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“We Are the Poem”:
Structural Fissures and Levels in
Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Chronology of Water*

Carolyn Walker notes in her introduction to a conversation with nonlinear memoirists and essayists that authors of such texts may feel “Like southpaws in a right-handed world...out of sync in a field predominantly filled with linear agents, editors, and readers.” Indeed, when we consider many of the foundational texts in memoir, linear examples are likely the first to spring to mind. Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life*, Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club*, and Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* paved the way for contemporary memoirists by telling predominantly chronological stories of each author’s difficult upbringing. Even Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss* makes a relatively linear arc as its chiseled, image-driven scenes pivot around Harrison’s affair with her father. Though it makes some sudden leaps backwards and forwards in time, it often does so to create juxtapositions that inform the central through-line of the incestuous relationship.

Such conventions may be part of the reason Elle Nash of *Lit Reactor* uses the term “the antimemoir” to describe Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Chronology of Water: A Memoir*. Its chapters are short and organized thematically, rather than chronologically. Its focus seems to be less concerned with reflecting on one particular time period of the author’s life and more concerned with tracking threads across several years: abuse, grief, swimming, redemption. A reader briefly thumbing through the book might be forgiven for wondering if it’s a collection of vignettes or short essays. Closer consideration, however, reveals that the associative, nonlinear threads in *The Chronology of Water* do indeed tell a story. Grounded in Yuknavitch’s distinctive voice, the memoir reflects on the author’s abusive childhood and subsequent challenges as an adult. The central images of water and Yuknavitch’s stillborn daughter function to link the

memoir's threads together. In this way, *The Chronology of Water* reads partly like a poem: It uses images that recur and link to one another, and it offers an alternative method of processing events that is nonlinear and body-driven. Interviewing with Molly Gaudry on *Lit Pub*, Yuknavitch has referred to the book as an attempt "to contribute to the poetics of bodies" ("An Interview with Lidia Yuknavitch"). As a nonlinear memoir, *The Chronology of Water* provides a way to move through grief that might otherwise be unavailable in linear writing.

The Chronology of Water: A Memoir inhabits and pushes the boundaries of its genre by developing an ethos of resisting linearity—precisely because linearity, with its traditional narrative structure and discourse, is often more of an imposition on life and its griefs than a useful enactment of processing them. The tools of poetry, for Yuknavitch, are a truer and more bodily way to speak of trauma. Yuknavitch thematically and formally must question dominant narrative structures, as she says explicitly in teaching her reader how to read. In creating her "antimemoir," Yuknavitch relies on a sequence of named chapters. Like ice crystals gathering around dust to form snowflakes, each one gathers around a topic or memory in one of Yuknavitch's thematic threads. Together, these cohere into major book sections that are themselves almost essays. As a whole, they create a memoir with, as Yuknavitch notes, fissures and gaps ("An Interview with Lidia Yuknavitch"), proving that "a memoir is, as tale and as discovery, always *consequential*, even if one tries narratively to evade or delay the consequence" (Larson 45, emphasis original), Yuknavitch's nonlinear, lyrical structure provides a model for resisting dominant linear discourse through a modular narrative that borrows from poetry even as it essays.

As a result of this modular approach, Yuknavitch is able to create lyrical and metaphorical payoff within smaller units of the memoir, much like grouping poems or essays together, while still creating a larger story. Perhaps the clearest example of the chapter-as-essay and section-as-essay structure occurs with the first section, "Holding Breath." The section opens with the stillbirth of narrator-Yuknavitch's

daughter and closes with spreading this daughter's ashes in water. While each section is cohesive and advances the memoir, "Holding Breath" feels like it circles back to its opening images the most and coheres the most almost as an essay unto itself. The nutgraph of the opening nonlinear chapter, "The Chronology of Water," works to teach the reader how to read all three structural levels (chapter, section, memoir) of the book:

All the events of my life swim in and out between each other. Without chronology. Like in dreams. So if I am thinking of a memory of a relationship, or one about riding a bike, or about my love for literature and art, or when I first touched my lips to alcohol, or how much I adored my sister, or the day my father first touched me—there is no linear sense. Language is a metaphor for experience. It's as arbitrary as the mass of chaotic images we call memory—but we can put it into lines to narrativize over fear. (Yuknavitch 28)

This paragraph helps establish two mini-essays (one nested in the other, both nested in the larger memoir) in two key ways. For one, it establishes a primary concern the chapter advances to a thematic conclusion: the thematic resonance of being "born dead" (Yuknavitch 28) in terms of both Yuknavitch's own birth and her stillborn daughter's birth. The chapter clearly establishes the central question—*what is the true chronology of memory and grief?*—of the entire memoir and sets up events to come. At the same time, it creates a satisfying little piece in its own right. After the stillbirth, the central question proceeds to shift ahead in time to the grief that follows this stillbirth (28), back to narrator-Yuknavitch's own birth (29), and ahead again to the hours just before narrator-Yuknavitch heads to the clinic to find out what is wrong (30). Like an eddy in a current of water, the chapter spins against the broader current of time. Concluding with the thematically resonant "In my body, birth came last," (Yuknavitch 30), it provides the emotional payoff for both births. While the chapter clearly sets the pattern for the entire memoir to come, as a short piece of writing on its own, it carries out the formal promise of its nutgraph and largely hinges on the punctum

of Yuknavitch's daughter. That unto itself is not necessarily atypical for a memoir chapter, but it performs triple duty in the work as a whole. It functions as its own almost-flash piece of nonfiction, as the establishment of the concern of the memoir, and as the opening crot of the shorter essay that the section "Holding Breath" becomes. This means that the nutgraph achieves three mini-resolutions that enact Yuknavitch's concern of repetitions and stopping and starting time.

"Holding Breath" is structured as a frame narrative. The section begins with the stillbirth and closes with the chapter "Ash," which uses a highly charged metaphor of the pink box of the daughter's ashes floating back to narrator-Yuknavitch (91-93). While this essay does not have the greater sense of resolution found in the birth of Yuknavitch's son late in the book, it still nonetheless creates enough of a metaphor of being "born dead" to hold both Yuknavitch's daughter and her own early life. In the chapter "Metaphor," Yuknavitch reflects on the power of imagination to discover a greater structure than linear narrative to hold the grief of one's life: "You will see you have an underlying tone and plot to your life underneath the one you've been told. Circular and image bound. Something near tragic, near unbearable, but contained....the chronology of water" (33). This circularity of image finds structural completion within "Ash." In this chapter, Yuknavitch-narrator's family and husband attend the daughter's funeral at the place river meets ocean (91-93). While the rest of the memoir will do its own share of circling back to this moment, this particular section achieves its own emotional transformation: the theme of being born finds a kind of resolution, particularly given the new context of the family introduced in the chapters between "The Chronology of Water" and "Ash." Years later, the ashes smeared on the coat are no longer visible (Yuknavitch 93), an image of both loss and closure that creates a satisfying payoff for the section-as-essay. Even if it will be further advanced by the rest of the book, it brings one arc of essaying to a moving, impactful end.

In "The Other Side of Drowning," for instance, Yuknavitch considers the nature of being reborn and realizing her story is not really about her (291). Beginning with her hitting a pregnant woman in traffic

with “Run-On” and ending with her realization that this collision changed the direction of her life in “Wisdom is a Motherfucker,” Yuknavitch uses the collision as a structural and thematic bookend for this section. While more powerful in the context of the whole memoir, the section works to create its own thematic concerns and unity. The other sections too, can function as essays, though perhaps without quite the consistent richness of language and theme afforded by the primary nutgraph and the level of nonlinear structure in the opening section. Still, they each work to advance the concern and provide some satisfaction in their own right. Thus, part of the structural achievement and pleasure of the book comes from its “patterns and repetitions” (Yuknavitch 33) and the small thematic resolutions that happen at so many levels, including the book’s closing passages meditating on what it means to story, to be reborn, and to create the document the reader swims in (Yuknavitch 291-293).

In an interview with Meg Tuite of *Connotation Press*, she describes her desire to find a structure that is body-centric instead of plot-centric. Her structure also thus allows more “poetic” concerns—i.e. lyric time, image, and the irrational and the imagination—to take priority over rational logic and linear thought, in an extension of the thematic and formal concerns. In the same interview, Yuknavitch describes her process of working with dream and image and the natural world: “I move more from metaphor and figurative ground than literal ground. I am more interested in writing that makes you feel like something is happening to your body; I am only partially interested in making ‘sense’” (“Meg Tuite Interview with Lidia Yuknavitch”). As opposed to Lopate’s definition of creative nonfiction as a form of logic and reason and rationality (section 1, first chapter, paragraph 20), Yuknavitch uses lyric techniques to make *meaning* without always making *sense*. She advances nonliteral, metaphoric—even irrational—image as another form of truth-telling in narrative, rather than lying or unnatural artifice, and her structure hinges on this.

Given her interest in the nonliteral, it makes sense that perhaps her most successful and beautiful chapters tend to first ground themselves in lyric time, as opposed to narrative time. “Sun,” for instance, opens by riffing off of its title: “Light. Life. Beautiful alive boy. The night my son Miles chose to come

there was a thunderstorm” (Yuknavitch 245). The narrative is delayed by nearly three sentences of alliteration and attempting to define or compare, pausing time before it resumes. While the grounding in time and space becomes clear quickly enough to not confuse the reader, the lyric time posits a kind of body-time, a space of both stillness and poetic momentum that creates energy distinct from that of narrative. The chapter structurally proceeds to circle around Miles’s birth, using the titular lyric slant of “Sun” to focus the vignette, almost like a poem, and to open up the page using the broader cultural context of “water children” and the ongoing metaphor of water (Yuknavitch 245-247). It pauses to consider more of the metaphoric, vertical implications of the birth than its place in the horizontal plot, and it uses the lyric image of how “We are all swimmers before the dawn of oxygen and earth. We all carry the memory of that breathable blue past” (Yuknavitch 247) to make sense in a way that goes a little beyond the rational, into the poetic. Such images are enabled in part by the structural decision to pause time through vignettes. In the opening line of the book, Yuknavitch similarly delays time through the repetition of “after” and “then” as she describes the stillbirth of her daughter: “after I held the future pink and rose-lipped in my shivering arms...after they handed my dead girl to my sister who kissed her, then to my first husband who kissed her, then to my mother...” (25). Time is transformed into an object, “the future,” to be held and handed away, and “after” and “then” formally mark and delay time, building lyric energy and shifting the work into a kind of no-time that embodies the concern of chronology.

As Yuknavitch notes in her interview with Rhonda Hughes, the publisher for Hawthorne Books, the extended metaphor of the rocks in the chapter titled “Metaphor” “is more ‘true’...to the experience of grieving than to say, [she] was intolerably sad” (298). It is ambiguous from this context whether Yuknavitch never collected rocks at all or whether she simply chose to dwell in this literal image over other scenes of grieving. The extension of the space and the language creates a space to enter that feels true to the body and that creates a different kind of time, demonstrating how an essay can borrow techniques from poetry without lying. “Metaphor” and “Run On,” which formally name their structures and styles,

both also use the second person to describe the narrator's actions, in contrast to the you-reader Yuknavitch speaks to throughout the memoir. Even as they narrate the action, the chapters also create lyrical space by creating a patchwork of vignettes that pause time, go backwards and forwards in time from one chapter to the next, and find their own internal formal logic and structure.

Yuknavitch's structure also creates holes that formally enact the gaps created in her life by her father's abuse. In two separate interviews, Yuknavitch has addressed these gaps: talking with Molly Gaudry of *Lit Pub*, she describes her hope that her structure has "fissures" in it, to allow the reader to "slip in to the water or leave with their own stories," and in an interview with Suleika Jaouad of *Lenny Letter*, she states that some things, like her father's actual abuse, do not made to be "explicit" for the reader, and she instead prefers to use the techniques of poetry and painting. Rather than attempting to fill the holes, as Mary Karr does in *The Liars' Club*, Yuknavitch works primarily through ellipsis. References to her father's abuse are brief, and they either focus on her inability to speak further to the details, as in dialogue with Andy Mingo (Yuknavitch 231-232), or use reflective voice by exploring the chronology *around* the abuse. In the chapter "Father," for example, she refers to the father's abuse only through the synecdoche of his hands, and she instead moves backwards in chronology through her father's life with the word "before" (Yuknavitch 103-106). Just as she does in the opening line of the book, Yuknavitch posits everything as before-and-after, and uses hypotactic time markers to poke holes in the chronology or pull the reader's attention elsewhere. The concern isn't in filling the hole, but rather in inhabiting the distortion or distending of chronology around the holes.

What does a less-explicit text offer readers, beyond Yuknavitch's personal preference for the techniques of poetry and the figurative? The lyrical meditations on water as metaphor, rather than explicit sexual abuse, and the indirect references to that harm offer the reader a way to not, in Yuknavitch's words, be "bound" to the narrative ("An Interview with Lidia Yuknavitch"). Yuknavitch's reflective voice is still deeply present

on the page, but her patchwork structure allows the reader to have agency in piecing together what happened and make “their own stories” (“An Interview with Lidia Yuknavitch”). That phrase can be interpreted multiple ways: the ability of the reader to piece together the details of the abuse, the agency granted to the reader to find different stories at different structural levels of the text (as previously discussed), and the space the text offers to the literal backstories readers themselves bring to the page. In a sense, a fractured structure extends Yuknavitch’s ethos of making a space big enough to hold everyone, a water the reader can dip in and out of as needed—taking each chapter on its own terms and bringing their own story into the spaces that exist between those chapters. Reader participation becomes an ethical, agentive act, a part of Yuknavitch’s concern to make—and help people discover—the deeper chronology of life than just a linear narrative.

Taken together, these techniques demonstrate the way a memoir can use poetic techniques without sacrificing direct reflection or the writer’s overt intervention on the page. Instead of allowing her reflective voice to recede along the fault lines of the fracturing, merely slanting the description to indicate meaning, Yuknavitch finds embodiment in the lyric spaces. She talks directly to the reader, even if, as she states in the chapter “Wisdom is a Motherfucker,” she feels she cannot speak wisely about her life experiences (291). Indeed, the structure of a narrative made of pieces, a narrative with holes in it, enables her to have close intimacy with the reader as she pauses horizontal plot to circle around an idea and constantly talk about her telling of it. As she admits in the opening of the chapter “My Lover, Writing,” she sometimes does not want to tell the reader things (Yuknavitch 181), or at least says so in her writing to create trust between narrator and reader. She uses the fragmented form to speak openly with the reader, instead of making most of the reflective voice implicit in the description, and in the reflective voice, she comments directly on how the structure has been crafted to let the reader enter it. Her closing passages note that the book is for the reader, is a path to follow (Yuknavitch 293), and if she compares it to water, then the act of reading may be compared to dipping in and out of the water of her experiences, coming up for air as

needed between sections. Yuknavitch's distinctive voice is crucial for navigating that path.

Indeed, *The Chronology of Water* is hardly an “antimemoir” at all, as it does what any good memoir should do: pursue a central question, trying to understand the meaning of the experience and taking the reader along the path of discovery. Formally, however, it resists the plot-driven structure followed by many of the “first generation” of memoirs, while finding a way to inhabit the fractures and crotches without a loss of direct reflective voice. In this way, Yuknavitch asserts that body-driven material requires a different kind of structure, one that grants the reader agency and release from the material as needed to find their own space in the text. Using the techniques of poetry, including the figurative and the non-literal space, she creates another kind of truth that serves as a model for writers working with this kind of material, as well as writers who may be interested in drawing on patterns of thinking from other artistic disciplines.

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