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“Which sounds bad and maybe was”:
A Study of Narrative in
Beth Nguyen’s “Apparent”

In “Apparent,” which was reprinted in *Best American Essays 2021*, Beth Nguyen tells a specific story of a woman’s experience as a daughter with a distanced relationship with her mother, and her own experience as a mother herself. But Nguyen uses this personal story as a basis for telling a larger story about what it means to be a mother, which she concludes is about “help[ing] them leave” (162). What is most striking and exemplary about this particular essay is how Nguyen’s narrative structure and conversational voice works so well to tell this messy and complicated story—one that she admits she once avoided telling because of its messiness.

Nguyen begins with a story about her mother not showing up to meet her first child and instead going to a casino:

When my first child was a year old, I took him to Boston to meet my mother. She didn’t show up. It turned out that she had gone to Foxwoods Casino instead, which sounds bad and maybe was, but it had been three years since I’d seen her or even spoken to her; we wouldn’t see each other for seven more. I couldn’t blame her for trying her luck elsewhere.

(150)

This anecdote immediately characterizes her mother in a particularly negative light, but Nguyen quickly shifts to explaining the complexity of this relationship. Nguyen writes, “This is a story I keep having to tell because I’m trying to understand it. Because there is no getting away from our origin

stories” (150). Rather than just telling the story as it happened, Nguyen explains how she tends to tell the story to others, even herself, which shifts the work of the narrative entirely. She starts sentences with things like “What I tell people is...”, “What I don’t always say is...” and “What I don’t usually say...” (150-51). Nguyen uses these conversational, metanarrative hedges like “which sounds bad and maybe was” to show readers that she is aware of how this story sounds to others, an expansion of understanding that takes into account the communal nature of storytelling and the role of the listener in the tale.

This is an essay that is very much interested in storytelling, in narratives. Nguyen explains how she grew up knowing little about her mother overseas: “My sister and I knew the vague story about our mother in Viet Nam, but ours was a family that preferred silence over questions, especially when there were no simple answers” (151). Even her Boston mother often resists telling stories or giving detailed answers to any of Nguyen’s questions, which complicates not just the story itself but the refusal to create narrative. Nguyen writes of her: “I ask her questions she won’t really answer” (153). She even directly states, “She is not one to tell stories. She will resist the very idea of a narrative. Maybe because this is a story no one would want. But I suppose we just don’t get to choose” (160).

But Nguyen writes that her parenting style to her own children is the opposite; it “is all about questions” (160). She creates story in a very matter of fact and honest way, unlike her mother’s reluctance to give any sort of specific details or remarks to any of her questions. Nguyen writes things like “Here’s what happened” and even remarks on her distaste for “narrative mess[es]”: “Perhaps it’s true that I am bothered by the narrative mess and messiness of my family’s story, which, like all family stories, can never have a resolution” (161-62). Not only is she literally trying to solve this messiness through creating a clear narrative in this essay, but she also says she tries to create a solid narrative in the way she mothers, through doing things like chaperoning and being a

constant in her children's lives (162). In this way, Nguyen creates a complex narrative as both a daughter and mother. Nguyen makes it clear to readers that stories are worth attempting to tell regardless of their messiness, and perhaps warrant attempts at telling even more so because of their complicated nature.

Nguyen includes narrative turns that emphasize the complicated nature of her background and her relationship with her mother. She writes: "My sister says that our relationship with our Boston mother only goes one way. We're the ones who have to visit, who have to call, who have to do everything, she says. If we don't, then we'll never hear from her. This is true. And yet. We are the ones who left her. Even if it wasn't our choice. We left; we are the leavers" (157). She then goes on to explain how she sometimes tells her sister that they are the ones who should be making amends, yet she counters this with "In truth, I'm not even sure what I mean by this." Nguyen remains committed to the truth, both on the page and in her own life, even while stating "It was easier when we didn't know the truth. It was easier when we didn't ask questions" (157). Yet Nguyen's narrative honesty tells us that easy is not always better.

Growing up, and even in her adult life, much of Nguyen's knowledge of and communication with her mother was moderated by her father, stories told second-hand almost like a game of telephone:

My father had told us that she had written him a letter to say that she had come to America with her two older children [...] my sister and I saw the envelope—I remember the neat, script-like handwriting of the return address, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania—but we never saw the letter, which must have been in Vietnamese, a language neither of us could read. I feel like I should know the exact moment that my father told us this news, bringing to light a subject that was supposed to be in permanent shadow, but I don't. It just happened that one

day my mother was no longer a distant someone in a country I didn't know much about, but a real person in this country that we now shared. (151)

Their father receives written correspondence from their mother in a language they do not know, and they don't even see the letter itself, just the envelope with an imprint of their mother—her handwriting—on it. The language barrier further puts a stress on their relationship and makes it difficult for their stories to come together or be told firsthand accurately. But Nguyen shows that we must still aim for truth, we must try to explain no matter how hard. Stories need not be perfect, only be told. When Nguyen finally meets up with her Boston mother, she writes: “The first thing she said to me was You are so late” (152). She chooses to disclose this detail because for so long she has avoided telling stories that are too difficult to tell—stories with missing details, with confusing anecdotes and messy backgrounds. Like her mother here, Nguyen is blunt in ameliorating this lateness: she expresses her insecurities about how she has thought she should feel or what she thinks she should know, and how she thinks her story should be told. Nguyen tells readers: “I don't know the truth, or if there is such a thing” (151). She informs readers plainly of these insecurities and doubts about her ability to tell her own story.

For much of their childhood, Nguyen and her sister tried to fit in with their suburban, white peers; knowing the full details of their mother would mean being aware of one more thing that made them different from the people around them. She writes, “My father and stepmother thought it best that my sister and I wait until we were older to meet our mother, because it was all just too complicated and confusing” (152). And for a while, Nguyen was content with this unknowing. It is when she finds herself walking around a market with her mother that she thinks to herself: “Anyone who saw us might have assumed we were mother and daughter. We were the same size, same height. I realized I'd never thought about that possibility, that I could see something in her that was something of me, and that she could do the same. I found myself looking anywhere else” (153). In

the moment, Nguyen explains that she wanted to run from this feeling. She writes, “I couldn’t wait to get back to the hotel, to go to a wedding filled with people I didn’t know” (153). Like her father, it seems Nguyen first inherited this desire to not attempt explaining the confusing or difficult, to not look too deeply into things that might create a rift in one’s identity, but has since changed her mind, this essay the proof.

And thinking about proof, throughout “Apparent,” Nguyen demonstrates a fascination with physical objects as representations of people. Thinking back to the letter her father received from her mother—the one that she never read—Nguyen writes: “I had taken note of her handwriting, the blue ink. But not of the letter itself. That was gone, and who can say when or how such artifacts slip away and disappear, lost in the shuffle of our lives” (153). Though her mother is gone—and the letter too—Nguyen cannot fully shake the memory of it. Nguyen finally writes down her mother’s phone number—not relying on her father’s moderation—and she keeps the piece of paper with the number on it in her desk. Toward the end of the essay, Nguyen meditates on her own permanence in her children’s lives. She says it’s “Unbearable to think of my children having no memory, no imprint of me” (160). Nguyen demonstrates a meta quality here, as she is essentially rewriting a story that she evaded for so long, creating something permanent, and rewriting her childhood through how she mothers her own children.

Nguyen’s narrative becomes cyclical in this way; as readers move toward the end, Nguyen reflects on how the way she mothers has been influenced by how she was mothered. She writes of memories from when her children were just infants and she’d wake early to feed them:

I would wake up just enough to be aware, enough to stay afloat in a near dream state. Often, I didn’t even open my eyes. I knew my children by heart. The normal measures of time—traffic, sunrise—seemed an affront, a demand to return to the outside world where who you are might be someone else entirely. And sometimes in that half-awake state I would try to

imagine the weeks after the fall of Saigon, my mother traveling across the city, from her own mother's house, to see us—my sister and me, her two youngest children [...] Maybe she knew before she got there that the house would be empty. A neighbor told her that my father had left word: we were going to try for America. For a long time, that's all she knew. (154)

Likewise, for much of her childhood, Nguyen knew little about her mother. Now, in this dream-like state as she mothers her own children, she imagines her mother's own unknowing. When Nguyen finally decides to introduce her own children to her mother, she decides to tell them about her existence on the ride to her house to meet her. She states plainly: "I guess I thought it was too traumatic for them to handle; in hindsight, I wonder if I was just replicating the silence I'd been taught" (157). When they arrive to meet their grandmother, she seems to evade all questions asked of her. Nguyen's oldest son asks what all the grandmother's stuff is for: "For this and for that, she said. This is how she always answered questions, and I remembered how when I first met her I asked her to tell me the story of how she met my father and she said, Oh, who can remember" (158). Nguyen sees her mother doing the same thing she herself had tried to do for much of her life: keep all messy things contained, hidden.

Throughout "Apparent," Nguyen showcases a strong attention to narrative complexity, to not simply telling a story, but even illustrating how she has told the story to others, herself, and how she is trying to continue telling this story through her words on the page and actions off the page. In this way, Nguyen's attention to narrative structure and her narrative voice work to effectively mirror the actual content of this essay in an impressive and beautiful way. Though narrating a complicated story, or parenting children, with honesty in mind is a difficult endeavor, Nguyen refuses to leave: "I never wanted to leave. I will stay as long as they let me" (163). Nguyen shows and tells readers that

origin stories, no matter how messy or confusing, must eventually be told because in the end, there is no getting away from them.