

A Flash in the Pan: Getting Started on Short-Short Nonfiction

The flash nonfiction, the micro-memoir, the mini-essay: whatever you call them, it is in these tightly compressed forms that the techniques of creative nonfiction and poetry meet and merge to create exciting new modes of expression. Through brief (under 1,000 words, and in many cases under 500) in-class readings, students will see how such tiny stories can pack a huge punch. After discussing how these narratives-in-miniature are structured, as well as what they can teach us about longer forms, students will have the chance to do in-class exercises, and will walk out with rough drafts of a couple very short essays that they can continue to hone, as well as with a new sense of how to bring economy to their sentences in writing of all lengths and genres. **Who Should Attend:** Prose writers of both fiction and nonfiction seeking to jump-start their imaginations and experiment with shorter forms, as well as busy writers who don't have the time right now to spend on an entire autobiography, but who want to keep their writing chops fresh.

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A Brief Introduction To / Some Definitions of Flash Nonfiction

“Essaykin” a term created by **William Makepeace Thackeray**, as in: “In these humble essaykins, I have taken leave to egotize.”

“Though trying to pin down any art form too strictly is ultimately a fruitless exercise, I’ve come up with what I think is an apt metaphor: Imagine there is a fire burning deep in the forest. In an essay of conventional length, the reader begins at the forest’s edge, and is taken on a hike, perhaps a meandering stroll, into those woods, in search of that fire. The further in the reader goes, with each page that turns, the more the reader begins to sense smoke in the air, or maybe heat, or just an awareness that something ahead is smoldering.

In a very brief essay, however, the reader is not a hiker but a smoke jumper, one of those brave firefighters who jump out of planes and land thirty yards from where the forest fire is burning. The writer starts the reader right at that spot, at the edge of the fire, or as close as one can get without touching the actual flame. There is no time to walk in.

The brief essay, in other words, needs to be hot from the first sentence, and the heat must remain the entire time. My fire metaphor, it is important to note, does not refer to incendiary subject matter. The heat might come from language, from image, from voice or point-of-view, from revelation or suspense, but there must always be a burning urgency of some sort, translated through each sentence, starting with the first.”

~**Dinty W. Moore**, “Of Fire and Ice: The Pleasing Sting of Flash Nonfiction,” *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*

“I often use a snowball metaphor. You’ve got all this stuff out there called snow but when you gather it all up and really pack it together, you know, and you throw it off, there’s a sting. I think with these short pieces—even when they’re quiet and meditative—the effect is a little sting.”

~**Judith Kitchen**, editor of *In Short*

For more, see the magazine *Brevity: A Journal of Concise Literary Nonfiction* edited by Dinty W. Moore, featuring all online content in pieces of 750 words or less: <http://brevitymag.com/>

And also the book of his that we just published last Fall, *The Best of Brevity: Twenty Groundbreaking Years of Flash Nonfiction*, co-edited with Zoe Bossiere

Writing through Innocence and Experience: Voices in Flash Nonfiction by Sue William Silverman

The “I” in creative nonfiction is a literary device used to enhance and explore complicated truths. Just as we are complex people in life, we must be equally complex personas on the page. One way to accomplish this exploration of self is through the use of voice—but not one’s everyday voice. In real life, for example, I don’t speak or write e-mails using carefully crafted language. When talking to friends, I’m not particularly mindful about word choice. I don’t use sensory imagery or think metaphorically. My speech meanders, full of half-developed ideas. In other words, a spoken, informal voice, though it can be breathless or intimate, is rarely as artistically structured as one that’s literary.

Using my flash nonfiction piece “Archipelago” as an example, let’s say that, at the time of the actual event (years before I wrote the essay), I confided in my sister as to why I didn’t want to leave the West Indies. I would probably have said something like: “I hate leaving. I don’t want to live where it’s cold.” This brief explanation, while sincere, provides little insight or depth.

Likewise, a diary “voice” can be intimate, but it doesn’t shape life into art, either. Here is a diary entry I could have written the night before leaving the island: “I’m going to miss everything about St. Thomas. I hate even the thought of returning to the States, where it’s so gray and cold.” These sentences are heartfelt, but abstract, lacking sensory imagery. They don’t bring the reader inside the experience.

Neither of these voices, though they are authentically me, would work when writing flash nonfiction.

So who, then, narrates an essay? It’s both me and not me. It’s an artistically created “me” comprised of two different voices that work in conjunction with each other: **the Voice of Innocence** and **the Voice of Experience**, labels loosely borrowed from the poet William Blake. **Briefly, the Voice of Innocence describes the event. The Voice of Experience interprets and reflects upon it.** Through the use of these voices, a writer maintains a cohesive narrative, while also journeying into the core of self-discovery. In other words, the voices used in creative nonfiction artistically craft what you’ve lived, in all its dimensions.

Here is a fuller description of these two aspects of the narrator’s voice:

The Voice of Innocence relates the facts of the story, the surface subject or action. It’s the voice that tells us, “first this happened, then this next thing happened.” Additionally, the Voice of Innocence reveals the raw, not-yet-understood emotions associated with the story’s action by portraying the person you were (and what you felt) when the sequence of events actually took place.

The Voice of Experience adds a more mature voice or persona that, in effect, explains and deepens the Voice of Innocence with metaphor, irony, and reflection. This voice offers the progression of thought in creative nonfiction by examining what the Voice of Innocence (facts and raw emotions) means. This more complex viewpoint interprets and reflects upon the surface subject. Say, for example, the Voice of Innocence describes feeling lonely; then, the Voice of Experience seeks to understand why you’re lonely, what it means. What are the ramifications of past occurrences and behaviors? What are the metaphors that deepen the events? With this voice you transform the lived moment, rather than merely recollect it.

Generally speaking, these two voices are flexible and can be introduced at any time during your essay, as needed. Now let’s see how they actually work within a piece of flash nonfiction.

In “Archipelago,” I begin with the Voice of Innocence in the first paragraph, where I state in a straightforward manner that I’m boarding a plane to leave the West Indies. In the second paragraph, I use the Voice of Experience when I reflect upon how, living in the States, I anticipate feeling “static,” as if “suspended in ice,” waiting to “melt into spring.” Because this voice allows me, the author, to go beyond mere facts, I’m able to construct the idea of cold and ice into a metaphor, thus enabling the reader to understand that, when living in a cold climate, I fear feeling trapped.

After the opening of “Archipelago,” I contrast St. Thomas with New York City, the Voice of Innocence once again conveying factual images, what I—that young girl—observed at the actual time of the event. Next, through the Voice of Experience, the author “me” re-casts these images metaphorically to show how I try to “carry” my island warmth and colors with me to the States.

In other words, the Voice of Innocence states what I see before me (the Marlboro Man, lights on a bridge, Horn & Hardart, chicken, apples, etc.); the Voice of Experience, meanwhile, conjures these items into the magic I actually felt at the time, but was too inchoate to express. The final paragraph of “Archipelago” is fully written in the Voice of Experience as I deepen the entirety of the experience by reflecting, finally understanding how, metaphorically, I’ve always carried the island with me, wherever I’ve traveled or lived.

This exploration is more interesting than the facts by themselves. We write creative nonfiction to discover the story behind the story—what we didn’t understand or know at the time of the event.

As you write, pretend to toss a stone into a lake or river. Through the Voice of Innocence, write the compelling ripples of life you see on the skin of water. Then allow your gaze to follow the stone as it slowly sinks. Through the Voice of Experience, you’ll discover what ebbs and flows below the surface as you peer into the metaphorical depth of you.

A Flash Nonfiction Exercise

Step 1: Using the Voice of Innocence, describe one specific image of your childhood hometown. For example, you could begin by writing: *Walking to school during an ice storm, I slide from one sidewalk to the next.* This sentence conveys a straightforward rendition of what happened, typical of the Voice of Innocence.

Step 2: Next, using the Voice of Experience, continue to describe this wintry day in such a way that it metaphorically conveys how you feel about it, reflecting back, incorporating knowledge and language you lacked in the past. *Icicles spike down from rooftops and cover window panes like jail bars. When I walk to school during the storm, the air smells blank, scentless, as if the whole town is encased in ice. How will I be able to chip through winter and breathe, as I wait for spring?*

By using words such as “jail bars,” “blank,” “encased in ice,” I show the reader what this town, and winter, felt like, what it meant to me. I am able, in short, through the Voice of Experience, to bring the reader inside my cold, icy world.

A Flash Nonfiction Essay

Archipelago 613 words

When I’m thirteen, my family and I leave our home in the West Indies. On the day of our departure I pluck a red hibiscus, putting it in the pocket of my madras skirt. Now that I’ve finally absorbed the wealth of island colors, I don’t want to leave. I lag behind my family as we walk from the tin-hangar airport, cross the tarmac, and climb into the sweltering cabin of the Caribair plane.

Even though I was young, in second grade, when we originally moved here from the States, my skin still remembers the chill of asphalt-gray mornings, frigid hands and feet. All winter, bleak trees longed for green. / longed. Static, as if suspended in ice, I waited to melt into spring.

Only here, on my island of mimosa charms and sunny amulets, I feel transfigured into endless days of warmth.

But the move is decided. My sister, now in high school, is too old to attend the Antilles School. She has to continue her education in the States. My father, a banker, secured a new position outside New York City.

After liftoff, I press my forehead against the window. I seem to see all my Caribbean life far below, in one glance, as we arc toward the horizon. For years, I walked up/down volcanic mountains, sandals slapping and scuffing Calypso rhythms. Our cook, Sylvanita, twisted chicken necks, voodooing them into dinner. I slept frothed in a mosquito net, stars and moon bluing the reflected viridian sea. I waded into dolphined waves, seaweed haloing my hair.

Now, the airplane itself seems gusted by trade winds, propellers spinning like silver doubloons through an operatic sunset—a chorus of ibis, bananaquits, blue-crowned euphonias. The sky is a blizzard of bougainvillea, poinsettias, flamboyants, before birthing an emerald-drop dusk, staining fields of sugarcane. Wanting to carry all of my green memories with me, I take a deep breath and strap my seat belt tighter across my stomach. I want to contain each ginger flower, each blade of fever grass. If only my suntanned skin would last all year long. Enough color, enough warmth...enough to last.

We land a few hours later, like magic, at Idlewild airport. On the way to the hotel, speeding across the city in a sun-yellow taxi cab, I press my face to the window. Times Square marquees blaze red and white, like neon frangipani petals, fluttering. Skyscrapers soar high as volcanic mountains. The Marlboro man, tanned golden as a pirate, puffs halos of smoke—almost like my breath fogging the window. Rising above Riverside Drive, Yale Truck tires spin billboard lights, around and around, as our taxi crosses diamond-studded suspension, bridging water frozen by alchemy. Snowy clouds mystically cape stars and planets.

Later, when we leave the hotel, my new penny loafers strike steel-drum percussion on city streets. At Horn & Hardart, dinner is conjured behind little glass windows—an apparition right here at 182 Broadway. Roast chicken, seaweedy spinach, banana cream pie. Rich island-bean coffee pours from dolphin-head spouts. Here, a fistful of silver coins buys paradise, warm and perfect. Green and crimson apples glow as delicious as sunsets.

That first winter I barely feel the cold. Nor do I sense the waiting, month after month, for summer. Rather, I see warm tropical afterimages as if I only, just then, turned my head from the window of that airplane. For years, whenever I'm about to touch down in another port—no matter how far inland—I feel as if trade winds reverse, tugging me back. Always, at this moment, I see that long chain of islands I live in still ... its outline, its history, its secrets of flaming abundance.

—Sue William Silverman, from *Brevity*

672 words

“An Indian in Yoga Class: Finding Imbalance” by Rajpreet Heir (Issue 60 of *Brevity*)

Sukhasana

My intent for the day’s practice: become more Indian. As an Indian from Indiana who has never been to India, I want to get in touch with my roots and doing yoga seems like a fun way to do that.

Ommmmmm

As we flutter our eyelids open, Brittany, the instructor, says, “Today we’re going to focus on our third chakra, where Ganesh lives and Buddha sometimes visits. Unleash your Kali!” I’m Sikh and don’t know my Hindu gods that well, except for a couple lessons from history classes, but I’m not sure Buddha is supposed to be included with them. But what do I know? Brittany is the authority on this stuff. Also, she has Sanskrit tattoos and I don’t.

Vinyasa

As everyone raises prayer hands to the ceiling for a sun salutation in time to Major Lazer, Kyle from the front desk sneaks in to photograph the class for the studio’s Instagram page, just like the Indians did thousands of years ago. #YouAreEnough #BeHereNow #StrengthGoals #yogaeverygoddamnday #Namastay #MadRelax #GoodVibes #NamasteAF

Tadasana

“Pick a *dristi*—I know, such an exotic word,” says Brittany. Would the name Kristy be exotic in India? Or Misty? Rice Krispie? We only have distant relatives left in Indian, but I suppose I could ask my British relatives who go to India more frequently than my American side.

Bakasana

“I’m so happy I got a spot in this class,” the woman next to me says as we wait for Brittany to get us blocks. “Brittany discovered yoga in 2009 and brought it to America. She knows everyone in India by name and the color of their aura. *And* she was asked to star in *Slumdog Millionaire* but turned it down because the title made it seem like a movie on consumerism.” I think about the \$300 I paid for a ten-class card. Maybe the classes are expensive because the studio has exceptional instructors?

Ardha Matsyendrasana

As I twist toward the wall, I see a poster for a sari draping class taking place in the studio later that week. I could ask my mom to teach me the next time I’m home, but Brittany probably knows more. Brittany has henna on her hands and a nose piercing, neither of which my mom has.

Virabhadrasana

“Stand strong in this pose, one hand reaching into the future toward Juice Generation, and another reaching back toward the past, Starbucks. Stay in the present and think about how good you look in your Lululemons,” Brittany instructs. “Concentration is key here...or karma will *not* lead us to nirvana.”

An interruption

Kyle opens the door and walks down the center of the room. He announces, “Yoga—it’s a way of life” then throws clouds of turmeric into the air. People around me others raise their hands to it in devotion, swaying side to side on their sits bones, while other yogis start snorting it off the hardwood floor. #bliss

Setu Bandha Sarvangasana

“Rameshwaria, move your hands closer to the backs of your heels.” “My name is actually Rajpreet,” I reply. “It’s Rameshwaria since I knew a Rameshwaria once.” “But my name is Rajpreet.” “No.”

Shavasana

Brittany explains this is the hardest pose and it really does feel like it. I don’t feel relaxed, in fact, I feel more stressed than when I arrived. A white woman is teaching me about yoga, an ancient Indian practice, and she thinks she’s an expert on Indian culture too, but I don’t know exactly which ways I can be mad because I don’t know enough about India or yoga myself, partly because I feel a pressure to assimilate. But darn it if Brittany’s playlist isn’t fun.

Namaste

(The cultural appropriation in me bows to the Indian in you.)

Putting away mats

“What other instructors would you recommend?” I ask Brittany. “Katie, Jenny, Julie, Courtney, Zoey, Christy, Mary, Lucy, Hayley Ashley, Natalie, Lindsey, Kaylee, Lizzy, and Audrey are amaze.”

Exit

I follow the trail of organic quinoa down the hall to the door and leave feeling very Indian American.