

Chapter 14. I Am Going to Write About You

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My grandfather told me I should make a habit of thinking about unsolved questions until the answers came of their own accord; in that way I should benefit more. The questions piled up, and the answers were more and more pieces of the mosaic that made up the great picture of the world.

– Thomas Bernhard, *Gathering Evidence*

Dear current and future students, myself included,

Maybe you will look to me for answers, but I am not sure I have them. What I do have are stories. Before I earned an M.F.A. in nonfiction writing, I went to graduate school to study literature. Signed up for an essay writing class because I thought it would be a break from thousands of pages of reading and literary analysis. On the first day, the professor told us each to go home and write an essay. I was ashamed to admit I did not know what an essay was. For hours, I wandered the stacks of the library, flipping through pages by Michel de Montaigne, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Johnson. Johnson calls an essay “a loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines an essay as “an attempt.” The latter helped assuage my perfectionistic tendencies and so I began attempting to write a piece about my Aunt Mimi, an artist who was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in her early thirties, a typically late age for onset. I wrote short sentences, filled with images that were seared into my mind. I attempted to make meaning out of what had happened to my aunt. My attempt asked more questions than it answered and left me with more questions than it asked. Was I invading Mimi’s privacy? Paying tribute to her? Humanizing one of the cruelest illnesses a brain can develop? Who, if anyone, might this essay hurt and who might it help? For days, I walked around campus feeling quiet and blue, my first writing hangover. Not long after, the piece was accepted for publication. By the time it appeared in print, Mimi was living in a facility and did not have access to or interest in literary journals. My mother had died four years before. My aunt, the third sister, told a cousin the piece was accurate, but too upsetting to read.

Dear Dorothy Allison,

You are standing at the podium, bellowing the words of your characters, intoning wildly and convincingly. I have read *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Two or*

Three Things I Know for Sure, the fictional and nonfiction accounts of the abuse you endured as a child. My mother, siblings, and I suffered similarly under the roof of my father. When the reading ends, I, a tongue-tied, 20-something graduate student escort you across campus, past the trees with tight, green buds, to the building where refreshments are being served in your honor. I thank you for writing your books and ask if it is hard to be so brave. You stare ahead through wire-rimmed glasses and tell me you do not have a choice, that writing saved your life.

Dear Brigid,

Remember how you wedged yourself behind the refrigerator to practice your rented clarinet? All we could see was the black bell of the instrument peeking from behind the side with the alphabet magnets that spelled the names of our dogs, cats, soccer teams: Dudley, Daisy, Blueberry, Big Red, Blazers, Angels, Angellettes. "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Your nine-year-old fingers pressed the silver keys in fits and starts. Your breath squeaked through the bamboo reed. You hated when people looked at you. For years, you wore a Sherlock Holmes hat, tilted the brim to hide your eyes. Sometimes, you untied the laces at the top; earflaps drooped like a hound's ears, skimming your cheeks and jaw. Decades later, you stand on a platform in a middle-school cafeteria, not far from where we grew up on Long Island. Using only your voice, you keep a roomful of unruly middle-schoolers in line. Like you, I am a teacher, but nearly two thousand miles away. A student from Malaysia tells the class he would like to go camping, but he is afraid. "The only real danger is exposure," a young Coloradan tells him. I know this is true of wind, lightning, rain, but sometimes it feels true about revealing the things that went on in our home. None of you asked me to blow the roof off our house.

Dear Dad,

I published an essay in *The New York Times*, a piece I wrote as one of many attempts to understand how you used the same sad, terrifying script with your second family as you did with us, your first. Two divorces. You estranged yourself from all seven of your children and stepchildren, then moved to an island off the west coast of Ireland where, at 63 years old, you died of alcoholism and an infected heart. When I flew alone to bury you, I found your rented cottage crowded with soggy cardboard boxes. Unpacked clothes and worthless documents speckled with mold. Yet two glazed pots graced your rainy door. They were bursting with yellow and orange marigolds the landlady told me you had planted. Blazes of color that cut through relentless December fog.

"There is always something beautiful in a tragedy," said my long-ago student Zita. She wrote an essay about a frail, bullied boy who lived in her apartment building in Poland. Zita would sit on her windowsill and listen to the boy play the piano. One day, when she came home from school, an ambulance was slowly leaving the driveway. The boy had jumped from the fire escape. Years later, Zita could not stop thinking about the music or the fact that she had not stood up for

him on the playground. There is always something beautiful in a tragedy. Piano notes. Marigolds. The fog, jumble, and heartbreak of experience broken into clear and manageable pieces.

Dear Mairin,

You, brave, stoic sister, chose that pseudonym, “beloved, star of the sea.” You taught me to read and write at the shiny dining room table that sits in your home today. You read entire novels and biographies to me before I could sound out the words. When I remind you of this, you wave my words away with your hand. You do not want any credit for turning me into a teacher or writer. “Why don’t you have your students write about The Declaration of Independence?” you asked me when I first started teaching nonfiction writing. “You’re not a trained therapist,” you said, worrying my students’ stories might be too much for them, for me, perhaps for you to hear about. Before I published the essay in the *Times*, I sent a copy to you and everyone in it. You all gave the go-ahead. But after the piece appeared, you told me you were glad we had different last names. You thought you could be fired from your job if people knew what went on in our home. Brigid said, “I want my superintendent to read the piece because I want him to know how brave I am.” My mind agreed with Brigid, but my nerves agreed with you. There is power in remaining a mystery. I had given up that power for both of us. Chosen the place and time. Chosen a different kind of power for myself and took you along for the ride. Took our siblings and stepmother for the ride. Took the people in our town along for the ride. Our quiet brother, Peter, was working in a shop in town, stood behind the counter as people who had known our father walked in to tell him they had read the piece, that our father finally got what he deserved. People we knew and did not know overwhelmed us with old and new stories about the tragedy of our father. Offered strong opinions on whether I should have written and published the piece. What justice. What a betrayal. Said he must be “rolling in his grave.” But none of us wanted him to be rolling in his grave. The story is more complicated for us. Our father has caused us nightmares. Yet in our own ways, all we want is peace.

Dear Declaration of Independence,

My students are welcome to write about you. They are welcome to write about moths. Trips to the lake. Gap years. The time they missed the penalty kick. Parents’ divorces. Coffee shops. Accidents. “Anyone who survived childhood has enough material to write for the rest of his life.” I tell my students Flannery O’Connor said this.

Years ago, I had a student who rushed into class everyday wearing dirty Carhartt overalls. He wrote about his job as a gravedigger, how he and his fellow diggers made crass jokes about the people who were going to be buried in the holes they dug. Until the day his high school friend fell off a roof and died. The student’s boss had offered to give him the day off, but he declined. He said it was the most important grave he had to dig.

Dear Winston Churchill,

You hated the portrait commissioned by Parliament on your 80th birthday. You did not deny its likeness, but you wanted to look regal, standing tall in your Robes of the Garter. Instead, artist Graham Sutherland captured you seated, in a rumpled suit and bowtie, posture both vulnerable and defiant. Columbia University art historian Simon Schama said, “What Sutherland saw before him was a magnificent ruin.” Critics call the work a masterpiece, but only photos of it survive. At your request, your wife, Clementine, took it out to the yard and burned it.

“Like the angels, you are likely to be simplified,” Amy Leach writes in her essay, “Memorandum to the Animals.” I wrote about the fact that the neighbors did nothing when Mairin and I ran to their house in the middle of the night, begging for help because our father was in a rage. “How could you?” Mairin said after the piece was published. “They gave me a Waterford bowl for my wedding.” But the piece was not about the Waterford bowl or the ways we shrieked with joy as we jumped in their icy pool, then sat at their long kitchen table, eating hot dogs and Fritos. An essay can only be about so many things, I tell my students. We all hope readers know this, but sometimes they do not seem to know this. Last year, I received an email from a student who had written about being sexually assaulted on campus. She had entered the essay in a contest and was proud to learn she had won. Still, her email said: “Imagine walking into a bar with a bruise on your face from being beaten or blood on your outfit from being assaulted. People no longer see you as you want them to see you. And many times, they don’t see you at all. They just see the blood and the bruise.”

Dear fancy, adjustable office chair,

My husband bought you for me because I kept telling him I could not get comfortable at my desk and this was the reason I was not writing. I read your manual, adjusted the back and armrests to the most ergonomic angles possible. Still, I did not feel at ease. A pseudo-protective fog kept descending over my desk. I was trying to write about a course of electric-shock treatments I underwent in my 20s, after my mother died. I had kept the treatments secret even from some of my closest friends. “Silence is not going to solve it anymore, Quentin,” Arthur Miller writes in his autobiographical play, *After the Fall*. I believe this to be true, but still had decades of shame and silence-training to shatter. Decades of fear that I would be judged and scrutinized for what had happened to me and how I had responded, and not enough strength to handle it if I was.

“No one will be able to fuck with me!” I said to my husband over and over as I worked on the electric-shock treatment essay, all false bravado, and then the piece was finished and I started to look with compassion at the girl I had been. I started to feel strong, like a whale covered with barnacles and scars from shark bites and boat propellers, but still able to swim a hundred miles a day.

Dear current and future students, myself included,

I am not a trained therapist, but I will do my best to read and listen carefully,

and I know where to send you for help and support if you need it. Maybe some of you will write to redeem what has seemed unredeemable. To attempt to control and make sense of things that were beyond your control, to tinker from the relative safety of your desks, with words, which I will tell you Charles Simic calls “splendid poverties.” But still, some of us will ask ourselves, which stories are ours to tell? We will try to choose carefully, but sometimes we will go ahead without really being sure. After the *Times* piece was published, I heard from a Princeton University football player who thanked me because his father was similar to mine and the essay made him feel less alone. A woman in South America said the same. A classmate from elementary school said she had no idea. And then there was another neighbor who sent my sister and me home after we banged on her door shaking very late one night. I saw her at the wake of a friend. She touched my arm, led me to a corner, apologized, and we hugged and talked.