



Barrie Jean Borich

## Radical Surprise: The Subversive Art of the Uncertain

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*Without change the essay disintegrates.*

I once had a lover who asked everyone she met a standard question. “Tell me,” she said, “about a time you were shocked.” This lover and I, we were young and had so many conflicts and differences we were unwilling to negotiate. We didn’t last very long. Still, I loved a few things about her. I loved that she painted every weekend, in a small drafty room in the attic of her apartment building. She worshipped the painter David Hockney’s work and borrowed from his color palette, so her paintings exposed a bright side of her she hardly ever let me see. She also listened to classic Frank Sinatra albums on vinyl—while she painted? I don’t remember, but I love the idea of old Frank crooning in the background while she worked. His songs were sexy she told me. This was the early CD era, before vinyl became cool again, and she was the first person I’d met who collected old records. Her collections seemed then just charmingly weird.

I also loved that she pointed out images to me, on posters or in advertisements, the occasional woman holding an odd pose—one hand holding back her messy hair, or squinting crookedly when she smiled, that she told me reminded her of me. I was happily surprised then to think of my queer self as present in the world beyond my singular body, as an amplified type. But mostly what I loved was her question about shock, and not because of what I said in response. This was more than three decades ago and I don’t remember my response, though I do remember how she lingered on the word—SHOCKED—holding the hard k in the back of her mouth for an instant, as if she might swallow before she got to

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the thud of the final d. I had not expected the question, and that surprise vibrated in my chest, leading me to think about myself in new ways. What shocks me? What kinds of things did I find shocking?

As writers, and as humans, how do we keep thinking about ourselves and our environments in new ways? When I suggest that the art of essaying requires an embrace of surprise I am suggesting that the essay is always, in some way, about change. Seeing our work, and our worlds, from new vantage points is the single most important element of intentional progression, and of writing the essay. Without change the essay disintegrates, like an old building falling away from its foundation. Change itself is no less precarious, but there is a difference between creative change that comes of action and breaking change that comes of neglect.

*To leave, to leap, to ballet, to bumble.*

We see it all the time. Politicians who deliberate on all sides of the big questions are seen as weak—thinkers instead of actors (as if *to think* were not a verb) and are often accused of “waffling.” But for essayists the notion that deliberation is a problem is laughable—if by waffling we mean considering one side, then another. The verb *to waffle* does not, in fact, describe the central quest of the writer, nor the critical thinking politician. What waffle actually means—aside from breakfast—is to move in a side-to-side motion, or speak vaguely or evasively, or to go on-and-on without clear point or aim. Few literary artists worth their salt are vague, but some, particularly the sort who write in parallel or braided forms, do move from side-to-side.

The best essayists execute those moves with balletic prowess, leaping from one subject to another, leaving behind them a streak of light or fading shimmer of sound, connecting disparate thoughts, breaking indirectly into some kind of new awareness, but then questioning what they find there. The essayer does not so much waffle as baffle. From that confused wonderment emerges surprise.

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Surprise itself is not remarkable. Surprise happens. We can't fully plan for surprise, which is what is so... surprising. We can, however, expect surprise, desire surprise, make the invitation to ecstatic bewilderment an operative in our process. We train as writers in order to know what to do when surprise barges in.

*Surprise waits on the other side of discomfort.*

In one of her many essays about Detroit, Aisha Sabatini Sloan invites surprise by going on a ride-along with her police officer cousin. Sabatini Sloan is a theory-trained artist and her cousin is a career cop. The writer is Black and Italian, and her cousin is from the white side of the family. They both crossed many lines in this endeavor. In doing so the author has to wrangle with the uncertain.

There is an implicit understanding among people who love Detroit that you shouldn't talk shit. And I love Detroit more than I do most places in the world. A sense of possibility and kindness emanates from all that chaos in a way that's hard to explain. But censoring trouble doesn't make it go away. James Baldwin and the Buddhists have long argued that healing results only from staring struggle straight in the face. The late philosopher and activist Grace Lee Boggs spoke of Detroit as a kind of ground zero upon which to visualize a new order. So here goes (64).

I quote this passage, from an essay entitled "D Is for the Dance of Hours" from Sabatini Sloan's book *Dreaming of Ramadi in Detroit*, where the author has set the uncertain on the table. I want to write about this beloved place, she tells us, but in doing so I have to show you some things that might not lead you to love the place too. She wants to protect her dear place from the possibility of our disaffection, or even worse, our fear and hatred. And yet she knows she won't be able to come to anything new without taking us through. Her love is deepened and complicated by the potential of our hate. She is uncertain of the outcomes here. She can't control what will happen if she lets us see her city through all her own complications, but none of us will "visualize a new order" without moving through.

Sabatini Sloan's essay goes on to take account of the city through the view of her cousin's squad car, responding to all manner of surprise, the ride giving her the "not-me" view of her beloved city, versions she could not have conjured without movement in-and-out of other people's stories. She also braids the city stories with a thread that has to do with music, but not with the famous Motown voices. The music that holds her city together is classical symphony and opera. She uses opera to tell a part of her father's story as well as a way to re-see her family city in terms of something contrary to the canned Detroit narrative, the story she hopes her essay will refute. She uses symphonic music as a disjointed soundtrack. "On a prolonged summer visit to Detroit three years ago," she writes, "I would play classical music while running errands. Each time the world would click, suddenly whole in a way I couldn't have realized, seconds before, that it wasn't."

The description that follows illuminates the common and amplifies the shifting tones of living in this place, this moment:

Colors pair best with their opposites: turquoise and vermilion, blood red and new-growth green. And in this way, the east side of Detroit is complimented by music that comes from worlds away: Burned wood and the entrance of a conductor. Overgrown grass and the sweep of a violin bow. A baby carriage tipped over in an abandoned lot and the hush that comes between a song's end and the applause (62-3).

When she re-scored the space of her exploration Sabatini Sloan's story changed. In order to write about *her* East Side of Detroit, Sabatini Sloan had to actively inhabit the actual character space of her exploration. She had to surprise herself with the tension and discomfort of re-witnessing the sensate terrain she already knew well. She had to act in order to understand, but the consequences of action are always uncertain.

*Surprise confounds what we see.*

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I'm interested in is the disjunction between what *was* and what *is* in those aftershock times, when what we once perceived is no longer perceivable. What we discern after replaces what came before. In the disjunction between what *was* and what *is* we come to new ideas.

What I am thinking about here are hurricanes, the new kind that have become so common since the planet's climate began collapsing.

My mother didn't leave in October 2019 when Hurricane Michael descended on her retirement home in Panama City Beach, Florida. When I called from 1000 miles away in Chicago, to tell her I'd heard evacuation was mandatory, she just laughed. Where would she go, 85-years-old and on her own, just six months a widow, with her bad knees and her rambunctious dog and her ailing cat and two turtles who needed lettuce and fresh bathing water every day. Leaving a small city that's a day's drive from any place that could take her (and her entourage) in, would have been near-to impossible, even if the roads had not been jammed. I don't blame her for staying. I don't even blame her for thinking it would not be so bad, just another storm, not much worse than all the other storms. Denial is a common form of shelter

The surprise was first of all that the storm was so bad. Though she was OK, and did not lose her home, the storm really did wipe out a whole waterfront town just up the beach from her. It really did crack half the trees up from their roots, and knock out all the power and phone lines for weeks, and break open roofs, and turn swimming pool water black, and gut the high school, and send countless people who used to have homes to live in tent cities that had to keep moving when the institutional city shut them down. All this in a panhandle county of Florida where the hurricanes were not supposed to be this bad. They quickly became a county of people who would never again have to pause when they were asked to remember a time they were shocked.

The easiest part of this account for me to write is this: Dear Climate-Change Deniers in Florida, look at this photograph of the beachfront town that's been wiped away. Look at that one blue house still standing, the only one built by someone who believed—and could afford—to build his home according to

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what the scientists have been saying, that yes, the oceans are warming and the waters are rising and the storms are getting much, much worse. Isn't this shock enough to change your mind?

And this is where you think this essay is going, right? Into a straightforward cause-and-effect climate change action argument? Such would be something I support, but this desire of mine to just make a statement is too simple, not radical surprise, and more appropriate to a bullheaded politician beloved for their resolve than for the essayer in the mix, the one who waves away certitude, the one who waffles from side to side in order to be able to better see the full view. I am swarmed by the uncertain as I push ahead deeper into his hurricane demolition. I am certain there is something here that has to do with the essay, but I am uncertain of how I will translate my instinct into language. My pull toward this event has something to do with an uncovering I fear may be too soft for the open air.

What really surprised me about Hurricane Michael was not the hard evidence of climate change getting worse, but something more difficult for me to understand. The prelude to my surprise was not being able to get ahold of my mother for a week after the storm hit, because all the communications were down, so I had to depend on third hand accounts—a sideways stream from my aunt to my cousin through my mother's neighbor's rogue working cell phone, or through a stranger on social media who I saw was a Facebook friend of my mother's. It was news reports of catastrophe writ large, filling my television screen, where squinting in I tried to figure out which landscapes were the ones I knew from visiting my parents and grandmother's retirement town for the past 25 years. It was internet mapping tools that hovered over the smashed-up landscape, looking to confirm that my mother's house was OK, and still providing a roof over her head. The prelude was that dissolving feeling I finally understood to be fear.

But I didn't see the real story until visiting my mother eight weeks after the storm. The debris. The ongoingness of clean up. The sodden sofas and broken trees and mounds and mounds of garbage, and everywhere the taut blue tarps bandaging roof after roof, the repetition that might have looked like a design motif, if it weren't for the all the broken fences and boarded windows, and one eerie couch, muddy

and abandoned, alone, in an open field I'd never seen before, because there had always been a privacy fence blocking my view.

*Surprise releases hidden layers.*

The real story is the tale that's hardly ever told, the narrative that admits all the ways a writer's presence impacts the telling, especially when we are writing about other people's trauma and broken things.

In her book-length essay-reportage hybrid *The Broken Country* Paisley Rekdal begins by looking at a wreck of images, a collage that presents itself to her in the form of sculpture she can't get away from while she is writing in Hanoi, on leave from her university teaching job. The sculpture is a found-object monument to Vietnamese victories in what they call there the American War. The monument was made of fragments of actual war planes, material pieces of the war itself, fused into a disconcerting assemblage with the image of a teenage female Viet Cong fighter at the top. Rekdal becomes obsessed with this image of war and its aftermath, but she's uncertain as to why. She writes:

I looked at this sculpture and saw inside its metal parts shapes that, rather like the emotions the work inspired, appeared to morph into strange new images emanating from the sheer enormity of the metal sculpture, menacing its spectators, radiating out through history. I saw some part of my father there, my uncle. I stood before the monument horrified, saddened, enraged (15).

Rekdal ends up merging her preoccupation with this sculpture into another story, about an incident of random knife violence in the Utah city where she usually lived and worked. One of the victims was a student in the program where she teaches, and the man wielding the knife, who yelled "why did you kill my people" as he stabbed men in a shopping center parking lot, was a homeless drug addict and a post-war refugee born in Vietnam three years after the fall of Saigon. Rekdal's book is a reverberation between the sculptural welding of war weapon relics, her memories of her uncle's experiences as a Chinese-American soldier on the American side of the same war, and her questions about the inheritance of trauma across

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generations and emigrations, in this case coming to roost as random violence in an American shopping mall parking lot.

The surprise in this work is not what Rekdal discovers directly by interviewing victims, community members, other post-war refugees and trauma experts, though every interview adds to her own fused monument. The surprise is in where her reporting takes her, to a point where the questions of her story and her questions to herself become the same questions:

To narrativize a trauma like war, or domestic violence, or a stabbing, which feels enormous, would be to turn it into something shaped and static: a slab of stone, a poem, a wrapped package. This is the paradox of writing about or even recounting trauma: the conventions you use to express experience may make these same experiences less actually palpable (63).

Her surprise was how deeply her uncovering led her into the ineffability of trauma, and the dangers of retelling that story we want to find, rather than the uncertain layers of what makes up any life, any act, any interpretation.

*Disorder makes room for possibility.*

The uncertain is an operative concept in the creation of the essay, particularly the long-form essay—the kind of works that become the novella-length books that are not stories, and not collections of poems, but rather the long-exhaled experience of the uncertain. Catherine Taylor’s *You, Me, and the Violence* is this kind of project. Taylor’s uncertain is based in a question. What does one do with an anti-militaristic point of view when a beloved brother is an Air Force pilot engaged in drone warfare?

She investigates her questions through a braid that includes transcripts of the audio communications of a U.S. drone attack, interviews with her brother, and extended contemplations of the diverse artistic practice and social impact of puppetry—all to try to get at what she calls “murky questions for the ethics of domination.” Her brother’s arguments that drones are not a particular evil, but merely the



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manifestation of all of warfare and American foreign policy, are sound enough to surprise even the essayist, sending her back to reframe her own pacifist-unless-absolutely-necessary stance. She lands on an ethos that the post-hippie activists of Bread and Puppet Theatre call "possibilitarian," a term which when coined by Norman Vincent Peale was a facile framework for positive thinking, but in the realm of theaters like Bread and Puppet is a profoundly activist, and cheerful, mode of disorderly performance.

Taylor is at first reluctant to get too close to the blatantly agitprop theater of Bread and Puppet. Her critical skepticism made me laugh out loud few times as she crept in closer. I wrote in the margins "why is she embarrassed to love the puppets" and "haha so she is a hippy too." Puppets embody a collective and sweetly radical joy. Why do thinking people want to keep an arms distance away from joy? I too struggle to write about loving things I can't defend loving, making the mistake of putting structure before discovery, putting certitude before love—but puppets, as Taylor describes, have a way of breaking through defenses.

Taylor writes this about being drawn to Bread and Puppet:

So much of my research has turned me toward their work, but I hesitate a long time before driving up to Vermont's Northeast Kingdom to visit them. I'm ambivalent; they are so old school. I find myself resisting their '70s hippie spectacle aesthetic and what I imagine will be a less than complex set of positions, and I find myself wishing they worked with a more contemporary medium and vocabulary. But they are so openly dedicated to anti-capitalism, and this radicalism appeals, so I feel compelled to take a look (30).

Bread and Puppet's possibilitarian stance is infectious, in part because the puppet politics version of imagining hope takes what it wants and leaves the rest from traditional folk narratives, so has the power to be at once familiar and a remaking. Their performance of possibility is a chosen family affair, the human longing for community the source of their power. Taylor goes on:

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I go back to Bread and Puppet several times. I take my children because I want to encourage their own possibilitarian impulses, because this is what I love about them, because this is what I'm longing for, and because of the high clouds and the sweet fierce people there. One day, watching the puppeteers parade by on stilts waving little wooden fighter jets and paper daffodils in the air, I find myself raising an eyebrow once again at their old-school stylings. I'm a little embarrassed to be here, but also deeply happy and at home. It's a fucked-up feeling, but nice in the way it keeps me close to contradiction, the only truth I think I can know (32).

In this passage Taylor knows she can't and won't find solutions, but she needs a new idea, a renewed way of seeing the problem. The turning point of the book occurs when she is at once deflated and surprised by the uncertain truth of contradiction:

Something shifts and my belief that violence is sometimes necessary seems at least arguable. Suddenly, accepting both my brother's position, that there will always be violence and war, while also accepting the utopian vision of pacifism, that this can be changed, feels like a contradiction that is necessary. It seems at least possible to imagine a world where war, like slavery, is not so easily accepted. Yes, I know, slavery persists and erupts, but it is no longer thought to be either necessary or inevitable and, suddenly, I can imagine this for war. Wildly utopian, yes, but I lunge at this thought (101).

What strikes me about this passage, along with the progression of her thinking, is that she is willing, as Aisha Sabatini Sloan and Paisley Rekdal are willing, to be uncomfortable in the disorderly essayistic space of the uncertain, and she is willing to admit to discomfort. Admitting discomfort flies in the face of professorial-driven knowledge. Admitting discomfort lets in the possibility that others understand better than you. Admitting discomfort makes room for change.

*We write to make out the bones and wounded places.*

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My own radical surprise, after Hurricane Michael, was in part the helpless experience of watching from afar when you have someone, a mother, caught in a catastrophe zone. But the real transforming surprise was my gut wrenching realization that a place I knew as one thing could so quickly become another thing entirely.

You might think from what I am saying here that I was shocked by the hurricane because this beach city is beloved to me. Who would not feel devastated by the destruction of this place they loved? But that's the thing. I do not love this place. I love the beach. I always love the beach. But otherwise I have mostly disliked, sometimes hated, and usually resented this place where my mother lived but had never been my home. I resented that my father left his dear Chicago to live in this not-Chicago place. I was repulsed by all the Tea Party right-wingers my Dad—always an old Chicago democrat—enjoyed arguing with at his gym and jazz festivals, and I felt betrayed by his friendships with these guys, especially after they all became Trumpians, because their political beliefs disrespected my both my queer life and my belief in progressive justice movements. I saw no beauty in the golf courses where both my parents played until their knees gave out and I resented the perfect round corners of the streets all named after fish where my grandmother, the first in our family to leave Chicago for Florida, took her walks, even into her dementia, when she forgot where she was going and had to be escorted home by neighbors she no longer knew.

I resented how the certainty of my southside-Chicago-brownstone bungalow-lower middle-class-rooted, blue-state, urban-queer, tattooed-artist, espresso-dependent identity was confused by first my grandmother and then my cousin and parents relocating to this pastel-toned politically conservative corner of Florida. I particularly resented—on the day I was trying to get to the church for my father's funeral—the man in the oversized SUV who rolled down his window to give me the finger when I tapped my horn at him. He had cut me off at the traffic circle, the urn with my dad's ashes teetering between my spouse's feet when I slammed on the brakes. In that moment, the man in the flat-faced monster truck became all the biggest-car-wins-shit I resented about this place, and about this country, ever since the 2016

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presidential election. My resentment of SUV-Man palpitated—whoever he was, whoever either of us were in the sharp July 98-degree heat, a few months before the hurricane would knock all this down. But mostly, I resented my mother for making my father move to Florida when he, I'd long believed, always wanted to stay in Chicago.

When I got down to see Mom after the hurricane, where she was alone and wearied by the mess, she told me something that shocked me. It turns out she was the one who had always hated Florida. She said my father, the father in whose honor, in part, I'd moved back to Chicago after years having made queer family in another city, had been the one who pushed them to move to Florida. He liked the long hot days, the over-developed yet still half-wild waterfront, the long sail boating season, the golf cart in the garage, even his endless arguments with his political foils. Mom said she was the one who would rather have lived in a condo in Chicago like me, like how I live now.

My second shock, arriving in Panama City a few weeks after the storm was the impact of all the wreckage. My response was strange and unfamiliar, as if I had wandered into a conservative queer-hating crowd of people who believed nothing that I believed, but whose clothing had been unceremoniously ripped off by the storm. I could make out their bones and wounded places. I could see that their clothing was not their bodies. I could see their vulnerability and seeing them this way I had trouble only resenting them. I could even see why my father had been willing, just person-to-person, to be their neighbors, and then I had to love them a little no matter what they thought of me and the way I live, no matter that they would not want my love, no matter that I don't want their love, no matter what they would say if I asked them what they believed was the reason the wind blew so hard that year.

The uncertain wandering of writing an essay led me to this perplexing feeling of critical compassion. Essaying gave me a new shock to mix into the bitterness I have not been eager to relinquish, am still not sure I can relinquish. But now, the possibility of relinquishment, a shift away from resentment, seems more radical than my usual refusal.

*In the essay's relinquishment comes the shock of another life.*

Certainty is arrogance, and arrogance is unbecoming to the literary page, as well as at parties, meetings, and when cutting off other drivers at the traffic circle. Certainty has its place; of course we want pilots, surgeons, and bridge builders to be certain of their skills. But when it comes to the art of interpretation the reason the uncertain is subversive is it invites in necessary confusion, vulnerability, and fear, and through those portals might also come compassion.

Certainty is great for maintenance of power, but the uncertain is the only pathway to dismantling infrastructures that prop up oppressive hierarchy and open new routes to change. Dismantling certainty is precisely what it means to essay. It's what the form is for. The essayistic uncertain is subversive because it invites necessary vulnerability, and fear, and through those portals might also come a perplexing and necessary compassion.

Compassion is what led Sloan to ride around in her cousin's police car, and when that compassion is coupled with her viewing, in a later essay in the same book (105), of Eric Garner's murder by police, her compassion amplifies into the wordless anguish that carries her essaying further still. Rekdal writes of becoming immobilized by compassionate witness of the subjects she interviewed. Taylor works to listen to a brother she is afraid of losing, either to their disagreement or the military violence they attempt to discuss. I am uncertain of what we need to invent next to make a more compassionate place for us all to reside, but my longing for that compassion is part of why I write.

*The vulnerable is an entryway for wonder.*

How does one end an essay on the uncertain? We certainly can't end with the certain. So then what do I leave us with? Perhaps an instruction to turn over a favorite idea and look at it again from the rearview forward, then let that backward thought onto the page? Perhaps I will implore myself—the next

time I'm sure I have something important to say in an essay—to back away, to listen, rather than insist? Perhaps, when listening, we can all let the silence lead us back to that memory or image or fragment of information or sodden couch alone in the mud between all the fallen fences that most confounds or frustrates or exposes us, and perhaps we can start trying to relinquish all that keeps the surprise from getting in past our gates, as that's likely to be where the next essay begins.

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