

# Chapter 3. Detours of Intention

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In 1984, I enrolled in the only graduate nonfiction writing program in the country, even though I wasn't sure what "nonfiction" actually meant.<sup>1</sup> It was blurry back then—not yet "creative" or "literary" or the "fourth genre." But I assumed it included journalism, and that's what mattered. I wanted to write about the war in Nicaragua. The Reagan Administration was trying to destroy the Sandinista government, and in the depths of my twenty-something naiveté and idealism, I thought that writing about it could make a difference. That words could impact the world. That the art of the writer was also a form of activism.

On the first day of my first class—Advanced Expository Writing—a know-it-all student from New York, a self-identified "working journalist," began jabbering about George Orwell's "rare ability to bridge fact and truth." I had no idea what he was talking about. Since it actually was 1984, a discussion then arose about the modern relevance of the novel, which I pretended that I'd read. The whole first semester was like that—lots of pretending and posing. Thankfully, our teacher, Jix Lloyd-Jones, was smart and kind, and seemed to expect the stark differences in our backgrounds.

In the next class session, with a thin stick of chalk, Jix scratched the word "essay" on the blackboard, and added the origin (*essai*) and root meanings ("trial" or "attempt"). Then he said that the personal essay was the nonfiction equal of a short story. This startled me, because I thought the word "essay" meant the dry, academic writing that had been required in all my prior schooling. But I loved short stories, and soon became hooked on the personal essay, a nonfiction genre that was making a comeback. I liked the essay because it felt so much like life, an unending series of attempts, or what I later called "detours of intention," which can be read two ways: sometimes you choose the route, but more often it chooses you. That's how writing/teaching/life is. You don't always know where you're going.

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In that course, we read fifteen essays in our anthology. But three of them stuck with me. These writers focused on neo-colonialism (George Orwell), family and parenthood (E. B. White), and race and identity (James Baldwin).

The first two pieces Jix assigned for contrast. One was quite political, looking more outward at the world, and the other deeply personal, looking more inward

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1. This essay originally appeared in a longer form in Tom Montgomery Fate, *The Long Way Home: Detours and Discoveries*, Ice Cube Press, 2022. It is reprinted with permission.

at the self. George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" (1921) did read like a short story: a clear plot with an emotional climax. Orwell, a member of the Imperial Police in Burma, had to kill a huge elephant "solely to avoid looking a fool." Uneasy with his unearned authority, and confused by Burmese culture, he botched the killing, and the animal died a slow, excruciating death. The essay is a critique of British colonialism. Orwell was trapped: he detested the British Empire he represented, yet was also hated by the locals he was supposed to protect.

One line in the essay would later haunt me: "when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys." In a few years, I would find strands of Orwell's story in my own—in Nicaragua and Guatemala and the Philippines and other sites of U.S. colonialism, where I would work and write and struggle to fit in, and to undo Euro-American privilege. Mostly I failed. In an interview, Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan Minister of Culture, once told me "You don't have to save the world, you just have to see it." It was a question Jix would later raise: does a writer's seeing (the art) precede and enable the saving (the activism)? Are they necessarily separate or different processes?

While Orwell's essay was fast-paced and political, E.B. White's "Once More to the Lake" (1941) was slow, intensely personal, and did not read like a short story. When White was a kid, each summer his father took their family to a lake in Maine for vacation. The essay is about a nostalgic return trip he makes decades later to the same lake with his own young son, who had never been there.

Some students in the class liked the piece, but others found White's endless memories and reflections self-absorbed. Exhibit A: White kept imagining himself as his own father and his boy as himself a few decades earlier. "I began to sustain the illusion," he writes, "that he was I, and therefore, by simple transposition, that I was my father." Such middle-aged insights didn't connect with the younger students. I didn't love the essay, but I didn't mind it. Maybe just because I liked to fish.

But twenty years later White's story would become my own. And that line—"that he was I"—would return to me when my son was born. So would the "simple transposition that I was my father" when my father later died from Alzheimer's. These events revealed to me something Jix knew: the essayist stops time for his or her readers, so that the words and images, like fresh leaves of mint in a steaming pot of water, can steep into deeper and deeper colors and flavors of meaning.

Back then I didn't fully understand this, nor the comforting lures of nostalgia. Probably because I didn't yet know that time moves faster as you age. That it's not a delusion. When you're five years old, a single year is one-fifth of your entire life. But when you're 50, one year is one-fiftieth of your life. So there are a few million more things to remember, and forget—college, marriage(s), children, broken bones and hearts, a leaking roof, a friend's death from cancer. Or maybe shooting an elephant or going fishing with your kid.

Which moments matter? Can the reader find their story in yours? These were the unspoken questions that Jix always seemed to be asking, and that I still carry.

The third essay, James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son," was intensely personal and political. There was no choice. His art and activism—amid the Harlem renaissance and resistance—were woven into one life, one perpetual struggle for social justice, and survival. In the class, Baldwin balanced Orwell: the colonial story told by the colonized, by the silenced, the invisible. Baldwin was teaching us how to see in a new way.

So how could a white, small-town Iowa kid in 1984 connect to the suffering of an angry gay black man in New York City forty years earlier? I'm not sure, but the narrative voice was more honest and self-revelatory than any essay I'd yet read. More so than White or Orwell. While I could not comprehend the violation and violence a black person felt in 1943 (nor in 2020), Baldwin's essay moved me. His belief in the spiritual and political power of writing sparked my own. And perhaps like Orwell, despite the depth of my white privilege, I wanted to believe that writing could somehow diminish the unbearable "weight of white people in the world" that Baldwin carried and despised.

Baldwin captures two pivotal days from his life with sobering clarity. On July 29, 1943, his stepfather died and his sister was born. Four days later, on August 3, he turned 19 and they buried his father amid the exploding Harlem riots. These events came to represent not only Baldwin's life in crisis, but a nation in crisis.

Jix used the essay to teach a basic writing move: the "framing" of an arresting image or charged moment in order to both limit and invite the reader's attention while introducing a theme. Late in the essay Baldwin frames a moment of rage. A white waitress in a fancy hotel rejects him—"We don't serve Negroes here"—and he explodes in anger, throws a glass at her, then realizes the danger he is in and runs. The moment captures Baldwin's vulnerability, his longing to be seen/visible, but need to be unseen/invisible in order to survive.

After this essay, we went back and reviewed parallel framed moments in Orwell and White. This basic strategy and model would become central to my writing and teaching. At the time I needed help or tools—some simple models for how to see and read my life like a writer. And now I had one: the camera. But this was in the pre-digital era, film was expensive, and there was no auto focus. So you really had to learn how to pay attention, how to see, how to frame and focus the image, and recognize the emotional nuance of the light and darkness in the language—how to invite and limit your reader.

When I left that class I'd just begun to understand the chaos and beauty of the perpetual trial of the essay, of writing, of seeing a life, and teaching others how to do it. And I'd begun to get my head around a core idea that was likely self-evident to everyone else: out of the millions of moments and images that we perceive, and that constantly buzz through the wild circuitry of our brain, we can only ever retain and frame a few. That's what Jix was always getting at. What do you choose to see? Where are you focused? In your language, but also in your life. What few precious moments will you choose to frame, and turn into art—into a handful of stories—that will once more change you, and the reader, and the world?