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## Situating Scenes: Cheryl Strayed's "The Love of My Life"

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In *To Show and To Tell*, Phillip Lopate writes that “the still-evolving pedagogy of nonfiction” often lapses into “fiction envy.” Instructors, adopting advice they learned when they were in fiction classes, say, “Put everything into scenes” (4-5). In other words, “show, don’t tell.” Lopate argues that, while creative nonfiction does use some of the techniques of fiction, we should also recognize that the personal essay and memoir are distinct forms of nonfiction. I agree with Lopate that personal essays are different than fiction, yet if we are going to move beyond simply adopting the pedagogy of fiction in our nonfiction courses, we will need an expanded terminology more suited to the kind of moves that writers of nonfiction make and a theory that helps students to explain where such moves might take them.

What the showing and telling dichotomy embodies is a dialectic between events, the once-occurring experiences we try to capture in scenes, and the stories that are told around scenes. In “Theatrum Philosophicum,” Foucault shares his thoughts about Gilles Deleuze’s *Logique du sens*, a work that counters Platonic idealism by injecting it with the event:

*Logique du sens* causes us to reflect on matters that philosophy has neglected for many centuries: the event (assimilated in a concept, from which we vainly attempted to extract in the form of a *fact*, verifying a proposition, of *actual experience*, a modality of the subject, of *concreteness*, the empirical content of history); and the phantasm (reduced in the name of reality and situated at the extremity, the pathological pole of a normative sequence; perception-image-memory-illusion). After all, what

most urgently needs thought in this century, if not the event and the phantasm. (*italics in original, no question mark in original*, 180)

Foucault (summarizing Deleuze's argument) describes the event (the experience that is shaped into scenes) with words or phrases that indicate a connection with reality: fact, actual experience, concreteness, the empirical content of history. In contrast, Foucault describes *phantasm* as an abstracted reality (simulacrum and copy; an abstract world, the self, and God as represented by "sphere, circle, and a center") and even set narratives ("a normative sequence"). Following Deleuze's lead, Foucault does not so much want to eliminate *phantasm* (a term that bears some negative connotations and seems at odds with nonfiction) as much as play it against the event, as a dialectic. In other words, he wants to inject the event into *phantasm* to ground and interrogate it, in short, to ground and critique Platonic ideals.

If we equate "event" with scene and "phantasm" with narrative, we can begin to discuss the importance of a dialectic between "showing" and "telling" that can examine some of our assumptions about narrative. Are some kinds of narratives more true and more likely to facilitate personal growth? How does narrative fix identity and transform identity? Are there times in our lives when it is more important to fix our identity and times when we need to transform it? Ultimately, does narrative harm or heal? Or, is it like *pharmakon* in Plato's *Phaedrus*, both medicine and poison?

Cheryl Strayed published "The Love of My Life" in *The Sun* in 2002, before she wrote either *Torch* (2006), a novel, or *Wild* (2012), a memoir, all on the subject of her mother's early death. As should become apparent, Strayed is doing more than scenes in this essay. She moves through a number of kinds of narration (scenes, recurrent time, backstories, fast narration, counter-narrative, and meta-narrative) as well a number of kinds of reflection (reflection on scenes, reflection on recurrent time, and reflection on historical/cultural norms). As I map Strayed's moves within this essay, I will refer to the sections by paragraph numbers, which readers will need to add to the original text if they wish to follow the analysis section by section.

## Scenes

Strayed begins “The Love of My Life” with a scene, which can be defined as the narration and crafting of a once-occurrent event (§s 1-13). The scene begins:

The first time I cheated on my husband, my mother had been dead for exactly one week. I was in a cafe in Minneapolis watching a man. He watched me back. He was slightly pudgy, with jet-black hair and skin so white it looked as if he'd powdered it. He stood and walked to my table and sat down without asking. He wanted to know if I had a cat. I folded my hands on the table, steadying myself; I was shaking, nervous at what I would do. I was raw, fragile, vicious with grief. I would do anything.

“Yes,” I said.

“I thought so,” he said slowly. He didn't take his eyes off me. I rolled the rings around on my fingers. I was wearing two wedding bands, my own and my mother's. I'd taken hers off her hand after she died. It was nothing fancy: sterling silver, thick and braided.

“You look like the kind of girl who has a cat.”

The opening scene—fully mimetic, with description, action, characters, and dialogue—makes for an effective opening. The unveiling in the first line—we could call it a confession—draws the reader in with a hint of eroticism, but that is soon dispelled. Within a few lines, readers become concerned for her safety, almost pleading with her to stay in the café, but she follows the man out, as if moving without volition. The man and Cheryl kiss, the man bites her lip, she screams, he pushes her away, and says, “You're not mature.” He leaves. The action in the scene is singular, occurring only once in this precise way, unlike Strayed's treatment of the affairs that follow, a pattern connected to Cheryl's grief.

The nature of this connection between Cheryl's grief and her affairs deserves some comment. It does not meet cultural norms. If Cheryl cried incessantly or spent all day in bed, she would be grieving

appropriately. Having affairs, not so much. Also, the connection between emotion and action is fuzzy and will take Strayed a while to understand. We could even say that it wasn't a connection at all, but a portal, the ending of one phase of a life, the opening of another. At the end of the scene, Strayed says she has entered her "life as a slut," which both sums up the scene and prepares readers for what follows. At the end of the scene, it is Strayed (the narrator, now further along in her healing, having completed her hike in 1995) who reflects back on the actions of Cheryl (the character and former self, as she existed between her mother's death and the hike), creating a double-voiced narration that might be mimicked in fiction, but not fully captured. Readers are already thinking beyond Cheryl (the character) to the real person she represents and are fearful about what lies ahead for her. When Strayed (the narrator) ends the scene with "My life as a slut," we know the embodied Cheryl Strayed is going to come through this—our concern for Cheryl is allayed.

This opening scene provides teachers with a number of topics to explore. Why did Strayed decide to begin with a scene? Are the other scenes in the essay strategically placed? In what ways does a scene go beyond—craft or aestheticize—the event, the facts of what actually happened? The teacher can even ask students to underline the facts of the scene and then discuss them one by one. When Strayed writes that the man has "skin so white it looked as if he'd powdered it," is this factual? If not, how has Strayed shaped the event as she created the scene? Does this mean that Strayed is fictionalizing the event? If so, does this mean the essay moves into a blurry area between fiction and nonfiction?

In addition to this opening scene (§s 1-13), Strayed includes five more scenes in the essay: a description of two acquaintances who died about the same time as her mother, which some might consider to be more anecdotes than scenes (§s 31-33), her confession about having affairs to Mark, her husband, about two years after her mother's death (§s 42-45), undergoing an abortion, about three years after her mother's death (§s 52-57), not being able to write a paper in a college class and graduate on time, months after her mother's death (§ 59), and losing her mother's diamond ring while swimming in a river

(¶s 64-69). In total, only thirty-two of the seventy-two paragraphs in the essay are devoted to scenes.

Students can learn a great deal about essay structure by identifying the scenes and then mapping what the author is doing in other sections. The class can even, as Bartholomae and Petrosky recommend in *Fact, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*, develop their own list of terms to describe the author's moves.

### Fast Narration

Fast narration relates a string of once-occurring events but without creating scenes. In her essay, Strayed includes two sections of fast narration. The first covers the year after her confession about having affairs to Mark, her husband (¶s 47-51); the second covers six months between her abortion and starting to hike the Pacific Crest Trail (¶s 62-63). The second section begins:

Mark and I had filed the papers for our divorce. My stepfather was going to marry the woman he'd started dating immediately after my mother died. I wanted to get out of Minnesota. I needed a new life and, unoriginally, I was going west to find it. I decided to hike the Pacific Crest Trail — a wilderness trail that runs along the backbone of the Sierra Nevada and the Cascade Mountains, from Mexico to Canada. Rather, I decided to hike a large portion of it — from the Mojave Desert in California to the Columbia River at the Oregon-Washington border. It would take me four months. I'd grown up in the country, done a good amount of camping, and taken a few weekend backpacking trips, but I had a lot to learn: how, for example, to read a topographical map, ford a river, handle an ice ax, navigate using a compass, and avoid being struck by lightning. Everyone who knew me thought that I was nuts. I proceeded anyway, researching, reading maps, dehydrating food and packing it into plastic bags and then into boxes that would be mailed at roughly two-week intervals to the ranger stations and post offices I'd occasionally pass near.

While the sections of fast narration relate once-current events (such as, Strayed's divorce), the events are not fully mimetic; they do not include description and dialogue. In the opening scene to the essay, Strayed

spends thirteen paragraphs narrating one event that probably spanned less than five minutes. In the above section, *Strayed* narrates a series of events that covered about six months in a paragraph.

Fast narration is not simply a technique for shifting narrative speed, covering more ground, and creating a bridge between scenes; fast narration is actually more like montage in film. A montage captures an important transition, like a couple falling in love, and builds emotion, through both images and music. In this paragraph, Cheryl is moving from her old life (her family of origin and her marriage) toward a period of transition (her extended hike). As with montage, this section of fast narration builds emotion with a key sentence: “Everyone who knew me thought I was nuts.” After years of acting unconsciously, *Strayed* has begun to take control of her recovery. She is still breaking norms, but now she does so with a purpose. She has literally and metaphorically begun a journey.

While we might think that student essayists need more practice writing scenes, they are often even less aware of the need to speed up narration, writing essays that give equal weight to all events and dully plod along. Thus, analyzing sections of fast narration can help students to make significant progress in telling stories. As when discussing scenes, it is important for teachers to point out that fast narration does more than just cover key events quickly; sections of fast narration also craft events in ways that convey mood or emotion. A discussion of montage in film as an opening to discussing fast narration often helps students to see the role of fast narration in building the emotional arc of the essay.

## Recurrent Time

Recurrent time, which is sometimes signaled with the modal “would,” narrates patterns of behavior that occur over an extended period of time, often relating behavior that is habitual, driven by social norms, or what Virginia Woolf calls “non-being” (70). *Strayed* includes four sections of recurrent time: the effects of her mother’s diagnosis (§s 14-16), her affairs (§s 19-21), recurrent dreams after her mother’s death (§s

28-29), and recurrent thoughts she experienced during her mourning, such as “I cannot continue to live” (§ 60). The following quote conveys, in recurrent time, Cheryl’s string of affairs:

I did not deny. I did not get angry. I didn’t bargain, become depressed, or accept. I fucked. I sucked. Not my husband, but people I hardly knew, and in that I found a glimmer of relief. The people I messed around with did not have names; they had titles: the Prematurely Graying Wilderness Guide, the Technically Still a Virgin Mexican Teenager, the Formerly Gay Organic Farmer, the Quietly Perverse Poet, the Failing but Still Trying Massage Therapist, the Terribly Large Texas Bull Rider, the Recently Unemployed Graduate of Juilliard, the Actually Pretty Famous Drummer Guy. Most of these people were men; some were women. With them, I was not in mourning; I wasn’t even me. I was happy and sexy and impetuous and fun. I was wild and enigmatic and terrifically good in bed. I didn’t care about them or have orgasms. We didn’t have heart-to-heart talks. I asked them questions about their lives, and they told me everything and asked few questions in return; they knew nothing about me. Because of this, most of them believed they were falling instantly, madly in love with me. (§ 16)

All of the modes of time, the components of a narrative, can be used for different ends and need to be assessed in context. Here, recurrent time is used to summarize a habitual pattern that is not so much unconscious as it is unexamined. The lovers do not have names; they are only referenced with Homeric epithets, which further emphasizes Cheryl’s need to numb herself. The recurrent time, as used here, is also a way of establishing boundaries. As Strayed confesses her affairs to her readers, she does not go into detail. Fully mimetic scenes about one affair after another might be too intrusive, crossing over into voyeurism.

Like fast narration, recurrent time covers an extended period of time quickly, and, if we valorize scenes, it would be easy to assume that the author is simply trying to move efficiently from one scene to the next, filling in gaps in the narration, glossing over less significant events. However, recurrent time

typically examines patterns and habits, and it is useful to encourage students to evaluate the behavior described in sections like this. If much of our life is “nonbeing,” as Woolf says, is this a good thing? Do these patterns and habit work for us or against us? Should we attempt to be more mindful of the quotidian in our lives?

### Backstories

Strayed includes only one long backstory in the essay (§s 33-39). The narration of backstories can be slow, more like scenes, which might also be called flashbacks, or rapid, more like fast narration. In her essay, Strayed covers her mother’s past rather quickly. This is the second paragraph in the section:

My mother had become pregnant when she was nineteen and immediately married my father, a steelworker in western Pennsylvania when the steel plants were shutting down; a coal miner’s son born about the time that the coal was running out. After three children and nine years of misery, my mother left him. My father had recently moved us to a small town near Minneapolis in pursuit of a job prospect. When they divorced, he went back to Pennsylvania, but my mother stayed. She worked as a waitress and in a factory that made small plastic containers that would eventually hold toxic liquids. We lived in apartment complexes full of single mothers whose children sat on the edges of grocery-store parking lots. We received free government cheese and powdered milk, food stamps and welfare checks.

The different kinds of elements that make up a complex narrative serve some general function in and of themselves (if a story begins *in media res*, with a scene, then backstories are needed to provide exposition), but we also need to attend to how elements might play off of each other and where they occur in the plot or the emotional arc of a story. The backstory about Strayed’s mother—actually a backstory about Strayed’s relationship to her mother—is positioned about half way through the essay, after the opening scene where Cheryl leaves the restaurant with a nameless man, after she lists in recurrent time a string of



affairs with men identified by epithets, and after she feels estranged from her husband. Until this point, we don't even know much about Cheryl. Even though we have understood the depth of Cheryl's grief, some readers might judge her for the affairs because they did not understand why Cheryl's grief is so intense. In seven paragraphs, Strayed narrates her mother's struggles and Cheryl's dependence on her, which contextualizes and grounds Cheryl's grief. A productive question about this backstory is why does it appear so late?

Backstories provide an opportunity to discuss how good narratives break the simple chronology of events. While the backstory in this essay allows Strayed to begin with a dramatic scene that draws in the reader, it is, like most backstories, moveable. In other words, it could have appeared at a number of places in the essay, so why here? Where else could it appear? How would that affect our reading of the essay? The discussion of this section can lead to class exercises where students identify the elements of their essay that can be moved and experiment with moving them around.

### Counter-Narrative

A counter-narrative is when the author imagines how life might have taken a different route. In the following section, which occurs when Cheryl is at her emotional nadir (§ 58), she thinks of a poster she stared at while having her abortion and mourns a lost life:

My mother had been dead for three years. I was twenty-five. I had intended, by this point in my life, to have a title of my own: The Incredibly Talented and Extraordinarily Brilliant and Successful Writer. I had planned to be the kind of woman whose miniature photographed face was placed artfully into a poster of a Victorian mansion that future generations of women would concentrate on while their cervixes were forcefully dilated by the tip of a plastic tube about the size of a drinking straw and the beginnings of babies were sucked out of them. I wasn't anywhere close. I was a pile of shit.

This meta-narrative, which is a kind of reflection, contrasts Cheryl's dreams to her reality in the wake of her mother's death. It explores loss, not just the loss of her mother and a pregnancy, but loss of the *might have been*. As we hear the narrative voice of Strayed over the voice of Cheryl, who fantasizes about being a writer, parody emerges. Within narratives of transformation, parody allows the author to both identify with and distance herself from her former self.

The self-loathing that has been building since the beginning of the essay, but not directly narrated, the culmination of three years of destructive behavior—non-being, inauthenticity—is covered in a short paragraph. For readers who were bothered by Strayed reducing the men of her affairs to stereotypes, she here applies the same kind of epithet ironically to herself: The Incredibly Talented and Extraordinarily Brilliant and Successful Writer. At this point, readers realize that all of the epithets that substitute for names are also condensed narrations that say something about cultural norms. They are a kind of *phantasm*, what Steve Almond calls “bad stories.” As we view “bad stories” backwards, as tableaux that must play out, they seem predetermined. A counter-narrative explores alternatives and opens the possibility of choice.

The self-loathing in this paragraph, in strict chronological time, occurs three years after her mother's death, when Cheryl is at her emotional low-point. Within the text, it is positioned toward the end of the essay, as Strayed moves toward a turning point, her hike as a search for meaning. Strayed has already presented glimpses of a later and more settled self, if only in the narrative voice, which makes it easier for readers to absorb this low-point without having it control their entire view of Cheryl. It would be difficult to read an entire essay in this emotional tone. Instead of dwelling on her emotional low, Strayed hits the mark, then quickly moves on. Parts of this passage (especially, “I was a pile of shit”) seem to come from early in her grieving process; they might have been written in an early draft or even pulled from a journal. Much of the healing that comes from writing about trauma and loss comes *retelling*, writing more than work about the same trauma (Strayed's essay, novel, and memoir) or revisions within a particular work, especially when the author layers the new emerging self (the self that is gaining some distance and

perspective on the event) over the older self (who has not yet been able to separate from the immediate effects of the event). Healing begins when the author can both identify with the former self and her reflection on it, decentering, almost as if viewing another person (Jensen 94-102). Passages like this provide an opportunity to discuss how the evolution of identity can emerge in revision and how revision can be less a form of erasure and more like a palimpsest, new text superimposed on the still visible old text that preserves earlier thoughts, emotions, and identity, documenting the transformation of self. I also focus discussion on the phrase “I was a pile of shit.” If scenes are important because they present once-occurring events, is this sentence the emotional equivalent of a scene? Are there other moves writers of nonfiction can make that are like scenes, like including artefacts—letters, passages from diaries, photographs, videos? How might an expanded notion of scene help us to question simple narratives?

## Reflection

On first read, “The Love of My Life” might seem to be more memoir than personal essay. It conveys a broad story; indeed, an outline of story that will be told in *Wild* is there, except for the hiking. Once, however, the sections of reflection are considered, we begin to see more affinities with the structure of a personal essay. Strayed includes one section that reflects on a previous scene (§ 46), one section that reflects on events told in recurrent time (§ 17), and one section that reflects on her turning point (§ 61). Five additional sections of reflection are more global, tying Cheryl’s mourning to cultural norms, including gender roles (§s 18, 22, 25-27, 30, 40-41). We can see the interplay of events, reflection on events, and global reflection on cultural norms in a sequence that begins with recurrent time, as Strayed explains the effect of her mother’s death on her relationship to her husband:

When my mother was diagnosed with cancer, my husband Mark and I took an unspoken sexual hiatus. When she died seven weeks later, I couldn’t bear for Mark to touch me. His hands on my body made me weep. He went down on me in the gentlest of ways. He didn’t expect anything in

return. He didn't make me feel that I had to come. I would soak in a hot bath, and he would lean into it to touch me. He wanted to make me feel good, better. He loved me, and he had loved my mother. Mark and I were an insanely young, insanely happy, insanely in-love married couple. He wanted to help. *No, no, no*, I said, but then sometimes I relented. I closed my eyes and tried to relax.

I breathed deep and attempted to fake it. I rolled over on my stomach so I wouldn't have to look at him. He fucked me and I sobbed uncontrollably.

"Keep going," I said to him. "Just finish." But he wouldn't. He couldn't. He loved me. Which was mysteriously, unfortunately, precisely the problem.

I wanted my mother. (§ 14-16)

While I have been sorting sections of the essay into a taxonomy, the sections are typically mixed. The last line of the second paragraph above ("Which was mysteriously, unfortunately, precisely the problem") is reflective and begins the move toward the reflection that will occur in the next section, a reflection on this extended pattern of behavior:

We aren't supposed to want our mothers that way, with the pining intensity of sexual love, but I did, and if I couldn't have her, I couldn't have anything. Most of all I couldn't have pleasure, not even for a moment. I was bereft, in agony, destroyed over her death. To experience sexual joy, it seemed, would have been to negate that reality. And more, it would have been to betray my mother, to be disloyal to the person she had been to me: my hero, a single mother after she bravely left an unhealthy relationship with my father when I was five. She remarried when I was eleven. My stepfather had loved her and been a good husband to her for ten years, but shortly after she died, he'd fallen in love with someone else. His new girlfriend and her two daughters moved into my mother's house, took her photos off the walls, erased her. I needed my stepfather to be the kind of man who would suffer for my mother, unable to go on, who would carry a torch. And if he wouldn't do it, I would. (§ 17)

This reflection is more specific, directed at the events told in recurrent time, and personal, tied to Cheryl and her family. The section of reflection that follows is more global as it critiques social norms, including the commonly accepted five stages of grief:

We are not allowed this. We are allowed to be deeply into basketball, or Buddhism, or *Star Trek*, or jazz, but we are not allowed to be deeply sad. Grief is a thing that we are encouraged to “let go of,” to “move on from,” and we are told specifically how this should be done. Countless well-intentioned friends, distant family members, hospital workers, and strangers I met at parties recited the famous five stages of grief to me: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I was alarmed by how many people knew them, how deeply this single definition of the grieving process had permeated our cultural consciousness. Not only was I supposed to feel these five things, I was meant to feel them in that order and for a prescribed amount of time. (§ 18)

Strayed moves from Cheryl’s behavior, to reflection on that behavior, to a critique of the values of her time and place. As Strayed steps out of the chronology of events, largely constructed in the reader’s mind, she critiques normative scripts (a kind of *phantasm*), the stages of grief and phrases like “let go of” and “move on from,” which are dialectically set against her experience, both as presented in scenes and recurrent time.

For students to better understand the form of the personal essay, it is important to discuss the function of reflection, but students also benefit from recognizing different kinds of reflection, which are different modes of decentering the self. The reflection of the author on a former self is, as Robert Kegan has pointed out, an objectification of self: the subject of a previous developmental stage becomes the object of reflection in the current developmental phase (104). This kind of reflection is quite distinct from reflection that sets the author’s experience against cultural norms, even though both can effect a transformation of self. As teachers who are usually older and more mature than our students, we should also realize, as Kegan also emphasizes, that the reflection of a twenty-year-old is qualitatively different than

the reflection of a forty-year-old (73-110). For this reason, it is important to discuss the kind of reflection students find in each other's essay and contrast that to what they find in published works, such as Strayed's essay.

### **Metanarrative**

Strayed closes her essay with three paragraphs of metanarration, which is a kind of imagined reflection that contextualizes her entire essay. Lisa Knopp's "Perhapsing" and Tessa Fontaine's "The Limits of Perception: Trust Techniques in Nonfiction" are other ways to think about how an author constructs metanarrative. The section begins after she has swum in a river and lost her mother's ring:

If this were fiction, what would happen next is that the woman would stand up and get into her truck and drive away. It wouldn't matter that the woman had lost her mother's wedding ring, even though it was gone to her forever, because the loss would mean something else entirely: that what was gone now was actually her sorrow and the shackles of grief that had held her down. And in this loss she would see, and the reader would know, that the woman had been in error all along. That, indeed, the love she'd had for her mother was too much love, really; too much love and also too much sorrow. She would realize this and get on with her life. There would be what happened in the story and also everything it stood for: the river, representing life's constant changing; the tiny blue flowers, beauty; the spring air, rebirth. All of these symbols would collide and mean that the woman was actually lucky to have lost the ring, and not just to have lost it, but to have loved it, to have ached for it, and to have had it taken from her forever. The story would end, and you would know that she was the better for it. That she was wiser, stronger, more interesting, and, most of all, finally starting down her path to glory. I would show you the leaf when it unfurls in a single motion: the end of one thing, the beginning of another. And you would know the answers to all the questions without being told. Did she ever write that five-page paper about the guy who lost

his nose? Did she ask Mark to marry her again? Did she stop sleeping with people who had titles instead of names? Did she manage to walk 1,638 miles? Did she get to work and become the Incredibly Talented and Extraordinarily Brilliant and Successful Writer? You'd believe the answers to all these questions to be yes. I would have given you what you wanted then: to be a witness to a healing.

Strayed begins the metanarrative section: "If this were fiction . . ." This essay was published in 2002, seven years after her hike on the Pacific Crest Trail. Strayed would write *Torch*, a novel about grieving, published in 2006, and then *Wild*, a memoir about grieving, published in 2012. These three paragraphs seem to map the next ten years of Strayed's life as a writer as well as map some of the differences between fiction and nonfiction, between personal essay and memoir. In the novel *Torch*, the narrator possesses what Bakhtin calls an *excess of seeing* (22-27). In a new preface written in 2012 for the paperback edition, Strayed wrote: "I don't know precisely what it meant for my stepfather to lose his wife or for my siblings to lose their mother, but in *Torch* I tried very hard to know" (xv-xvi). Typical of third-person omniscient (imagined) narration, Strayed moves into the minds of characters, as in the following passage about Bruce, whose wife, Teresa, is dying of cancer: "He imagined her dying next month, in February, and then he pushed the idea immediately from his mind, scorched by it. He imagined her dying a year from now—a whole year, an entire blessed year—and it seemed so very far and it seemed that if he knew it were true, that she would live for one more year, he could bear it" (49). The author of nonfiction does not possess this kind of vision. Rather, the focus on "The Love of My Life" is clearly on Strayed's interior. In *Wild*, Strayed's focus is on plot and scenes. She does not pull back to critique rituals of mourning or gender roles. Rather, Strayed, as narrator, evaluates Cheryl's experiences, but she stays close to the action. For example, after she loses one of her boots and her Bob Marley T-shirt, she writes: "Losing my boots was bad. But losing my Bob Marley T-shirt was worse. That shirt wasn't just any shirt. It was, at least according to Pace, a sacred shirt that meant I walked with the spirits of animals, earth, and sky" (216). This is, arguably, a form of

reflection, an interpretation of the significance of Cheryl's experience, but Strayed doesn't step out of narration to deal with abstract ideas. While this article does not allow for a detailed discussion of each work, Strayed's three works on the loss of her mother provide a means of understanding how each form allows an author different paths for processing trauma. Even when focusing entirely on Strayed's essay, teachers can pull in passages from *Torch* and *Wild* to spark a discussion about craft.

## Conclusion

The dialectic interplay between event and scene, event and social norms, event and *phantasm* or cultural metanarratives, connects the singular experience of an individual with something larger, a search for meaning. Writing about self, we often assume, is about understanding who we are, and so we lapse into discussions about whether or not the self is even knowable, which are not particularly productive. Instead of seeking self-knowledge, Kegan bases his developmental model on finding meaning in our lives:

Meaning . . . is the primary human motion, irreducible. It cannot be divorced from the body, from social experience, or from the very survival of the organism. Meaning depends on someone who recognizes you. Not meaning, by definition, is utterly lonely. Well-fed, warm, and free of disease, you may still perish is you cannot "mean." (19)

As a psychologist, Kegan does not focus on how writing and the options inherent within a genre contribute to this process. The essay is certainly much more than a linear narrative in chronological order, that is, a fixed and set story. By jumbling chronology, jumbling also linear thought, looking at herself—actually, multiple selves—from multiple perspectives, Strayed is opening herself to freedom, to the possibility of change, the opportunity to make choices that will create meaning. She owns, embraces, the singular, once-occurring events that she presents in scenes, critiques how the scenes are surrounded by *phantasm*, bad stories, and cultural norms, and reframes her experience. She writes herself into a new self, a



new way of being with others, a new meaning. As Kegan says, “Our survival and development depend on our capacity to recruit the invested attention of others to us” (17).

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