the ways they engage with sculpture and writing—but I do find the idea compelling. I might go further, too, to suggest that there is an overall trajectory in the book that relates to movement and stillness, and that both “On Touching Ground” and “Immortal Wound” speak to that through line. The first essay, which weaves in reflections on Degas’s sculptures as well as Muybridge’s photographic studies of motion, is laden with images of running, the movement of horses and dancers, notions of westward expansion, what it means to be wild, what it means to be free yet continuously searching. The last essay, which happens to be one of the short form essays you mentioned earlier, is a brief homage to Woolf and Dillard through my own encounter with a moth. Finding the dead Luna moth was in some ways a moment filled with movement (or rather, a lack of movement—I wanted desperately for the moth to be alive after all, to take flight once again) and it certainly propelled my mind into a childlike wonder and meditation. But the moment also conjured a grounding sense of stillness and responsibility in me as a writer—a responsibility to describe, to record, to take notice to step into my own skin as a writer keenly aware of influences such as Virginia Woolf and Annie Dillard.

Lost Wax has been described as a collection of “coming of age” essays, and while I’m not always sold on that description I do recognize that there are various through lines in the book that speak to growth, youth, and adulthood. One thread that I was particularly

conscious of is the overall movement from restlessness toward a sense of grounding as the essays progress and build on one another. And, yes, the sculptors and painters and writers, and the art and music and poetry I draw upon all contribute to that overall trajectory or journey—from a young city girl running in the desert trying to emulate a wild mustang or a lithe ballerina to that same girl years later stumbling upon a Luna moth, engaging in conversation with the writers she loves about our odd preoccupation with life and death... and sure enough, she's still feeling out of place yet managing, at least on some level, to belong.