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Bringing Dark Events to Light: Emotional Pacing in the Trauma Narrative

*My sharpest memory is of a single instant surrounded by dark.
I was seven....It took three decades for that instant to unfreeze.*

Mary Karr, *The Liar's Club*

When I was three and Bailey four, we arrived in the musty little town, wearing tags on our wrists which instructed—"To Whom It May Concern"—that we were Marguerite and Bailey Johnson, Jr., from Long Beach, California, en route to Stamps, Arkansas, c/o Mrs. Annie Henderson. Our parents had decided to end their calamitous marriage, and Father shipped us home to his mother.

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

I'd seen the map of my life. What lay ahead in the early years was difficult. I wanted a head start, to make my way through as fast as possible. Then, as I got close to the door, I panicked. I began choking and kicking, fighting for air.

My spirit helpers spoke precisely: "If you fight water, you drowned."

Joy Harjo, *Crazy Brave*

Introduction

Dark experiences lie at the heart of the trauma memoir. Like their counterparts in fiction, poetry, and drama, trauma memoirs can portray devastating encounters with nature, as in *Wave*, the story of Sonali Deraniyagala's heartbreaking loss of her parents, husband, and children in the 2004 Sri Lankan tsunami. They offer accounts of overcoming horrific accidents, such as Matthew Sanford's *Waking* in which the narrator survives a car accident that left him paralyzed and killed his father and sister, or sudden, life-threatening illness as in Jill Bolte Taylor's *My Stroke of Insight* in which she heals from a massive stroke at

the age of 37. Trauma narratives also encompass the human experience in war, such as Jon Swain's *River of Time: A Memoir of Vietnam and Cambodia* or *Madness Visible: A Memoir of War*, journalist Janine di Giovanni's story of covering the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

And, of course, trauma memoirs tell stories of a wide-range of interpersonal experiences in which people cause harm, intentionally or inadvertently, to other adults or to children. Memoirs of harm a narrator experienced as a child at the hands of adults comprise a particularly remarkable, if wrenching, group of stories within this category. These stories challenge an expectation that children will be protected due to their vulnerability in body, mind, and spirit. Even more remarkable and gut wrenching within this subcategory are memoirs in which children suffer abuse and neglect within their own families. These writers depict family situations in which their young bodies, minds, and spirits were steeped in overwhelming, chronic stress. To further appreciate the extraordinary triumph that these memoirs represent, consider the range of events they can encompass.

A landmark investigation of the health impact of childhood abuse and neglect in the late 1990s identified ten types of adverse events that cause overwhelming stress for a child. Five relate to direct personal experience: physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. Five relate to family member experiences to which a child may be exposed: parental alcoholism, a mother who experiences domestic violence, an incarcerated family member, a family member with mental illness, and an absent parent due to divorce, death, or abandonment. Although not included in the original study, other intra-family experiences have since been recognized as contributing to overwhelming stress in children, including losing a familial caregiver and witnessing intra-family abuse, such as a sibling, father, or grandparent being mistreated and hurt.

Keep in mind that adverse childhood events that occur within a family don't happen in a communal vacuum. A child's encounters with social, economic, political, and cultural forces within the community surrounding the family often compound the injury of events that occur within the family.

These include experiences of racism, bullying, community violence, homelessness, the foster care or juvenile justice system, and refugee, immigration, and asylum systems that separate a child from her parents. Because of detrimental experiences within the family, too often a child lacks the personal skills and resources to functionally navigate the social world beyond the family experience.

Transforming experiences of childhood familial trauma into literary art presents significant challenges for those of us fortunate enough and healed enough to have developed the skills, resources, and support to do this work. Given the darkness at the heart of these stories, how can we tell them in a way that does justice to what we lived through without weighing down the narrative? How do we tell them without minimizing or masking the continuous work of healing and transformation upon which the art-making rests? How do we present and sequence the darker moments in our stories in a way that allows the reader to breathe in those moments and appreciate their amplitude? And how do we create a narrative structure that holds their presentation and sequence in order to effectively support the story's message?

These are the questions I'm grappling with as I compose a narrative of growing up in the shadow of my aunt's murder, living with parents whose own unhealed childhood trauma led to abusive and neglectful behaviors towards me and my siblings, two of whom were my aunt's daughters. To create compelling and resonant literary art from my childhood experience and its impact on my adult life, I need to attend closely to the story's pacing, both narrative and emotional. When writers talk about pacing in storytelling, they're usually referring to *narrative pacing*, that is, the tempo at which a story is told. At a high level, elements such as scene length, the speed of the story's action, and how quickly information is imparted affect the overall pace of a narrative. These elements are carried out through techniques such as dialogue, detail and description, syntax, paragraph length, exposition, and narration.

When talking about literary craft, however, writers seldom address a story's *emotional pacing*, that is, how emotion embedded in a story's raw material is presented and sequenced within the narrative. In one of the very few references I found, fiction writer Donald Maass describes emotional pacing with respect to

the way a protagonist understands an event and in terms of the story's emotional effect on the reader. According to Maass, one way writers accomplish emotional pacing is by shifting gears between tension and energy within a story. He writes: "Think of tension as a tiger poised for a pounce, and energy as the pounce. A shift inside a character is like that. As emotional gears shift, the reader feels the force of physics. There's a sense of surging forward or pulling back" (Maass). I consider what Maass describes above to be part of the unfolding action and information within the story, and thus an aspect of overall narrative pacing. As Maass conceives it, emotional pacing has more to do with the emotional gear shifting itself, as if emotions were two-dimensional, mechanical objects disconnected from the body and the senses (internal and external), including the mind. His use of a mechanical metaphor—gearing—to describe emotional pacing doesn't capture the aliveness, multivalence, and nonlinearity of its subtle force within a narrative. This energetic force is separate and distinct, yet intimately and seamlessly interwoven with other elements of narrative craft.

As I conceive it, emotional pacing relates to the raw material of the memoir itself, its situation and the events that comprise it, which come ready-charged with myriad and often divergent emotions. In the trauma memoir, particularly narratives of childhood familial trauma, the situation and events at the story's heart carry inherently dark, heavy, and complex emotions, such as parental betrayal, fear of annihilation, grief, rage, guilt, shame, and significant confusion around personal boundaries and responsibility. Pacing or modulating the presentation of this emotionally laden material allows us as writers to convey, with intention, the meaning we've made of an experience after the fact, that is, after we've processed and made peace with the emotions that were part of the experience. It involves not only decisions around which events to include, but how much detail to provide, how to present that detail, and how to sequence the events. It involves using narrative techniques that enable us to manipulate the narrative distance between the narrator and the moments or events narrated. Without skillful emotional pacing, we risk overwhelming

readers, giving them too much heavy emotional content at once or too soon, without proper preparation or the time and space to fully take it in, digest it, and appreciate its weight and impact.

For example, in the mother-daughter memoir I'm writing, at what point in the story do I reveal the facts of my aunt's murder, which occurred when my mother was pregnant with me? What's the most effective perspective from which to show scenes of my mother's abuse and neglect of me in the wake of that event? How do I relay the relationship confusion I experienced as a child around my biological brothers and sisters and my cousins/sisters, including displacement as my mother's daughter? How do I show the impact of the situation on my father's behavior, his increasing rages and abuse of my siblings and me without those aspects of the story overwhelming or hijacking the narrative? At what point in the story do I reveal that I found out about my aunt's murder, which had been kept secret, by snooping around my parents' private papers when I was nine, leaving me with a secret of my own to hide? How do I convey the ripple effects of that discovery on me in the context of increasingly out of control and abusive relationships among family members and conflict among me and my siblings, including competition for parental attention, love, and protection?

With each of these questions, I'm confronted with an artistic choice around where and how to present highly charged, emotionally laden content in a controlled and modulated manner. To come to a better understanding of emotional pacing, I will examine three nonfiction narratives that tell stories of injuries to the body, mind, and spirit of a narrator that occurred within her family and altered the narrator's life course in significant and sometimes radical ways: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou, *The Liars' Club* (1995) by Mary Karr, and *Crazy Brave* (2012) by Joy Harjo. I limit my analysis to memoirs written by women because I believe that gender conditioning impacts not only our experience of childhood adversity within our families but also how we carry the imprint of those experiences into our adult relationships with ourselves, our family members, and others in the world outside our family. It also influences how we render those experiences artistically.

The Craft of Emotional Pacing

I have been especially interested to understand how these writers modulate the emotions inherent in their material in light of what they believe their experiences taught them. I wanted to apprehend with greater clarity the literary techniques they used to pace this emotional content in order to convey a meaningful message about what they learned from their experience. That message had to go beyond *I survived these horrendous experiences and lived to tell the tale*. The telling had to go well beyond offering a litany of one awful harmful event after another.

My close reading and analysis of three memoirs of childhood familial trauma proved to be time well spent. Here's what this study helped me to uncover and affirm. First and foremost, emotional pacing is inextricably tied to four dimensions in the work:

- The writer's tone, that is, her attitude toward her subject.
 - The writer's tone signals her stance with respect to the subject matter about which she's writing. It conveys how resolved she is around her experience, what her emotional posture is towards it, and how she has approached making meaning from what she has been through. It can also reflect the degree to which the writer has made a personal reckoning around her behavior, life choices, and the consequences of both with respect to her life events.
- The questions that drive the writer's exploration and excavation into her past.
 - The clarity of the question or questions that drive her investigation into the life events she addresses determines so much of what she chooses to include and, just as importantly, what she excludes.
- The message that she sets out to convey.
 - Similar to the tone, the message of the work expresses the meaning the writer has made of what she has experienced and what she would like readers to take from the reading. In

addition to helping select what to include and exclude, the message can help guide choices around when and where to place events and the degree to which they are emphasized.

- The shape or structure of the work.
- The shape or structure of the work, though somewhat more elusive than tone, guiding questions, and message, provides the necessary scaffolding for the emotion of the material, which in turn enforces constraints on how the emotion is managed and modulated.

Although these connections may seem obvious, they were anything but before I began this study. Seeing them more clearly in the work of other women writers helps me understand the struggles I've had in working with my own material.

Seeing them more clearly also helps me understand not just the *how* of emotional pacing but its reality. Throughout this project, I've questioned whether emotional pacing was a bona fide concept. I kept asking myself: *Is there a "there" there? Or is what I call emotional pacing some other aspect of craft that goes by another name and is already well understood?* After many months of close reading, analysis, and contemplation, I'm more inclined to say it is real, that it is something that we as writers do, whether knowingly or intuitively, to create a compelling story from exceedingly difficult life experience.

Each writer of the memoirs I examined as part of this study paced her work differently. At the same time, each seemed to be intentionally manipulating the narrative distance between herself and the emotions inherent in the situations and events described. Sometimes she accomplished this by toggling between adult and child perspectives. Angelou's depiction of the rape scene is a good example of this technique. Other times she achieved it by toggling between exposition (eg, summary, commentary) and narration, zooming out and zooming in to an event. One of the ways Karr effected this was through shifts in verb tense from past to present. She reserved this technique for two key scenes: Her mother's breakdown and the sexual abuse she experienced at the hands of her babysitter. In Harjo's work, she often manipulated narrative distance by moving among genres.

In addition to manipulating narrative distance, each writer skillfully used images, figurative language, and other literary devices to amplify or compress emotion, shift mood. They often accomplish this through rich, multivalent sensory detail. And, of course, each writer used scene breaks and juxtapositions—almost any kind of change in technique to modulate how emotions in the work were carried, how they were co-mingled, how long they were held, and the way they rose up and dissolved from one narrative moment to another. In each memoir, the emotional pacing is a unique blend of techniques, a reflection of how the writer worked with the tools of her art to create a portrait of an emotionally affecting experience that carries a message of how it shaped some aspect of who she is and how she arrived at insight into the experience.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, by Maya Angelou

In the first of five volumes of autobiography, Maya Angelou examines the period from her early childhood to early adulthood. The narrator tells the story of emerging whole and hopeful despite experiencing numerous, compounding adversities. These include growing up as a Black girl in the deep south under Jim Crow segregation; the divorce of her parents; being raised by her paternal grandmother after her parents abandoned her at the age of three; being raped at eight by her mother's boyfriend; being stabbed by her father's girlfriend at 15 then left homeless; and becoming pregnant and giving birth to her son at 16. In addition to exploring the question of how she overcame such difficult circumstances and wounding experiences, the narrator inquires into her sense of where and to whom she belongs.

Throughout the narrative, the narrator remains unflinching. Her rock-steady tone projects confidence, strength, clarity, wisdom, and compassion for herself and her family. This tone supports the story's overarching message, which the narrator articulates in the book's second-to-last chapter:

The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power.

The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of a struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance. (265)

The reader accompanies the narrator on a journey that spans a prologue plus 36 thematic chapters and follows a roughly chronological timeline. The narrative structure can be likened to a long, perilous hike. The chapters fall into three, interlocking sections. The first section covers the narrator's early childhood; the second encompasses her later childhood; and the third deals with her adolescence and entry into young adulthood. The first and third sections form two mountain-peak shapes with the second section forming a valley in between. At the summit of the first peak, the second peak is obscured by a leveling off that gradually gives way to low-grade rise toward the second peak and then levels off as the story comes to a close.

Angelou uses a number of techniques to emotionally pace the story of her childhood. The principle technique involves manipulating narrative distance as if she were adjusting the lens of a movie camera, deftly moving back and forth between exposition and narration, combined with shifts in perspective between the narrator's child self and her adult self. Perspective shifts often incorporate poetic devices, figures of speech, and imagery to highlight emotion or convey its felt sense in the body, its reverberations for the narrator and the characters in her world.

Within the two-mountain-peak structure, the narrator constructs her personal story against a pulsing backdrop of Jim Crow-era racism and segregation. Her portrayals of racial aggressions, micro-aggressions, the persistent threat of annihilation, and murder by whites form a steady backbeat throughout the narrative. She interweaves depictions of Black life and culture into this backdrop, which she presents in

compressed, sweeping strokes of zoomed out exposition, summary, and commentary on what she observed in the communities in which she lived in Arkansas, Missouri, and California. The narrator delivers clear-eyed observations and recollections in direct, specific, and often poetic language in a voice resonant with resolve, wisdom, and restraint. The images and metaphors often do the heavy lifting of the emotion embedded in what she describes in exposition and summary. For example, she offers this image of herself not succumbing to depression on less structured Saturdays when she's back with her paternal grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas, after being raped: "I thought of myself as hanging in the Store, a mote imprisoned on a shaft of sunlight. Pushed and pulled by the slightest shift of air, but never falling free into the tempting darkness" (109). The simile pulses with the hope of being held in light while at the same time conveying a sense of disembodiment, tenuousness, captivity, and a lack of agency.

The narrator paints the story's backdrop from her adult perspective on her early life experience. This enables her to create a picture of the events and circumstances that forged her character, a world of customs and lifesaving, if, at times, capricious, rules she learned to navigate from within a small inner circle of personal relationships and often by withdrawing into herself and reading. From this zoomed out perspective, the narrator zooms in periodically to narrate a specific, racially oriented injury in which she witnessed an aggression or micro-aggression directed against someone she cared about and/or herself. She typically narrates these events from the perspective of her adult-self looking back through the eyes of her child-self (child perspective). From her adult perspective, the narrator often interjects expository comments into these scenes. Once she completes the scene from her child perspective, she shifts her perspective back to that of her adult self.

For example, in Chapter 3, she depicts the life she lived on the Black side of Stamps, Arkansas, with her paternal grandmother, Momma, and crippled uncle, Willie, in the Store Momma owned. The narrator uses the context of these circumstances to show the persistent if unpredictable life-threatening presence of the Klan and the terror Black men faced in particular. She tells a specific story of this ever-

present threat, how one night as she and her brother, Bailey, are doing evening chores, she hears a horse come into the front yard, an unusual occurrence for a weekday night. She narrates the scene from her child perspective interspersed with expository comments from her adult perspective, comments that call attention to the abject fear and uncertainty that undergird the scene's tension. The reader learns, as the narrator's child self learned, that the visitor is the used-to-be sheriff coming to warn Mamma: "Annie, tell Willie he better lay low tonight. A crazy nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys'll be coming over here later.' Even after the slow drag of years, I remember the sense of fear which filled my mouth with hot, dry air, and made my body light" (17–18). Immediately following this, the narrator steps out of the scene and back into her adult perspective to deliver this commentary:

The "boys"? Those cement faces and eyes of hate that burned the clothes off you if they happened to see you lounging on the main street downtown on Saturday. Boys? It seemed that youth had never happened to them. Boys? No, rather men who were covered with graves' dust and age without beauty or learning. The ugliness and rottenness of old abominations.

If on Judgment Day I were summoned to St. Peter to give testimony to the used-to-be sheriff's act of kindness, I would be unable to say anything in his behalf. His confidence that my uncle and every other Black man who heard of the Klan's coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in the chicken droppings was too humiliating to hear. (18)

Note the narrator's anaphoric use of "boys" in the first paragraph above, the image of these men she paints and the way these techniques highlight the narrator's embodied fear as a child and the life threat the presence or even the suggestion of their presences that the mention of "boys" signaled. At the same time, Angelou employs this term to convey, from her adult perspective, her disdain for these men, what they represent, and what they perpetrated. Angelou uses these and other poetic techniques throughout the narrative to intensify the spotlight on the emotion within the experience of these events, framing them from the narrator's adult perspective.

The narrator ends the comment in the second paragraph above with this image: “Without waiting for Momma’s thanks, he rode out of the yard, sure that things were as they should be and that he was a gentle squire, saving those deserving serfs from the laws of the land, which he condoned” (18). The image conjures the sense of the overseer, a feared figure within the slave experience. She then moves back into the narrated scene, returning to her child perspective to describe what happens next.

Immediately, while his horse’s hooves were still loudly thudding the ground, Momma blew out the coal-oil lamps. She had a quiet, hard talk with Uncle Willie and called Bailey and me into the Store.

We were told to take the potatoes and onions out of their bins and knock out the dividing walls that kept them apart. Then with tedious and fearful slowness uncle Willy gave me his rubber tipped cane and bent down to get into the now-enlarged empty bin. It took forever before he laid down flat, and then we covered him with the potatoes and onions, layer upon layer, like a casserole.

Grandmother knelt praying in the darkened Store. (18)

The tension of the scene is as tight as a drum skin. The first two sentences of the next paragraph break the tension and signal closure on that memory of threat, uncertainty, and prayer. In these sentences the narrator’s adult self relays the outcome of the event in this expository commentary: “It was fortunate that the “boys” didn’t ride into our yard that evening and insist that Momma open the Store. They would have surely found uncle Willie and just as surely lynched him” (19).

In these mini-transitional moments as she moves from child perspective to adult perspective, it’s as if the narrator herself has paused and taken a breath to be more fully with the moment of injury, and in that ever-so-brief pause has formulated a comment or set a frame around what she has just narrated so that its meaning along with its weight cannot be missed. The narrator establishes a pattern of shifts from exposition to narration then back to exposition that work in tandem with shifts in perspective between adult and child that enable her to control the presentation of the story’s emotional material. At times this

technique works to highlight or magnify the emotion, at other times it allows the narrator to create the space needed to breathe, be with the emotion of the scene, and appreciate or reflect on it. Meanwhile, the reader, walking shoulder-to-shoulder with the narrator on her journey, has the opportunity to do the same.

Against this backdrop of racism and segregation, the narrator presents instances of additional, personal injuries (parental abandonment and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse/violence) that she sustains within the context of her family. She shows these events primarily from her child perspective. Many are presented as simply part of the life she lived, what had been normalized, and what she became accustomed to (eg, thrashings, name-calling and other forms of shaming).

The two peak, emotionally explosive events within the memoir—the sexual abuse and rape she endured at the hands of her mother’s boyfriend in St. Louis when she was eight years old, and the stabbing she suffered at the hands of her father’s girlfriend in Southern California when she was 15—are narrated in scenes that span three chapters each and form their own dramatic arc. The presentation of these events in linked chapters reveals a separate pattern that acts as a spotlight for each event. Unlike other instances of racial or personal injury that she embeds within a single, thematic chapter, the narrator stays almost solely in narration. She slows the action in the lead up to the peak event, slows it further during the event itself, and only marginally increases its speed through the aftermath. She reserves exposition to provide background on a character, such as her maternal grandmother, or to move action forward to a key moment within the event.

For example, at the height of the first event, the narrator interrupts the narrative of the rape scene and shifts into both exposition and her adult perspective to comment on what she’s describing. Rather than break tension, these movements increase it and the scene’s emotional potency. The narrator deftly delivers that commentary in the form of a graphic, biblically-inspired metaphor, further intensifying not only the emotions of terror, betrayal, and helplessness, but also the felt experience of physical pain from the rape itself: “The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the

camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot" (76). From her adult perspective, the narrator gives voice to what her eight-year-old self in the midst of being brutally violated could not possibly have articulated. The shift in perspective amplifies the emotional impact of the moment when the rape occurs.

The narrator uses a few paragraphs before and after a section break at the close of the last chapter covering the rape to begin pulling back from its intensity. As she reverts to exposition, summary, and the perspective of her adult self in these paragraphs, she offers a concentrated emotional picture of the additional injuries she sustains: her family's mistreatment of her when she doesn't bounce back to her pre-rape self and her abandonment, once again, by her mother. The chapter ends with these revelations. The chapter break offers additional time and space to allow everything that's come before to reverberate and be taken in, its weight and gravity fully appreciated.

As I read the memoir, its second section begins when the narrator is back in Stamps after the rape. With the start of this chapter, the narrator continues her story through thematic chapters, each alternating rhythmically between exposition and narration, adult and child perspectives.

While the narrator continues to relay incidents of aggressions and micro-aggressions, she presents more experiences in which she is affirmed, seen, and appreciated for her sensitivity, love of language, and enthusiasm for reading. Of course, the backdrop for these experiences, which occur across multiple chapters of relative calm, is everything that has come before them, so they stand out by contrast. This long, second section (chapters 14–26) offers time and space for everything that's come before to be processed and for the new, more affirming experiences to be further appreciated given the extreme challenges that preceded them. The narrator depicts how she healed and reclaimed agency through these experiences, becoming stronger and more self-confident. This section also functions as preparation for the story's second emotionally explosive event in the story's third section: The stabbing the narrator suffered at the hands of her father's girlfriend, Dolores.

The stabbing scene occurs after a disorienting and, at times, harrowing day-trip the narrator takes to Mexico with her father. She gives long, detailed scenes of their time there in which she shows her isolation geographically, culturally, and relationally. The narrator describes their destination as being atop not just a mountain, but a *steep* mountain. Culturally, she didn't know Mexican lifestyle or customs and had little knowledge of Spanish, which limited her ability to communicate. She portrays the relationship with her father as distant at best, in which she is neither valued nor protected and communication is limited, but not by language.

Unlike the scenes in St. Louis, these scenes in Mexico, and later back at her father's home in Southern California, also operate symbolically, which further accentuate the emotions embedded in what she portrays. The symbolism allows the narrator to show the extent of her father's disconnection from and abandonment of her, her initial terror at that realization, then acceptance not only of its reality but of who her father is. Upon arriving at their destination at the top of the steep mountain in Mexico and seeing her father's reception by the locals, the narrator steps back out of narration into exposition to comment:

It was obvious to me then that he had never belonged in Stamps, and less to the slow-moving, slow-thinking Johnson family. How maddening it was to have been born in a cotton field with aspirations of grandeur.

In the Mexican bar, Dad had an air of relaxation which I had never seen visit him before.

There was no need to pretend in front of those Mexican peasants. (226)

Then, hours later after she realizes he's left her alone at the bar, she stays in narration, going into greater interiority to show her state of mind as she became aware of her situation:

I tried to staunch the flood of fear. Why was I afraid of the Mexicans? After all, they had been kind to me and surely my father wouldn't allow his daughter to be ill treated. Wouldn't he? Would he? How could he leave me in that raunchy bar and go off with his woman? Did he care what happened to me? Not a damn, I decided, and opened the floodgates for hysteria. (229)

These events in Mexico become the backdrop for the stabbing and its aftermath.

In another difference from her telling of the rape, the narrator has foreshadowed the stabbing, using exposition to comment: “Had I protested that I would like Dolores to go along [to Mexico], we might have been spared a display of violence and near tragedy” (223). She also uses spare but deft description of Dolores’ manner upon returning from their day-trip, the narrator’s language harkening back to and echoing her description of the rape: “[Dolores] responded, briefly but politely, and threaded her attention through the eye of her needle” (236).

In the next scene, the narrator presents, blow by blow, her faceoff with Dolores in which Dolores calls the narrator’s mother a whore. The narrator interrupts the scene to step back into exposition with this comment:

Maybe if I had been older, or had had my mother longer, or understood Dolores' frustration more deeply, my response would not have been so violent. I know that the awful accusation struck not so much at my filial love as at the foundation of my new existence. If there was a chance of truth in the charge, I would not be able to live, to continue to live with Mother, and I so wanted to. (239)

This interruption and step back from narration into exposition supercharges the emotion of the scene by drawing out the moment in time. It allows Dolores’ insult to hang in the air between her and the narrator in all its ugliness. And finally, the comment itself contextualizes the particular meaning the comment had for the narrator in the moment, further signaling the violence to come.

And then the narrator and Dolores get into a clutch and Dolores stabs her. Using phrasing almost identical to what she used to describe the bleeding she felt after being raped, the narrator says after Dolores has stabbed her: “On the steps [outside the house] I felt something wet on my arm” (239). After the rape she says: “Walking down the street, I felt the wet on my pants” (77). The mirroring of violent aggression and betrayal the narrator experiences in connection with her parents’ significant others can’t be missed.

When her father abandons her to the care of friends after the stabbing, the narrator shows how she acts on the choice to care for herself and take the reins of healing and her future into her own hands. In the last chapter of the three-chapter arc, she uses exposition and summary almost exclusively to relay how she reached into an inner, self-built reserve of strength and courage in order to strike out on her own, connecting with other dispossessed, homeless adolescents her age while the gash in her side healed. The narrative distance provides for needed rest from the intensity of the two preceding chapters while enabling the narrator to show a moving portrait of her transformation to independence and agency.

The Liars' Club, by Mary Karr

In *The Liars' Club*, the first in a trilogy of memoirs, Mary Karr traces her early childhood to uncover the roots of her mother's Nervousness and the consequential behaviors that spiral out from it, taking the story's narrator through an odyssey of adversities. These include experiencing her mother's increasingly erratic behaviors, alcoholism, and horrific emotional breakdown with its threat of annihilation for the narrator and her sister; her mother's attempt to drive off a local bridge while driving her, her sister, and grandmother to a relative's house during a hurricane; her mother's extended stay in a mental hospital; being raped at age seven by an older neighborhood boy, then sexually abused at eight by an adult man who her mother hired to babysit her when she was sick; her parents' divorce and mother's remarriage, worsening alcoholism, drug addiction, and suicidal tendencies; and her father's alcoholism. The narrator sets out to understand her mother's Nervousness and why her mother tried to kill her and her sister. Was she somehow at fault for her mother's Nervousness and extreme behaviors?

With the assuredness of an expert storyteller, the narrator recreates the painful childhood mystery she lived with well into her mid-to-late 20s. Her deceptively diverting tone conveys compassion, deep love,

and respect for her flawed parents, not to mention her past self and the beliefs she held about herself. This tone supports the story's overall message, which she delivers near the end of the narrative:

Mother's particular devils had remained mysterious to me for decades. So had her past. Few born liars ever intentionally embark in truth's direction, even those who believe that such a journey might axiomatically set them free. (311)

The sunset we drove into that day was luminous, glowing; we weren't.

Though we should have glowed, for what Mother told absolved us both, in a way. All the black crimes we believed ourselves guilty of were myths, stories we cobbled together out of fear. We expected no good news interspersed with the bad. Only the dark aspect of any story sank in. I never knew despair could lie. So at the time, I only felt the car hurtling like some cold steel capsule I'd launched into onrushing dark.

It's only looking back that I believe the clear light of truth should have filled us, like the legendary grace that carries a broken body past all manner of monsters. I'm thinking of the cool tunnel of white light that spirit might fly into at death, or so some have reported after coming back from various car wrecks and heart failures and drownings, courtesy of defib paddles and electricity, or after some kneeling samaritan's breath was blown into stalled lungs so they could gasp again.

Maybe such reports are just death's neurological fireworks, the brain's last light show. If so, that's a lie I can live with. (320)

Like Angelou's message, Karr's is hard earned through the living, the meaning making, and the vivid writing, which shows its kinship with the oral storytelling tradition she was steeped in as a child at her father's side at the Liars' Club or wherever he happened to share a tale with her.

Karr lays out her journey "into the chute that led down the dark corridor at the end of which truth's door would fly open" (311) in three sections that comprise a total of 15 chapters. The three sections mirror the classic three-part dramatic structure, forming an arc. Within this classical scaffolding,

Karr presents her material much like an oral storyteller would, using a working-class-Texas, dialect-laden style, rich in figurative language, and rife with apparent digressions and meanders. These digression and meanders play a key role in her emotional pacing, as they allow her to temper the emotion playing out within a scene and control its “volume,” raising or lowering it to modulate its effect on the telling of the story at that point, as well as how long the emotion reverberates. They also enable her to move fluidly and with apparent effortlessness from challenging emotional terrain to more stable ground for periods of rest.

Like Angelou, Karr masterfully captures the perspective of her narrator’s child self, the primary lens she uses throughout most of the story. She also skillfully shifts into the perspective of the narrator’s adult self to preview an event or offer expository commentary, background information, or summary in a way that not only moves the story along, but also typically adds emotional texture by fleshing out some resonant emotional aspect of the narrator’s familial or socio-cultural world. As they were for Angelou, shifts between child and adult perspective are also apart of how Karr emotionally paces her storytelling. Like Angelou, Karr sometimes uses these shifts to highlight and intensify the emotion embedded in a scene. Other times she employs the shift to break tension and offer a space to rest, breathe, digest, and assimilate what has transpired.

During peak emotional moments, Karr shifts verb tense from past to present, slowing down the action and giving heightened immediacy to the emotions within event, further intensifying them by providing copious sensory detail, which is often delivered via multi-sensorial images and figurative language.

In Chapter 7, which depicts the breakdown of the narrator’s mother, we can see how Karr uses each of these techniques to control the emotional pace of the chapter and the events it narrates. The chapter begins in exposition with some summary flash forward information and commentary: “Grandma wound up leaving Mother a big pile of money, which didn’t do us a lick of good, though Lord knows we needed it” (140). The action of the chapter picks up shortly after where the previous chapter closes: At the

end of the narrator's disastrous eighth birthday celebration in which her parents engage in an alcohol-fueled, bloody fight, in part over Mother spending money lavishly on the narrator and her sister at a time when Daddy, a union man, has been out on strike for months and the family's finances are precarious. The chapter break has interrupted the emotional tension of the fight scene. What follows from the opening sentence of Chapter 7 is more exposition from the narrator's adult perspective about how Daddy has been managing the family's finances and his bill-paying habits on Fridays when he picks up his strike pay. This exposition meanders into a specific, if composite, scene in which the narrator shows how Daddy handled paying on tabs at merchants, such as the pharmacy, and Daddy's feelings of shame around owing money, which the narrator senses through his body language and tone of voice as he interacts with the pharmacy owner.

The narrator uses this composite scene to convey the emotional weight of the family's finances and their effect on the mood and behavior of the adults, particularly Daddy. "That was the dance we went through with Buggy [the pharmacy owner] on payday," the narrator comments, continuing with

The movements of it were both so exact and so fiercely casual that I never for a minute doubted that this whole money thing was, in fact, not casual at all, but serious as stone. All the rest of the week, nobody talked about it. That silence slid over our house like a cold iron. But woe be it to you if you didn't finish your bowl of black-eyed peas, or if you failed to shut the icebox door flush so that it leaked cold and thereby ran up the electric. Daddy would come up behind you and shove that door all the way to or scoop up the last peas into his own mouth with your very spoon. After doing so, he'd stare at you from the side of his face as if holding down a wealth of pissed-off over your evil wastefulness. (141)

The narrator continues in exposition from her adult perspective, showing her father's anxiety over money and debts. She contrasts his worry with Mother's detachment from this worry and her immersion in grief over her own mother's death from cancer several months earlier. Her grief manifests in emotional

withdrawal, drinking, and Blues-music-infused crying jags. Every detail the narrator adds about each family member's behavior reflects the mounting tension within the house, the disconnection among family members and their isolation from one another. The narrator describes how the family's habits «seemed odder than ever» (142): Mother walking around the house naked while everyone else was in various states of undress no matter the time of day, their collective insomnia, and satisfying their fierce need for privacy by sealing the windows with wax paper and crayon suncatchers.

The narrator paints this backdrop of the palpable pressure and tension fed by financial worry, grief, anger, distress, shame, and uncertainty, working from her adult perspective in large strokes of exposition, with dips into specificity, that show how normal what's "odder than ever" has become. At the same time, normalizing the oddness, the family's silence and displaced emotion, renders it as the hum of a distant menace, like the swarm of cicadas that overcomes Mother's car the first time she leaves Daddy, taking the narrator and her sister to her mother's house in Lubbock.

From this zoomed out view of the collective family state over a period of time, the narrator shifts from exposition to narration, from adult perspective to child perspective, zooming in to a specific point in time: the moment she steps into the scene of her mother's breakdown. The shifts starts with the narrator coming home from school and noting that the front door and screen are ajar—a sensory (visual) detail. Now on sympathetic nervous system alert, the narrator homes in on and relays more and more sensory detail: her scuffed oxblood loafers, the feel of her satchel thumping her right hip, the heat of the day making "the air thick as gauze" (145).

The narrator then digresses into a story of her spelling test triumph, which allows her to both convey her excited state coming into the house and draws out the dreadful moment of finding her mother in the midst of breaking down emotionally. She takes the reader with her into discovery of what is happening with Mother by layering multi-sensory detail in images rendered with poetic precision: the silence that meets her when she calls out that she's home that is "heavier than the air outside. It lay across

the coarse rugs like swamp gas; the black fan sweeping a dull little wind over a cup of cold coffee; and grandma's lawyer's letter folded into about a dozen accordion pleats the way a kid would make a paper fan" (145). The narrator relays these impressions, then lets them hang like the hot, humid air of the day as she steps back into her adult perspective to convey her memory of the letter's details about the size and components of Mother's inheritance.

What follows these sensory images is a long digression into the specifics of Mother's inheritance, covering more than a page over two long paragraphs. The information is interesting but more mundane and almost excessive given the focus of the chapter. Nonetheless, the interruption cools the heat of apprehension about where Mother is, and offers hope that some of the tensions in the house due to low finances will resolve. It's as if in this pause the narrator, too, is buying time to rest emotionally and bolster her courage with concrete information related to family money, land, and her grandmother's history around and attitude toward land before delving into the horrific details surrounding Mother's breakdown.

As the narrator resumes the scene of searching for Mother, she shifts back into the child's perspective: "I ran through the house again then, calling out for Mother. What I found in her bathroom knocked the wind slap out of me" (147). The narrator follows this with a vivid, sensory-laden description of the bathroom mirror scribbled over with orange-red lipstick that left only streaks of silver showing, the stub of lipstick in the sink, its empty gold tube laying "like a spent shell casing on the fuzzy oval of a yellow rug" (147). She interlaces these external details with descriptions of her felt experience of the moment, using Salvador Dali-like images to reflect her internal emotional state and the nightmare she is discovering: "A thin filter of fear came to slide between me and the world. Objects in the house started to get larger and more fluid. A standing lamp reared up at me as I came on it" (147).

The narrator continues in this vein, pouring forth a flood of images honed with rich, figurative language. The sheer volume of blow-by-blow description of her movements as she follows Mother's trail lays the emotions in the scene—terror, anxiety, uncertainty, apprehension—bare and pulsing. When she

eventually finds Mother sitting in a rocker in front of the wood stove in her art studio, feeding the raging fire with paper and squirts of charcoal lighter fluid, the narrator compares her to the killer in the movie, *Psycho*:

Mother's back to me in that rocker conjured that old Alfred Hitchcock movie *Psycho* she'd taken us to in 1960. In the end, the crazy killer was got up like his nutty old mother with a gray wig. He rocked in her personal chair. Mother turned around slow to face me like old Tony Perkins. Her face came into my head one sharp frame at a time. I finally saw in these instants that Mother's own face had been all scribbled up with that mud colored lipstick. She was trying to scrub herself out, I thought. (148-49)

The comparison raises the emotion in the scene to fever pitch. The narrator's description of how she sees Mother's slow turning head is classic in its depiction of how traumatic events are not only experienced in real time, but encoded in memory: as single snapshots frozen in a two-dimensional image. The narrator amplifies this classic image, describing these single frames as *sharp* like the edge of the knife blade her mother will later wield or the shards of broken mirrors throughout the house.

These graphic scenes delivered in the past tense lead into the chapter's crescendo, initiated by a change in verb tense from past to present. The narrator sustains her child perspective and uses the present tense to describe the events of the remainder of that horrific day—the destruction of the bedroom the narrator shares with her sister, the bonfire behind the garage, and the bedroom scene later that evening in which Mother appears in the doorway wielding a butcher knife. The syntax in these pages changes, too, as the narrator shifts from more complex, textured sentences, to shorter, more staccato sentences. For example,

She picks up toys one at a time off the closet floor and flings them into the box. We have left our room a mess, she says in a hoarse voice I don't think of as hers. But that's the only voice she has left, her drunk Yankee one. (149)

And a little later,

Once the closet's bare, she yanks off our bed covers and sails them through the room. She drags our mattress on the floor, then lifts our bare box spring over her head. She looks like Sampson in Bible pictures with one of those big stone pillars bench-pressed up when she heaves it. It hits the wall with a deep-throated clang at once primitive and musical. (149)

The syntax change alters the rhythm of the narrative to that of a drum beat.

The immediacy of the present tense combined with continued sensory detail captures the rising and falling tide of emotion as the narrator describes the final stages of Mother's breakdown. Emotion shifts from terror, shock, and agency to grief, sadness, and defeat, and finally to aching calm, isolation, and abandonment. And, yet, the narrator retains agency enough to stay with Mother, watch over her even from a distance. As the fire behind the garage smolders, they all move indoors. The narrator and her sister sequester themselves in their shambles of a bedroom, Mother in hers. The emotion within the scene leading up to and including the bonfire still remains hot, but more like large glowing embers than raging flames as the narrator describes setting up a pallet on which to lie with her sister. This changes again as the narrator describes Mother's silhouetted figure appearing in the doorway wielding a butcher knife.

Then a dark shape comes to occupy that light, a figure in the shape of my mom with a wild corona of hair and no face but a shadow. She has lifted her arms and broadened the stance of her feet, so her shadow turns from a long thin line into a giant X. And swooping down from one hand is the twelve-inch shine of a butcher knife, not unlike the knife that crazy guy had in psycho for the shower scene, a stretched-out triangle of knife that daddy sharpens by hand on his whetstone before he dismantles a squirrel or a chicken, though it is also big enough to have hacked through the hip joint of a buck. It holds a glint of light on its point like a star so that old rhyme pops into my head: *Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.* Then I don't know what to wish for. Lecia's finger stays pressed to her lips. Her eyes are big but

steady on that figure in the doorway and on the knife. I wish not to scream. Screaming would piss Lecia off. I can tell. A scream is definitely not what I want to happen to me right now. It's part wish and part prayer that zips through my head and keeps me from howling.

No sooner do I choke down that scream than a miracle happens. A very large pool of quiet in my head starts to spread. Lecia's face shrinks back like somebody in the wrong end of a telescope. Then even Mother's figure starts to alter and fade. (155–56)

Keen visuals of the life threat Mother poses give way to descriptions of her thoughts and growing dissociation.

The narrator then recalls the Mother's Day card she made for Mother the week before, decorated with a stick figure to represent Mother. As she relays this memory, the adult perspective replaces the child perspective, and the verb tense changes back to past, further blunting the emotion previously unleashed. It changes again back to the child perspective and present tense as the narrator further dissociates:

Now in my mind, that stick figure is what Mother becomes.... My stick-figure sister is breathing deep in the chest of her white PJs, and I match my breath to hers. We lie there in the cartoon of a room for what seems like forever and then out of nowhere Mother roars No!" (156)

The scene and chapter end with the narrator in a state of dissociation; "I lock all my scaredness down in my stomach until the fear hardens into something I hardly notice. I myself harden into a person that I hardly notice" (156–57). Emotion becomes distant, cut-off and experienced as two-dimensional. The narrator depicts this with respect to herself: "I can feel Lecia cock her head at me, like she wants to know what the hell I have to grin about" (157). She also depicts it with respect to Mother: "She's crying, the stick mommy, with sucking sobs. A whole fountain of blue tears pours from both pin-dot eyes" (157).

Crazy Brave by Joy Harjo

In *Crazy Brave*, Joy Harjo offers the story of her fraught journey to becoming a poet as a bildungsroman. Her Native American ancestry bestowed on her a heavy legacy marked by centuries of betrayal, brutality, colonization, dehumanization, theft, and displacement at the hands of white Europeans. The adverse effects of intergenerational trauma are the waters she enters at birth and swims in both within her family of origin and in the various indigenous communities where she lives and learns, formally and informally. These waters include alcoholism and other addictions, domestic violence, child abuse, sexual abuse, and divorce.

From a young age, Harjo knows herself to be an artist. She sees herself within her family's lineage of painters, musicians, singers, and storytellers. As a small child, she gravitates easily toward music and drawing. And while she loves language and poetry, she disavows writing as an adolescent after her stepfather violates her privacy by breaking into her locked diary and reading from it in front of the whole family. In *Crazy Brave*, she sets out to explore the question: How did I become a poet?

With the clarity and lyricism of a mystical storyteller, Harjo's narrator tells the story of her journey to embracing her life path as a poet. That artistic path could just as easily be characterized as a spiritual one. The narrator seamlessly weaves her personal narrative in with the story of her indigenous ancestors, affirming with tremendous humility how she

was entrusted with carrying voices, songs, and stories to grow and release into the world, to be of assistance and inspiration. These were my responsibility. I am not special. It is this way for everyone. We enter a family story, and then other stories based on tribal clans, on tribal towns and nations, lands, countries, planetary systems, and universes. Yet we each have our own individual soul story to tell. (20)

Her quietly fierce tone is resonant with wisdom, compassion, deep love, and respect for what she, her family, and larger indigenous community have suffered and the importance of remembering not only what

has passed but what needs to come forth into being. This tone supports the narrative's overall message, delivered in two separate yet closely related passages:

I believe that if you do not answer the noise and urgency of your gifts, they will turn on you. Or drag you down with their immense sadness of being abandoned. (135)

It was the spirit of poetry who reached out and found me as I stood there at the doorway between panic and love.

There are many such doorways in our lives. Some are small and hidden in the ordinary. Others are gaping and obvious, like the car wreck we walk away from, meeting someone and falling in love, or an earthquake followed by a tsunami. When we walk through them to the other side everything changes. (163)

Similar to Angelou's and Karr's message, Harjo's is hard earned through living the events she describes along with depicting them in her compressed, lyrical writing and genre-fluid composition. Her gifts as a poet and storyteller reflect her literary heritage and show her to be a cultural warrior for indigenous people.

Harjo uses the indigenous symbol of the medicine wheel to organize her narrative into four parts: East for beginnings, North for difficult teachers, West for endings, and South for release and transformation. Unlike Angelou's and Karr's narrator, Harjo's narrator emotionally paces her story, in part, by moving her adult perspective on her childhood to early adult years through a skillful blend of genres. The narrator moves effortlessly from mystical, mythic storyteller, to poet, to more traditional memoirist. As she does, she creates a text as multidimensional as any human and as multifaceted as any history, whether of a single person, family, community, tribe, or nation. In the process, she manages to hold and tell her personal story within the larger story of her ancestral history, linking both to the universal experience of being human.

With respect to handling the emotion within the events and relationships she describes, the narrator's poet-self leads, adeptly restraining its presentation as she glides among genres. One of the ways the narrator achieves this is by crafting simple sentences that give direct, plainspoken descriptions of people, places, and events. Some read as understatements delivered without irony. In many of these sentences, whether understatements or not, the narrator brings in uncomplicated images and metaphors that function like the sound of crystal being rung. They carry straightforward, unadorned truths that ring with emotion and truth. For example, in the following paragraph she layers sentences like these, one upon the other like a painter layers oil paint to achieve texture, hue, and tone for the purpose of conveying emotion and meaning:

Tulsa was a Creek Indian town established on the Arkansas River, after my father's people were forcibly removed from their homes in the south in the mid-1800s. When they arrived in these new lands, they brought sacred fire. They brought what they could carry. Some African people came with them as family members, others as slaves. Other African people arrived independently, established their own towns. European and American settlers soon took over the lands that were established for settlement of eastern tribes in what became known as Indian Territory. The Christian God gave them authority. Yet everyone wanted the same thing: land, peace, a place to make a home, cook, fall in love, make children and music. (18-19)

In this one paragraph she provides a sweeping, concise description of the traumatic history of Native American's colonization, displacement, and dehumanization that affected her family specifically by way of the tribal group to which they belonged. She thus unites the heartbreaking universal and particular experience of her indigenous ancestry in a textured, emotionally multivalent way. Her description of place history also includes people of African descent, their forcible removal from their homelands coupled with enslavement. The juxtaposition of indigenous and African experience at the hands of white Europeans intensifies the overlap of complex emotions related to each group's experience. The narrator amplifies the

emotion of these events further with this simple, truth-telling sentence: “The Christian God gave them authority” (19). This short, simple sentence ramifies with meaning and resounds with emotion related to the alien-ness of Christianity, the atrocities carried out in its name, and the hypocrisies engaged in by its white European practitioners and standard-bearers, who stole indigenous lands and abused and murdered indigenous people.

The narrator could have ended the paragraph with that sentence. Instead, she chooses to acknowledge the common humanity of all parties involved, moving from the heated emotions held within colonization, displacement, dehumanization, and enslavement to shared emotions related to human wants and needs. The move is subtle and signaled by a single word: *Yet*. And not to be overlooked is how, within the emotions that are a part of what white Europeans perpetrated upon her ancestors, the narrator also intertwines yet another emotion-bearing truth by acknowledging the resilience and will to survive and thrive that they retained. She accomplishes this with a brief clause and short sentence: “[T]hey brought sacred fire. They brought what they could carry” (19). They carried their faith with them along with what was most necessary, most important to survival on their journey to and on the new lands where they would make their lives.

In acknowledging the complex of truths involved in her personal and ancestral history, the narrator conveys wisdom and demonstrates that, despite all the formidable challenges she’s been through, she retains her humanity and compassion for all without letting off the hook those responsible for doing her and her ancestors grave injury and harm.

Harjo’s narrator uses this method consistently through the nonfiction portions of the narrative. She draws on and folds in mythic and mystical dimensions of storytelling from her Native American heritage, blending them with more traditional approaches to nonfiction narrative. The narrator layers and juxtaposes sentences as she would paint with an artist’s brush. Sentences become like strokes of a brush, their length, syntax, diction, and the word placement within them crafted as a painter has learned to apply

brush strokes, controlling length of stroke, amount of paint, depth and feel of color to represent the emotional felt sense of the reality she lived.

The narrator then further blends this text with poetry. And in “North,” the story’s second major section, the narrator also links the nonfiction narrative with renderings of memories that have been partly fictionalized. Within the symbolism of the medicine wheel, North represents the direction of difficult teachers. This period spans her parents’ divorce when she was eight to her mid-teenage years. During these years, her mother marries a controlling, abusive white man who moves the family far from the home they knew in Tulsa, and the narrator leaves home to finish high school at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe. In this section, Harjo’s narrator depicts relationships and encounters with difficult people who call forth and test both who she is born to be and what she is born to do, not least of which is her cruel and domineering stepfather.

“North” begins with an epigraph, Harjo’s poem, “This Morning I Pray for my Enemies”. Narratively, the section picks up where the previous section leaves off: The divorce of the narrator’s parents and the void it’s left for her: “My father disappeared. And so did I in this world without father. Emptiness took the place of everything I had known to be true” (51). The poem’s opening line poses the query that the narrator explores in the section: “And whom do I call my enemy?” (56). The perspective of the poem is the speaker’s wise, adult self, looking from above the action of the story thus far. From this zoomed-out perspective, the poem’s speaker sets the emotional stage for the section’s events and outcome, alluding to the conflicts the narrator will encounter and choices she will make, what she forgets and ultimately remembers: her own inner knowing. The narrator identifies this as her guiding force that will enable openhearted, nonjudgmental, clear-eyed seeing that leads to discernment, compassion, and wisdom.

The narrator glides from the poem into a more traditional portrait of life with her stepfather. This part of “North” is all emotion-charged summary, starting with how her stepfather manipulated his entry into their lives:

The last man who courted our mother was 17 years older. He charmed her and us. He gave me a pair of skates. He took us for rides that ended in hamburgers and shakes. He sang songs and smiled with his eyes. He'd been watching our mother for some time.

He married our mother in a ceremony without us. (57)

As with each major section of the book, "North" comprises multiple subsections, the majority of which depict the violence of the narrator's oppressive, repressive, and abusive home environment under the iron fist of her stepfather. In each section, the narrator zooms in on a specific dimension of that violence: belt beatings, threats of annihilation, jealousy, belittling and other forms of humiliation, social isolation. She controls the emotional pacing by using the simple-sentence technique described above to create a montage of scenes that move forward in time. Each taut scene vibrates with tension and ends not only without resolution, but with a summary of the threat posed, the injury sustained. The section breaks function like the narrator's sleep at night during these years:

We were in the middle of one of those fairy tales that was rolling toward a nasty end. The pressure kept me up at night. From the time our stepfather married and moved us until the day I left home as a teenager, I kept sentry at night. I would doze lightly or not at all until I heard and saw the sun coming up over the horizon. Then I would sleep. (59)

Sleep comes when the narrator leaves home as a young teenager to attend IAIA, approximately two-thirds of the way into "North."

In the two longest subsections within "North," the narrator interrupts the more traditional nonfiction narrative and braids in another type of story. In the first and shorter of the two, she weaves in a traditional, archetypal Native American story of the girl and the water monster, "a story no one told anymore" (68). This fictional narrative functions as a step-back from the intensity of what has come before it while mirroring the non-fiction narrative that has preceded it and foreshadowing what is to come.

The step-back allows for a pause to breathe, for the narrator to place her personal story within a universal story from her culture, thereby resurrecting the story and signaling that she will find her way out.

The narrator returns to her nonfiction narrative at the point in her story in which she is still in the abyss of her stepfather's home. Now, however, he presents a new threat: sexual abuse. The narrator describes becoming the object of her stepfather's lascivious attention that leaves her feeling like prey (69), while still subject to his beatings and punitive, if capricious, restrictions on her activities. She deepens into the abyss and starts to drink, discovering and welcoming alcohol's medicating effects. At the same time, she also finds her way out to IAIA.

In the second and longest subsection of "North," the narrator interlaces a different type of story into the nonfiction narrative. She refers to it as a "story I found in my memory in a tangle of Indian school stories. It is partially fictionalized" (91). Unlike the story of the girl and the water monster, this partially fictionalized story changes the narrative perspective from the adult looking back to childhood to the adult as her child self as she offers the story of her time at IAIA and how she and other indigenous students "continued to battle with troubled families and the history we could never leave behind. These tensions often erupted in violence provoked by alcohol, drugs, and the ordinary frustrations of being human" (89). As the fictionalized memory shows, this history encompasses the effect of colonization, displacement, and dehumanization of their Native Americans ancestors and the legacy of personal dysfunction, various forms of abuse, and abandonment (self and other) those experiences engendered.

The movement into the story of a single memory among many other IAIA stories marks a distinctive shift in the telling. It shortens the narrative distance between the narrator and the events narrated, creating greater intimacy with them and presenting them as if they are being relived in the moment of telling rather than recounted from a distance. The emotion within the events is more palpable, less restrained in its presentation. By interlacing this story within a story, it's as if the narrator has stepped closer to her younger self to more fully feel the effects of her shared experience with her peers. It also

allows her to use the partially fictionalized memory emblematically to illustrate what she has just described about her school experience while continuing to advance her personal story. This lends texture and depth to the emotion within the portrait she creates of this period in her personal and artistic development. At the same time, this story and the manner in which the narrator tells it offer some reprieve from the concentrated intensity of the events she relays of her home life with her stepfather even as it depicts heartbreaking experiences she and her peers shared.

Finding Traction within a Slippery Concept

I have felt so daunted by the amount of material I have to work with in my experience of childhood familial trauma that diving deep into this type of memoir written by women became imperative. I needed to see how others navigated a tsunami of dark and injurious experiences that began pre-birth and continued throughout their formative years into adolescence and young adulthood. I needed to see how they worked with the reality that they had little, if any, adult support to help them understand and put into perspective the chaos of the family environment, especially when accompanied by routine experiences of physical, emotional, and psychological abuse and violence, and too often the very real, ever-present threat of annihilation. I needed to see how they cut through the confusion and doubt about their familial experiences, how they came to understand what they learned from their experience, what their story actually was, beyond mere survival, what value it might have to others, and how they could best convey it without getting tangled and lost in its darkness.

A few last notes in closing. First, in grappling with how to describe what I saw as I read each memoir closely, I had to reach to other arts, particularly painting, to express what I observed and experienced. I found the reach toward painting especially striking, and believe the analogy holds. Second, I regard this study as a preliminary or pilot effort. It offers what I consider to be, in the words of TS Eliot, “hints and guesses.” For as much as I strove to elicit concrete examples of what I experienced as I read

and what I saw as I took long, penetrating looks at each of these texts, this concept wants more attention with an even steadier gaze and ever more specific and explicit articulation. And finally, if this concept holds true, its applicability may very well extend to narratives of all kinds, inviting further inquiry and study.

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