

NOW WRITE! NONFICTION SAMPLE EXERCISE

On Propriety, Or The Fear Of Looking Foolish

by Paul Lisicky

The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the “Oh, how banal.” To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness.”

--David Foster Wallace

Students of memoir are often instructed to write out of their deepest fears. They're told that any worthwhile personal narrative is born out of some kind of confrontation with shame, a head-to-head battle with a fact that one would rather not admit to. I'm sure that doesn't come as news to you. The very form of memoir—the sense of inquiry and meaning-making at the core of it--hastens the kind of disclosure that often leads to uncomfortable, sometimes devastating questions about self, the people we've held dear, and the values we might have built our lives upon. Not to mention the people who might have hurt us along the way.

But I'm proposing a new way to think about this matter. I think we tend to understand this instruction in conventional ways. We might think it asks for a confession. Or writing about an incident that might make us potentially unlikable, even morally unattractive. I'd be the last one to tell you *not* to write the scene of your most embarrassing choice because it's not as bad as you think it is, or that it's already been written by someone else. (Those of you who have submitted your work to editors, literary agents, and the like have probably heard that one.) At the same time, however, I'd like to encourage you to consider what you might elide from your work out of propriety, or the fear of looking foolish.

I'm reminded of a panel I attended at the Dodge Poetry Festival last year. The subject of the discussion was shame; four prominent poets talked about how they dealt with—and made use of—shame as part of their craft as poets. Interestingly, no one said the expected. Not one poet talked about the difficulty of writing about an early sexual experience—though at least three of these writers had written openly about such things. They talked about the fear of seeming trivial, of writing about matters that might not be seen as culturally approved.

One panelist, the wonderful Toi Derricotte, talked about writing a series of poems about her late pet goldfish. (I can already see you rolling your eyes, but listen first.) Toi has written a body of remarkable work, in poetry and nonfiction, about her relationship with her difficult mother, about the challenges of living as person of mixed-race heritage, about class and identity, and many of the most imperative social issues of the day. And yet she told us that no subject was nearly as wrenching as writing about her goldfish. The truth was, she missed that goldfish; she couldn't *not* write about that goldfish; she was *impelled*. But wouldn't the reader think she'd lost her mind? And wouldn't some think she was focusing her attention in directions too insignificant to be socially responsible? (I think this condition is something that many—particularly women—labor inside of. It's easy to forget, from our twenty-first century perspective, how subversive it was for Virginia Woolf to write about the domestic life from the perspective of a woman. In other words, to take seriously the drama inherent in Clarissa Dalloway's plan to buy flowers for her party).

But think about the great work such risks have yielded. If Toi had listened to that externally directed voice, she wouldn't have embarked on that series of tonally slippery,

grave poems that think about attachment and wordlessness. Through that vehicle of the fish, she found new ways to think about love, mourning, and growing older, which never would have happened if she'd tried to refract those issues through more acceptable lenses.

But it's not just content that's at issue here, finally. All of us are prone to elision when it comes to matters of style. I'm thinking of the fear of the purpled, the cheesy, the overboard. Of melodrama. Of sentimentality. Those fears should be taken seriously by any writer; I wouldn't begin to minimize those concerns, but they become a problem if they start to enervate our work and shut it down in terms of range. I think about some of my recent students who labor so hard—and with all good intentions—to create the aura of ironic, playful indifference that characterizes some of the indie bands they listen to on their iPods. No warmth of tone, no rise and fall of pitch. That coolness takes part in another kind of conventionalizing, the kind that's often difficult to see, because it's trendy. It's too much in the atmosphere. Control, control, control—how often is that the hidden subject of our writing? How often are we trying to be someone else on the page? How often is the means of our expression away from us, a vague notion we're reaching toward, and not quite inhabiting, because it doesn't embody our speech patterns, or the particularity of our seeing, or the objects and people we authentically cherish? How much ends up in the ether of the hard drive before it ever gets a chance to be work that's definingly ours, not just another competent version of a story that's already been reproduced a hundred times?

EXERCISE

- 1) Think about something that you love and haven't written about before out of the fear of embarrassment. A childhood hobby, an adult hobby: your secret life as an accordion player, or Tole painter, or collector of Matchbox cars—anything. Write a single scene in which you're taking care to enact your participation in your love for this thing. Be faithful to description; make use of all your senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch.
- 2) Think about your writing style, and the patterns of expression you typically take out of your work. Go back to the above scene after a week has passed and allow some of those patterns to emerge on the page. If you're attracted to long, qualified sentences, use a few. Remember that they might very well contribute to a voice that's necessary to the scene.
- 3) Extend the initial scene by writing about an incident in which someone else tries to dissuade you from your interest. How can the speaker talk back to that force, to resist it, through an action?