

# Flash Fiction from Amanda Fields: “Buffalo”



In Badlands National Park...American Bison (Bison bison)

When I was a child, and my father had just begun to be noticeably strange, my mother took me to the zoo. It was July, and hot. The lions were thin, their manes as brittle as straw. Monkeys tumbled in a canopy of ropes, pausing to pick at each other's hair. They ignored us. The parakeets seemed lifeless, tucked into layered bark. After hours of this, our wrapped sandwiches eaten, our feet sore, my mother suggested that we leave.

“Please, can we stay?” I scuffed my thick shoes on the walkway to slow her down.

Her dress seemed too loose in the cooling wind. “The crickets are tuning up,” she said. Strands of hair dropped on her cheeks.

“Just one more thing, then,” I begged. I was thinking of the meerkats in their artificial desert, a painted sky behind them. I wanted to see them one more time. A sentry always stood at attention on its hind legs, making sure no harm came to the rest.

“The buffalo,” my mother said, touching her rounded stomach.

As we crossed a little bridge over an expanse of land, my mother gave me a nickel, and I slipped it into a metal stand that resembled a parking meter. A pair of enormous binoculars perched on the stand, the lenses opaque without the click of the coin and the tick of the meter. I strained up and felt the crick-crack of my corrective shoes, the ones my parents made me wear so that I wouldn't walk pigeon-toed.

The lenses blurred until I moved my eyes into just the right place. Then the view through the slits became clear. There were the mighty buffalo, grazing in what appeared to be deadened grasses – what at the time I thought of as prairie, not understanding that the prairie didn't exist anymore.

I squinted one eye, then the other, watching the buffaloes' fluffy bent heads in the stalks. Despite the binoculars, the buffalo were distant, as unrealistic as moon craters in a telescope. The sun warming my back seemed a closer friend.

"See the buffalo?" my mother whispered. "They don't belong here."

I pulled away from the binoculars and blinked. My mother wiped at the sweat beneath her nose then gripped the railing. I heard the tick-tick and put my eyes back.

But I didn't get a good look before the minute was spent and my mother held out a white-gloved hand, her forefinger smeared a light pink where it had run against her upper lip.

I twitched my face to indicate that I might cry, turning my left foot inward.

"No more nickels," she said, glancing at my toes. "No more time."

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## **New Poetry by Denise Jarrott**



Rembrandt's Susanna and the Elders, pen and brown ink, 1650-1652

*manhunt*

will I always be poor

always a slowing of small

pittings where roots were

milkweed

meadowsweet

rue or

pink lilies on a backdrop dark, blooming

rather against than next to

themselves vibrating

against the black soil deep as a hole

in the ground and quick to wither, water

swell into a dawn dark, then day

the horizon a series of holes and oaks

the field dressed as deer

as viper

as garden

as the sun red as fish mouths in Iowa

in summer while here I keep my eye to the scope

to the fourth county over

to the fielded to the fallow now

I can scale up a wall now

I am pressing my hair against the sap of a tree I have learned  
now  
I will not be free will I always be with Iowa where I was  
exposed grass flat land grazed like a comb through my wet hair  
my six years  
body folded  
up in the towel  
of okoboji  
where I learned  
to fear my god  
given ability  
to see snakes  
dark ropes  
in the dark  
soil the darkness from  
which the honey-gold  
the sweet  
corn springs tall  
springs bright springs  
sweet  
water  
no, I am not

a farmer's daughter  
though my grandmother  
was my grandmother  
gold and black teeth she  
was the child of a farmer  
she ate nothing but corn she  
thinks not of herself  
no I am not my father's  
daughter spring-  
loaded the metal somehow  
always cold is this  
supposed to make me  
feel safe colt  
number to give me peace the kind  
I could  
rest in if I  
wanted to I wanted  
to my father  
points a smith  
and wesson a remington  
at a shape  
at a man

at an outline

of a boyfriend

of a starling, of a squirrel

the only way to feel safe is to sleep

with death between your knees between your teeth

with death under

the bed as if in the yellow light of farmhouses

you'd win you'd know

what to do you'd hold

death against their heads you'd keep

death hidden in a closet in a chest

you'd keep it near you'd keep us all

alive

I learned no poisonous snakes live in Iowa no lions no sharks  
just men

made of leather lubricated laughter killdeer

nested in the rocks at the water

plant was I not always

looking

to be approached by a colt by

a steer, not looking to see a streak of orange move across my  
line

of vision not looking

to meet god in a grove,  
in a field in a cave by a river  
Io a white bull with clover  
in my fist as defense fed  
held out circled in looking out  
at a pocked horizon at a land I loved only because it was  
wounded from whose hand I fed on meat so red it made me cramp  
my body seized like a fist  
  
I swum out to the middle of the lake I played  
a game I spent  
my money in another place I placed  
a bet my body made  
of golden tickets of air heavy as water isn't there  
a place where a body is supposed to end isn't there  
someone I'm supposed to find  
  
a soft wavering, a shimmering  
a minnow, a mouth  
a how and a why, a wren,  
a winnowing, a face,  
I could wipe, hair I could brush  
I could feed it food and the food would go away  
alive even when I wasn't looking

## AUTOMATA

My new job is to exchange one thing for another,  
My new job is to install veils between the wealthier members  
of the audience and my compatriots. My new job is to balance  
a camel on the head of a pin, my new job is to make it dance,  
and isn't it the dance that connects me to the world? Aren't I  
lucky  
to be here at all, squashing cockroaches that rain down from  
the ceiling,  
aren't I lucky to support my whole family with my brain in  
it's numb  
skull? My new job affords me and my family a vacation at the  
lake two hours  
north of the lake on which we live. My new job is to fill my  
mouth with clear  
goo and call it a hot meal. My new job is working toothpaste  
to the end of the tube  
and not leave any toothpaste behind. My new job is to become a  
screen, bright white,  
for everyone to yell at, my job is to be a white sheet to  
throw tomatoes at. My new job  
involves a lot of interface with the public. My new job is to  
make sure my hatred  
doesn't leak out of the holes in my face. My new job is better  
than no job.  
My new job is dabbing drool off of a wall of stuffed animals.  
My new job is cleaning  
up blood and cum and spit and shit and snot. When my new job  
is over (for today),  
my compatriots and I go out for wine we spill  
wine all over each other, we spill blood. We go home and pat  
our stomachs which for today are full. We go home but do not  
squeeze our hands goodbye. I am in a cab and I hate myself for  
it,

I pull my smock over my face so that I cannot see the numbers  
tick and glow,  
my new job is beating its fists against my brain. I think I'm  
growing a new worry  
stone in my body, I think my body is full of piss but I do not  
want to move.  
I might piss in the street before I get home, get in bed  
alone. How much does this cost, how much?

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## **New Fiction from Jennifer Orth-Veillon: Marche-en- Famenne**

*The following is an excerpt from Jennifer Orth-Veillon's work-in-progress, The Storage Room. Here, she intersperses real letters from her grandfather (italicized), an American soldier who fought at the Battle of the Bulge, with her own imagined accounts of the stories behind the letters.*

*The Battle of the Bulge, which ended 74 years ago on January 25, 1945, was the largest and deadliest battle fought by Americans in WWII and the second-deadliest battle in American history.*

*All photos provided by the author. – WBT Editors*



Three American soldiers in Europe, WWII, taken by the author's grandfather. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

January 12, 1945

Somewhere in Belgium

My Darling,

You are probably sore at me as you read this. I'm sorry. I write as often as I can, and even then, Uncle Sam doesn't handle the mail service over here like he does at home. I admit I laughed at the way you gave me hell in one of your letters. In fact, I read the letter to the boys.

To bring you up to date: we are fighting with the 7th Corps in the north who are using the pincer maneuver. "Pincer" is just like it sounds—a military tactic that actually "pinches," meaning we flank the enemy on both sides and press in. We pinch them. It works beautifully. We are planning to trap some Jerries in the drive.

I hate missing holidays with you. Did I ever tell you about our Thanksgiving Day in Geronsweiler, Germany? It was Roosevelt's best T-day yet. Jerry had an artillery observer in the town, and we hit him hard. Still, we took a pounding for the several days we were there. We were stationed in a central building that the Jerries bombed so regularly we timed our trips to the john according to their schedule.

Often, I daydream about you. Sometimes it's so real that I can almost feel you in my arms. Dreaming of you is one of two things I do other than work. The other is dreaming about good food. Incidentally, the Christmas cookies and peanuts arrived in good shape.

The November wave of muddy battles around the Siegfried Line that carried Brillhart and the Railsplitters, the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry, east in December 1944 turned to ice at the Belgian border. They had to blink to keep their eyeballs from freezing, but the cold muted the smell of rotting. A few Christmas lights hung in some little town squares, softening

the browns and greys tracks from tanks that stained the new-fallen snow. Frozen mud and dirty snow, brown and brown-grey stains dominated the colors of the Bulge landscape, blurring the contours of quaint villages with pointy church spirals and red clay roofs so they almost looked intact after the intense bombing.

Unfrozen mud could swallow bodies and fill holes, but against the backdrop of snow that spanned the flat fields and streaked the Ardennes, nobody could completely disappear. The cold preserved the dead in seconds, the look of horror or peace seemed almost chiseled on their faces by the precise hands of ice. The bodies reminded Brillhart of sculptures he saw in the Paris Tuileries Gardens and he caught himself studying corpses as the snow dusted their bloodied clothes. Wounds frozen in time. The snow would never stop falling, blanketing the bodies, until spring turned the statues into fertilizer, humus for revitalizing the battle-ravaged soil.

Brillhart and his men shuffle-kicked and stomped their way through the Ardennes forest moonlit snow towards a Belgian farmhouse in the distance. Translucent smoke poured from its great stone chimney. The more the soldiers pounded the ground, the less likely that Brillhart, the battalion surgeon, would have to cut frostbite away from their feet, with amputation the eventual outcome. The thermometer registered thirteen below Celsius. They had to find a warm place for the night or freeze to death by morning.

*I am sorry you cried at Christmas. I felt a little low myself. I can imagine the menu and it must have been wonderful. You should see me – I look like a coal miner, judging from the slack in my pants. But don't worry. It won't take long to get my figure back once I start eating your cooking.*

*Snow! When I was a kid, I always loved the snow. It's nearly a*

*foot thick in the fields here. There's less in the forests, which are beautiful but show battle scars. Belgium is a beautiful country. The Belgian people are simple and homegrown. They live quiet lives and never seem to be in a hurry. All along the way they gave us delicious apples. You want to fight to help these people. Already, they have been invaded twice by the Boches – we are here to prevent a third.*

Over their thick wool uniforms and insulated helmets, Brillhart and the other Railsplitters were still wearing the long white winter underwear to camouflage themselves in the snow. During the past few days of the Bulge, wearing long underwear on the outside of their clothes became protocol. The disguise had helped them win the last yards of the town of Marche-en-Famenne, a three-day fight. The story told through the ranks was that, a few nights prior, the Railsplitters, wearing the outer layer of long, ghostly underwear, spotted two Germans cowering behind leafless trees in the winter forest lit by the full moon. Hunching over in the dark, the GIs first thought they were frightened bears. "Hände hoch!" one of the battalion sergeants had called, apparently mangling the German order with his strong Texan accent. The Krauts must have heard them coming but made no effort to run or fire. They raised their hands without protest as the Railsplitters surrounded them. Both Germans—now prisoners—had officer status. What were they doing alone in the woods in enemy territory? Rumors surmised that Krauts were tired and wanted to get caught by any ally before they had to confront the Russians again—American POW camps were said to be more humane. The two captured Germans had led the entire ghostly American battalion unnoticed away from five enemy squadrons and into the heart of a strategic Belgian village.

The rest of the Krauts didn't see the GIs coming at them from all sides and were forced to capitulate. Brillhart tried to get the American generals who implemented the rule to honor the insignificant private from his company who came up with

the idea, but his superiors refused to admit that a boy who hadn't been to military school or even college was that smart.

White soldiers on white snow. A small town, big victory. A thousand men lost. The Bulge was far from over.

*My birthday, Jan. 6, was spent in a town that I can't name – but I had French-fried potatoes (with salt!) and fried chicken (with salt!). I also heard a Kay Kiser radio program. What a treat! Kelly – the guy I told you about before – is still a Lieutenant. I found out why he wasn't promoted to Major: apparently, he hasn't got the guts, brains, foresight or desire. Personally, I have no respect for Kelly, but I play along to get what I want. Then there's the translator, Urban – we call him "Burpin Urban"–who asks to be evacuated every time he has some damned minor ailment. The whole regiment will rejoice if he gets really injured and leaves.*

*We get decent food from time to time, but what we really want is a bath, clean clothes, and a shave. I am glad to hear you are working on a scrapbook of our relationship. I wish I could send you something for it.*

Brillhart and his men reached the farmhouse with the chimney. As he prepared to knock at the door, he realized that the orange light of the hearth would illuminate the blood and dirt stains on the white underwear covering their uniforms. They would look like murdered ghosts rather than American saviors. Brillhart instructed the men to shed the outer layer, then knocked. A toothless man with a hollow, dark-stained mouth answered. He uttered something Urban couldn't understand and slammed the door shut. Brillhart's stomach squeezed with hunger at the brief blast of heat and glimpse of the stove. He ordered the men to put their frozen C rations on the ground in front of them as a peace offering.

A string of obscenities rose from the men. *Goddamn frog. Goddamn Belge.*

*Goddammit, there was booze in there.* Brillhart kicked at the door with his boot. Urban was a wiry nineteen-year-old with chronic indigestion and a Canadian mother. He tried to talk to the Belgian man when he re-opened the door, but the man shouted, waved his hands in the air, and slammed the door again. Brillhart kicked harder, shoving Urban in front of him. The Belgian opened again and gestured wildly. He held up all ten fingers, made fists, held up two more, and pointed to his crotch. Brillhart looked at Urban, his eyebrows raised. "What in the hell is he saying?"

Urban, useless, shook his head. "I can't understand this accent, Doc. I get one word out of ten."

The Belgian man held his hands to his chest in the shape of a woman's breasts. Still speaking quickly, he pointed to his crotch again and thrust towards the door as if he was taking a woman from behind. Then ten fingers, fists, and two more. More thrusting.

*Oh! And I'm glad you like the perfume I bought you at Guerlain. Tell Aunt Bessie she'd better stay away from it, that cow!*

*The further along you get with the pregnancy, the more I wonder about whether you are taking care of yourself and if you are being careful. I wish I could have seen you at Christmas. We would have had so much fun together—shopping, packing, mailing presents.*

*Belgium at the present is wrecked with war. I don't know what kind of Christmas they had, but the people don't seem to mind. They realize that there must be some destruction in liberation.*

"What's he saying, Doc, that he's a woman?" shouted Lt. Kelly, the short redhead Irishman from Chicago. "He wants to fuck us? What the hell? Tell him, sure! We'll make sweet love to him in exchange for a bed and some booze."

Brillhart turned around and drew his finger across his throat, looking at Kelly and the others. He shoved Urban forward to the door again. "Ask him to speak slowly. And ask it slowly."

*"Nous comprenons rien, Monsieur. S'il vous plaît, nous comprenons rien. S'il vous plait, parlez plus lentement. We don't understand you, Sir. Don't speak so fast, please."* Urban held up a can of C rations and a pack of cigarettes. He knocked the can against the house's stone wall to show that it was frozen. The man held up his palm and said slowly *"Attendez. Stop."* He pulled the door partly closed but left it open a crack. Brillhart moved closer to the sliver of heat coming from the house.

"Wait, he says wait," Urban said.

The Belgian man appeared at the door again, offering Brillhart a framed photograph. Twelve somber-eyed children dressed in white stood between a younger version of the man and a plump woman in black. Her lips were pressed so tightly that Brillhart wondered if they could soften into a kiss.

"He has twelve children sir," Urban said, *"Douze enfants, c'est ca, Monsieur? Pas de place, c'est ca?"* The man nodded vigorously and smiled, revealing several brown teeth lingering at the back of his mouth.

"Doc, we can't stay here. He's got twelve kids. No room. No food."

"Thank him and let's move out," Brillhart said. All twelve were probably sick and undernourished. He had dealt with enough depressing scenes over the last days and couldn't fathom caring for anyone else without a few hours of sleep.

Brillhart felt his men's disappointment and reminded them to keep rubbing their hands together to keep blood flowing.

"Son of a bitch."

*"Merci, merci Monsieur. Au revoir. Bonne nuit,"* Brillhart said, mangling the few French words he learned.

*"Et merci. Merci à vous, nos sauveurs. Que Dieu soit avec vous jusqu'à la fin,"* said the man, bowing his head and then saluting.

The door closed. The emptiness of moonlight in the snow silenced them. Their hunger deepened, but they left the C-rations for the family in front of the house. *When you talk about buying diapers for Junior, I wonder about the name we should choose for him when he's born. I'm at a loss. I have considered every single name in and out of the family, and even some girl names just in case. Belgian names like Colette, Therèse, Jeanne, but I still can't hit it. I think about cigarettes, too. I've got more than a carton left, but I give so many to civilians. They need them more than I do.*

Still stomping and kicking at the snow, Brillhart felt the heat at the bottom of his veins dwindling. His blood was slowing. Little knives of cold dug in. He was minutes from frostbite. Nothing could stop the necrology of frozen tissue.

When the Railsplitters first arrived in the region, he found the rolling mountains of the Ardennes comforting. They brought back pleasant memories of snow-covered hills in Kentucky after football practice when he would walk home to the wood stove and hot food. As the star of the team, he ran miles, back and forth on the practice field, crushing himself against other players and smelling dirt as he hit the ground. After practice, he stayed in the hot shower longer than the others, feeling the gentle pull of his muscles recover. He knew that he wanted to spend his whole life studying the body's power. Back then, all he knew of war were the medals his grandfather won in 1917 from the Meuse-Argonne. His grandfather was strong and quiet although he cried at odd times.

While poor, he was a nobleman in the coal mining town.

Everyone respected him. Before the Bulge, it had never crossed Brillhart's mind that his grandfather saw things like uncoiling intestines.

But within days of the Battle, the Ardennes appeared squat and bulbous under a gray sky that faded or darkened according to the amount of smoke rising from arms fire and shelling. Only at night could Brillhart see a few stars. Now, in leading his freezing men in search of another house, Brillhart decided he wanted to live in an isolated, beautiful place like pre-war Belgium, alone with June and Jr., away from everyone, away from the cities and people. He would build a beautiful Belgian stone house from the rubble.

*Since you always ask, I'll tell you about the old farmhouse in Belgium we stayed in. It was typical of Belgian farmhouses in that the barn and house were located together, but the Belgians are very clean people. It was clear that Jerry had used the house as an aid station a few short hours before we arrived. Fresh piles of dirt indicated that a few dead Jerries were buried outside.*

The men almost passed by the next farmhouse. There were no lights, and no smoke rose from the chimney, but it was quiet. Brillhart switched on his flashlight and shone it across the stone walls. Bullet marks dotted the façade, but no other sign of significant structural destruction was visible. He knocked on the door, prepared to wait, but the it swung open. The men stepped inside and swept their flashlights across the rooms.



A Belgian farmhouse during WWII, perhaps the one mentioned in these letters, or another. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

As their eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, they saw soiled

gauze, empty morphine ampoules, discarded scalpels, and shards of disinfectant tubes littering the floor. Sofas, chairs, and a piano with missing keys had been pushed towards the wall and the large kitchen table had been dragged into the center of the living room. The top of the table was slick with frozen blood and icy bits of flesh.

“All clear Doc,” called Kelly from the kitchen. “Not even any dead ones lying around. Think they’re all outside already, buried and frozen, so they won’t stink us out. God, I love German efficiency.”

Though it was a hygienic disaster, the house would do for the night. Brillhart and his men decided to light a fire in the stove, eat, sleep a little.

The soldiers found enough logs stacked in the small barn adjoining the house to make fires in the kitchen stove and in the living room fireplace. Slowly, their hands and C rations thawed. A few portraits hung on the wall, but the subdued eyes and high-buttoned collars inspired little empathy from the hungry men, who were more concerned about the unpleasant taste of canned rations. The flames revealed details of their physical condition— all the fat chiseled from their cheeks, chins peppered with dirt and stubble, eyes like dull moons. They looked to Brillhart like the coal miners limping into a diner in Loyall, Kentucky after days underground. Brillhart remembered thinking that no amount of sunlight could erase the miners’ ashen pallor as they drank coffee and ate toast with pork gravy. The color was stain, not dust.

Every meal for Brillhart and the medics had become a guessing game since the labelling disintegrated in the wet snow. Tonight, they opened three cans of meat and potato hash, two meat stew, four meat and beans, and five cellophane-wrapped fudge bars. They added two instant coffees and nine pressed sugar cubes. Except for the chocolate and sugar, all had the same soft, morbid taste of over-salted metal. They had eaten

the same range of things for almost two months. It calmed but never vanquished their hunger.

Kelly stubbed his cigarette out in the viscous film of meat hash left in one of the cans. "Well, that was disgusting, as usual. Anyone want to go with me to find the cellar? They've always got something stored away in those basements. Maybe even booze."

Urban followed him. Brillhart stayed upstairs and smoked one of his last cigarettes.

Kelly's trip to the basement reminded Brillhart of Christmas when he and some other Railsplitters had spent the holiday with a Belgian family in the town of Comblain La Tour. During the meal, Monsieur Colson, the father, recounted the town's proud history. It was famous for its picturesque houses along the quais of the river Ourthe, and for its steep granite cliffs, called Le Rocher de la Vierge. After dinner, when Brillhart thought he had eaten and drunk everything the family had to offer, Monsieur Colson stood up and announced he was going to the cellar for the rest. He disappeared and then re-emerged with one arm full of dried sausages. In the other, he carried a bucket sloshing over with a thick dark red liquid. "*C'est du boudin. C'est du sang. Pour le nouvel an.*" He set it in the middle of the kitchen, rolled up his sleeves, and pulled out strings of sausage links. "Blood sausage. For New Year's.

As he stared into the bucket of blood, Brillhart his eyes swirled. In the messy pail, he saw intestines spilling out of downed men. Blond curls belonging to a private he lost back at the battle at Geilenkirchen in December swirled together with the intestines. His vision blackened and he fainted, falling off of his chair to the floor. He came to as Kelly pinched his cheeks and announced to everyone that Brillhart had never been able to hold his liquor. He hoped that Kelly would come back from the basement in this deserted house with something more

appetizing than blood sausage.

*In the basement of the house, we found two girls— one around 18 and the other 8 – and a smaller brother who was blind and badly crippled. Jerry had locked them down there. They hadn't eaten for four days, it was very cold, and upstairs, the parents had been shot dead. The mother and father were still in bed under the covers. We brought the kids upstairs and gave them food and hot coffee and blankets.*

"Doc, you'd better get down here," Kelly called from the top of the basement stairwell, breathless. Urban panted behind him.

The soldiers' flashlights made a flickering kaleidoscope of yellow dots as they thundered down the stairs, then formed a bright circle around three children, two girls and a boy, propped against the far end of the basement wall. Pale and shivering, tears traced lines down their fear-pinched faces, but they didn't move. The younger girl whimpered as the men moved closer.

Brillhart pointed to the red cross on his sleeve and then to the sleeves of all the other medics as he approached. He motioned to Urban, who said, "We're doctors. We're here to help you. Don't worry" and then, "*Nous sommes médecins. Nous sommes là pour vous aider. Ne vous inquiétez pas.*" Despite their tears and dirty faces, he noticed the two girls were beautiful, with heart-shaped faces and thick wavy brown hair. They huddled around the boy. Brillhart elbowed Urban in the back when he fell silent. "Keep talking, Goddammit. They need to know they can trust us."

Urban jumped and repeated "We're Americans. We're allies," several times.

Finally, the girls unlocked themselves from around the boy and the young girl looked at the men with a faint smile. *Nous sommes Américains.*

The eldest girl began to get to her feet as if to move toward them, then fainted, her hand sliding down the wall as she hit the floor. The other two children bent over her, screaming, *Germaine, Germaine!*

"Sh, shhhh. It's ok." Kelly moved forward and gently slid his arms under Germaine, while Brillhart took her feet. Despite the fullness of her face and lips, her body was almost emaciated. She seemed to weigh almost nothing. Together, they made their way up the stairs. Urban stayed with her as she recovered in the kitchen while Brillhart and Kelly went to get the other sister and the boy, who could barely walk.

Brillhart put more C rations on the fire and melted clean snow for drinking water. The children brought the food and water to their mouths in swift, jerky movements, and it was gone in minutes. The men searched their bags for more cans. Brillhart saw a bit of color return to the childrens' faces and realized they were more beautiful than he thought. With a bit of regained strength, the girls looked tearfully around their devastated house.

Brillhart felt grateful when he learned the boy was blind. At least he couldn't see the blood and dirt covering his family home, or how the lace curtains had been torn from the windows, probably used for tourniquets.

The younger girl, Colette, sprang up from the table and ran toward the stairs leading to the second floor.

"Non!" Germaine cried. She lunged forward but teetered and gripped the table for balance. "Please, stop her. She's looking for my parents are up there. She can't see that."

Brillhart caught Colette and lifted her up as she kicked her legs in protest. He set her by Germaine, who enveloped her sister with her arms. Colette shuddered and buried her head in Germaine's shoulder.

*"Maman, Papa,"* she sobbed.

Germaine, who had begun to cry again, dug her lips into Colette's hair and muttered quick, soft French until she calmed. Brillhart dug in the rations and pulled out all of the pressed sugar cubes that the men used to make the terrible coffee somewhat drinkable.

"Look," he said, holding a cube up to Colette's face. "It's magic." He stuck out his tongue and placed one of the white squares. He pulled his tongue back in, scrunched his face for a few seconds, and stuck it back out. The square had transformed into a smaller, rounded lump. He stuck his tongue back in again and repeated the process two more times. Finally, the sugar cube disappeared and his clownishness had drawn a weak giggle from Colette. He offered the box to the girls, who mimicked him. He gave one to the blind brother, Jacques. He had steadied them enough for now. He would give them the chocolate at the next outburst if necessary.

While Jacques and Colette sucked and played with the pressed sugar cubes, the older girl, Germaine, who spoke excellent English, stood in a corner out of earshot of her siblings and quietly told Brillhart the story of the last few days. The Jerries had arrived in the middle of the night, kicking open the front door, waking the whole family, but it was too late for them to hide. The children ran to the room where the parents slept, and they hugged each other in fright as the soldiers climbed the stairs. The soldiers kicked the bedroom door open, ordered the children out, and shot the parents. They made the children take them to the cellar. The Jerries were tired of their own rations too. When they found nothing, they locked the children inside. That was four days ago.

According to Germaine, the cellar had done little to muffle the sounds of battle that raged around them and of the makeshift hospital the Germans had made in their home. Shelling shook the house for hours at a time and the children

were sure they would be buried alive when the walls caved in. The screams they heard came in waves, followed by silence. "Either they died, or the morphine kicked in," Brillhart explained. Germaine had heard someone calling for his mother.

*The scene was a tear jerker. Unfortunately, I've seen things like it several times.*

*What can you do? Curse Jerry and carry on. When we left, we notified civilian affairs and made sure the children had some food. And then we looked to our next job.*

Brillhart made a bed out of the Army blankets next to the dwindling fire in the stove for the children, who had barely slept while locked in the cellar. Germaine sung to Jacques and Colette until they closed their eyes.

"It's a miracle," Germaine said. "I can't believe they're sleeping. Thank you."

"You should sleep too. We're not going anywhere right now. It's safe." Brillhart handed her the blanket he was going to use for his own bed. She wrapped it around her shoulders. Colette whimpered in her sleep. Germaine placed her hand on her sisters head to soothe her and then closed her own eyes.

Once the children were all asleep, curled in their blankets next to the stove, Brillhart went upstairs, harboring the stupid hope that the mother and father had somehow suffered only surface wounds, and were still alive. When he found them, he understood why Kelly overlooked the scene. He was surprised to find the parents' room neat, untouched, except for minimal bloodstains on the floor and the pungent odor of decomposition that they had all gotten used to. Under a pristine white blanket two figures, a set of shadowy lumps dappled with moonlight appeared to sleep.

Once, when his father had rare a day off from the railroad and slept the whole night at home, Brillhart woke before sunrise

and tiptoed to watch his parents sleeping. They snored in soft, cacophonous bursts. His mother's snore was deep and throaty, while his father exhaled shrill, nasal blasts. He watched them hopefully, willing his father to get up and go outside to the pond with him to catch the early-biting fish.

That morning, his mother awoke to her young son standing in the doorway of her bedroom. Instead of shooing him away, she lifted the covers, and Brillhart crawled over her into the warm space between his parents. He pressed his back into his mother and let the snoring lull him back to sleep.

When he pulled back the blankets on the bed in the Belgian farmhouse in Marche- en-Famenne, Brillhart was relieved. The gunshot wounds on their heads were dried. The blood had drained from the backs of their heads into the pillows and mattress. The Germans had made a perfect, thorough shot. Madame and Monsieur Jacques Bourguignon. A mother, a father asleep with the knowledge, Brillhart hoped, that their children had been spared.

It had only taken a few months of combat for Brillhart to understand what he now called German logic. Unlike the French, the Germans were exacting, methodical. When he checked German medical bags left on the field, he found them to be impeccable, well- stocked, with clean instruments. The tanks, the weapons, the burp guns fired precisely. The Germans spared no one, not even animals got in the way of the mission or the order.

Few traces of life sprouted back after their destructive path. The rumor was, though, that they were also tired. Americans were fresh from two decades of peace. It was their main advantage.

Brillhart couldn't understand why the Jerries had let the children live. This bedroom looked like someone had tucked the parents in. If the parents were trying to protect the children

or vice versa, some kind of struggle must have ensued. Sheets on the floor, nightstands knocked over blood and brains everywhere. Someone had taken care to clean up, to recreate a peaceful diorama. Given his take on German behavior, the scene both dumbfounded him and made perfect sense. He placed the covers back over the couple's head, went downstairs, and ordered Kelly and Urban to take the bodies to the barn outside before the children woke up.

*I read your letters over and over to make them last longer. It is darned nice of you to write so often. Mother never writes, but I guess she is busy with her sister and can't find time. I should be in bed right now, but I wanted to write to the dearest person in my world.*

A few hours later, in the kitchen, they were awake, hovering over the stove to keep warm. Jacques plunked away on a piano with a few keys missing. Colette was the only one still sleeping. Brillhart and his men talked intermittently with Germaine.

In 1914, the girls' father had stopped trusting Germans after losing his entire family to the first World War. As soon as Hitler annexed Austria, the father dug a hole in the basement floor, barred it with a wooden plank, and covered it with dirt. Day after day, he filled it with his hunting rifles, ammunition resistance, yards of dried sausage, pork fat, dried potatoes, jars of apples, bottles of beer, and candles. He was determined to see his family survive the second coming of the Germans. That's why, at first, the children weren't worried when the Germans locked them in the cellar. But when they tried to get to the supplies, they found that the ground was hard and frozen. They didn't have the strength to dig all the way through.

"Why didn't you tell us when we were serving you that horrible army crap?" Kelly cried.

Germaine shrugged her shoulders and blushed. "It wasn't that bad."

In minutes, the GIs were chopping away with axes they found in the barn. Within two hours, pork fat and potatoes sizzled in a heavy pan. Apples bubbled beside them. The soldiers drank the thawed beer and gnawed on the sausages, giddy that they outsmarted the Germans with this treasure trove of food. Thanks to their father, these children would survive on the surplus through the rest of the war. Colette started to cry again and run to the stairs, but Brillhart brought her back and gave her chocolate, which she had never tasted. The novelty quieted her briefly.

For the second time, Brillhart entertained the idea that June, his wife, might give birth to a girl. If so, he would name her Germaine. Jacques felt his way to the piano and played a song resembling Yankee Doodle Dandee on the remaining keys. Blind and crippled, he seemed the least affected by the parents' death or perhaps he was just used to other people taking care of him so he trusted the soldiers. Brillhart, Kelly, and Urban laughed as the boy sputtered the words to the song. How did he know? they asked. "Papa taught it to him and told him to play it as soon as the Americans got here," Germaine explained.

"Well, shit," Ramsey, a medic from Georgia said, "Your Pops had his damn head too far up north. Shove over boy, let me play you the real song." Ramsey sat next to the boy and pounded out Dixie. Even with the missing keys, Ramsey managed to render an accurate version. After hearing it that one time, Jacques replayed it perfectly.

"He's a goddamn Mozart," Ramsey said.

His sisters smiled shyly "He can do it with almost any song," Germaine said.

The GIs all sang the southern hymn of Dixie together and then returned to the food.

After more apples, potatoes, sausage, beer, and coffee, Brillhart sat down and talked to Germaine again. Germaine told them how Monsieur Bourguignon had put away money for at least one of his children to go away and study something other than farming. Since his only boy was blind and crippled, he decided Germaine would be the best educated of his two girls. The schools nearby didn't have a spot for her, so instead, she spent six months in Amsterdam studying to become an English teacher, which explained why she hardly needed any translating from Urban. She had a second cousin in Amsterdam, who lodged her in exchange for housecleaning and goods from the farm in Marche-en-Famenne that Monsieur Bourguignon brought once a month.

The mention of the Netherlands made Brillhart remember the package nestled under his coat. He had been carrying a slightly-torn Dutch comic book that he found in another house weeks ago. He understood none of the words – he just knew it wasn't German – but the pictures of the animal characters made him smile. He ruffled Colette's hair and pulled it from his leather satchel, spreading the pages out on the newly-clean kitchen table. Colette seemed transfixed by the critters jumping over the pages and giggled when Brillhart snorted like one of the pig characters. When she pointed to a horse, he neighed and stuck his upper teeth out. She giggled again. Germaine leaned over the table, too, smiling at the comics and at her little sister.

Brillhart announced that he would return in a few minutes. Germaine nodded and waved. He heard Jacques still pattering away at Dixie on the piano. He couldn't see the children's faces when he said goodbye. Perhaps the first overwhelming stirrings of fatherhood. Germaine, Colette, and the boy almost felt like his children, as if he owned them, as if they owned him. If he could wrap them up and send them to June, he would. They would love America. He envisioned a bustling household full of the adopted French-speaking children and his own.

Germaine could be the nanny and go to school. He pictured the crippled boy sitting in the sun by the pool he hoped to build one day. Water exercises would be good for atrophied legs. If he stayed with them any longer, he might stay forever. Brillhart kept walking.

When he reached the main road, he saw the line of surrendered German soldiers, many carrying litters of wounded. They filed past Brillhart as he went to the battalion station in the center of town. Kelly would have yelled obscenities at the prisoners, but Brillhart kept his head down.

That afternoon, the Railsplitters moved on to another town, another battle. A few days later, they came back through Marche-en-Famenne. Brillhart had let civil affairs know about Germaine, the two younger children, and the dead parents. Brillhart walked into the center of Marche-en-Famenne taking photos for June, though few of the buildings rising out of the icy rubble remained intact. The Town Hall with its Romanesque and Gothic facades, the Mosan church and belfry, made of red brick with ornate white trimmings, and the classical columns of what had been a bank, represented Old Europe. This was what June would want to see. This was where she dreamed that Brillhart ate and slept each night. He tried to aim the camera so that it didn't capture the hungry townspeople or piles of broken homes. Sometimes, without taking pictures, he let the camera linger in front of his face to hide his eyes that searched everywhere for Germaine and the children.

He paused in front of a modest, partially-caved-in church and observed a small cemetery with a group of civilians gathered by tombstones that had been knocked sideways by shelling. A priest crossed his hands over the bodies of the dead before closing their makeshift caskets. Brillhart recognized, among them, Germaine's mother and father. Next to them was a hole that Brillhart knew had taken hours to dig in the hard ground. He looked into the crowd for the children but still didn't see them. He hoped they were drinking Red Cross hot chocolate and

eating doughnuts under warm blankets.

*Today, I saw townspeople burying bodies in a churchyard. Amid the rubble and ruin, a small group surrounded a priest who was quietly conducting the ceremony. Some of our boys helped to dig the graves. The parents from the farmhouse were among the bodies.*

*There is so much ruin. It's hard to imagine the Belgian people regaining the quiet lives they once had. And at the same time, it's easy to see how this destruction feeds all our hatred of the Germans. It makes us want to kill more, and take fewer prisoners, to grind every German deep into the soil. Sometimes I am afraid of how you will react when I return. I hope and pray that you'll still know me, but that the memory of this ruin will stay vivid enough that we will never let the German or any belligerent nation get a foothold again.*

*We thoroughly enjoyed the cookies and the Readers Digests you sent, as well as the tuna fish, knackers, sardines, and saltines. Thank you. My darling, I must stop now. I have a big day ahead of me. I will try to write more often, but regardless of how busy I am, I'm never too busy to remember you and the things we've done together, to think about our plans for the future. I love you more every day. Brillhart.*



Brillhart's wife upon the birth of their first child, a girl, in April of 1945. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

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# New Essay by Patrick Medema: Being Acquainted with Violence

✘ I was in junior high the first time my friend was bullied. This was during the late 1990s, before we could maliciously attack someone from our phones or smart devices, when belittling someone took a personal touch, away from keyboard. I wasn't there but the bully had hit my friend, nothing serious, no broken bones, just a little hurt pride. However, when his father found out, he got in touch with my father and together they agreed that my friend and I needed to learn how to defend ourselves. I wasn't asked, I was told that I would learn to fight. Thus began my acquaintance with the practice of violence.

I've never thought of violence as being "evil." I was taught that violence is a tool, the same way a gun or a knife is a tool. And while violence isn't the solution to every problem, the proper application of violence can be a good thing. There are limits though, a time and a place to call it quits before violence begets violence or you find yourself on the wrong side of a jail sentence. That being said, I've never understood pacifism, the idea that violence serves no purpose or that civilized society has no need for violence is a joke and a poor one at that. Violence can be a good thing, a necessary thing so long as you understand its proper

application. It's a thin, hazy line at times but a line nonetheless.

After the decision was made, my first acquaintance with violence came in the form of a boxing ring. Boxing, or Pugilism to the sophisticant, is an art. There's a finesse to it that is lacking in the more popular mixed martial arts. It's hard to explain to someone that's never done it but it's like a dance, a graceful and violent series of motions, second nature to the practitioner but magic to the people watching.

It's easy throwing a punch but throwing a punch well, that's the trick, and it's not all about throwing punches. The secret to being a good fighter is making the other guy miss, going blow for blow with a guy doesn't mean you know how to fight, all it means is that you can take a beating. Sometimes that's enough but there's a difference between a brawler and a fighter. This is the way I was taught to fight, with style and finesse and, most importantly, with my head. But, for all the talk of magic and finesse, boxing is all about the show, it's a sport. Two equally matched fighters in a ring with a referee and gloves isn't the same thing as a brawl in the street. In the ring, your title may be on the line but odds are that you're going to walk away afterwards. There is no such security in the real world, a fight in the street or a brawl in a bar could end up costing you your life, whether that means a cell or a box.

Knowing how to fight in a ring or an octagon doesn't means you can handle yourself on the streets, where we visit violence upon each other not for sport but for real, where anything can happen and anyone can catch a beating. The man that places all his hopes in his ability to perform is a fool, especially when violence is involved. Just because you can fight, doesn't mean you should. There are no guarantees in a fight. It doesn't matter if you're the greatest fighter in the world; if you go looking for a fight, you're going to find one, one you might not be able to win.

The thing about violence is that even when it's justified, it doesn't mean that your problem will be solved. In life or death situations, violence can save your life. In a combat zone, violence is a daily occurrence and while you are justified in defending your life, or the life of your comrades, there are consequences. The harming of another human being is anathema to our souls. The long-term effects of war and posttraumatic stress disorder are only now being fully realized as so many of our veterans are struggling to overcome the mental and emotional scars of facing and perpetrating violence. Even a simple street fight can have long term repercussions. A fist is a little like a bullet, once it's been fired, everything else that happens afterwards is on you, the good and the bad.

My father was, and is, an old-school kind of guy. His father, my grandfather, was a cold man, detached and distant from his children, a veteran of the Korean War and a champion fighter. My father grew up in a time when streets and neighborhood were sacred and you defended them at all costs. My father was a good fighter and good fighters earn a reputation. There's a certain mystique when it comes to neighborhood tough guys, those guys that people cross the street to avoid, the way the room gets quiet when they walk in. It's intoxicating, the kind of power you can cultivate with the threat of violence. But neighborhoods don't last and when the neighborhoods went away and he was forced to participate in society, my father brought his reputation with him. And, as a teamster in Chicago during the 80's and 90's, a penchant for violence was a good thing.

Thus, a man who thrived on violence, or the threat of violence, and who chose to isolate himself from others raised a son to believe that violence was an easy way of getting what he wanted and that people in general were only useful if they served your needs. If they couldn't help, then they were discarded. If they could, then they were cultivated. And, if they threatened you, you hurt them. Growing up, it got to a

point where it was easier sizing a person up for a fight rather than getting to know them. I'll be honest, I'm not sure which came first, the ability to commit violence or the ability to isolate, but it's a symbiotic relationship. Turn yourself off to people and you start to lose interest in their well-being. Once that happens, hurting them isn't all that difficult. Not when you're the most important person you know.

When violence is an easy means of dealing with a person, that person's value as a human is diminished. The amount of time you're willing to invest in a person is directly proportional to the value you attribute to that person. Why waste the time talking to them, understanding them, empathizing with them, if it's easier to just shut yourself off? It's a lot harder learning to live with someone instead of just hurting them when they don't do what you say or want. It's a time saver too. It's much faster to hit someone than it is to sit down and talk with them.

Devaluing a person means deciding that they are not worthy and therefore require minimal effort on my part. This is hubris, believing that I'm better by virtue of who I am and what I've accomplished, as if such things hold any real meaning. The funny thing about arrogance, you're never really as good as you think you are and there is always someone better. Diminishing a person's status to that of a "thing" is unnatural, it's a conscious act driven by our selfishness or, if we're being really honest, our insecurities and fears. This is what relationships are all about, sharing who we are, imperfections and all, and having that vulnerability reciprocated. I dare say that kind of rejection is more painful than a punch to the face.

It wasn't until years after I'd joined the military that I started seeing people as being meaningful, not just "useful." So many of my problems with relationships were a result of my belief that people were just "things," an attitude I had chosen to pursue for so long. It sounds silly to say aloud but

people have value, even the ones that you don't like. And while I still struggle to build and maintain relationships, they are worth the investment. And not only that, what kind of life is that, plotting, manipulating, using people to your own ends? Pop culture wants to glamourize it on T.V. and in movies but like everything else pop culture produces, it's a bunch of lies. Think about all the craven, sycophants trying to earn their way to the top. Is that how you see yourself? Is that how you want others to see you?

As long as we exist in relationships with each other, violence is a possibility. If we agree that some violence is acceptable, how do we avoid unnecessary violence? Who is our enemy? The guy that talks shit about you behind your back? So what? The guy that cut you off in traffic? So what? Your shitty neighbor down the block? Call the police if you have a problem. What good is violence in any of these situations? It's satisfying, or it can be, hurting someone. But what does it accomplish? What does it do for you other than cause more problems? In the right situation, violence can save lives. In the wrong situation, it can ruin them. If we value people and want to avoid violence then we must be willing to humble ourselves, to quiet that nagging voice that tells us every slight or perceived insult should be answered with violence. Life cannot be spent sizing people up in preparation for violence. Man was never meant to live that way.

I'm not an expert but it takes someone acquainted with violence, comfortable with violence, to know when it's appropriate to use it. I feel bad for people that have been sheltered from violence all their life. These people are ill prepared for the reality that violence is an inevitable part of life. I don't think we need to revel in it but we need to be prepared for it. This isn't a rally cry for the Second Amendment or a revitalization of the "Affliction" mixed martial arts culture. If anything, it's an appreciation for those that accept violence as a part of life and are willing

to use violence to protect others, our military, and our law enforcement.

But, even amongst our armed forces, what percentage have actually taken part in violence? And of that percentage, how many have the requisite maturity and experience to apply violence in an appropriate manner, enough to save lives but not so much as to appear savage or malicious. Ditto for our law enforcement. We want to believe that those charged with the use of necessary violence are grizzled, battle tested, level-headed men and women but the truth is that most of them are no different from the people they "protect." An oath of service or a badge doesn't mean you are exceptionally qualified to use violence. I'd go so far to say that the majority of controversy surrounding excessive force and wrongful deaths is not only a failure of judgment on the part of the individual involved but a lack of preparation on the part of law enforcement in general when it comes to the proper use of and application of violence in a high-risk situation. And I don't mean to second guess anyone, I won't play armchair officer, but we owe it to our police, and our military, to prepare them as best we can for a job only a few are willing to undertake.

I think it would be great if we lived in a selfless society dedicated to the preservation and betterment of man, where egos are non-existent and where people are valued as equals rather than treated like "things." But that just isn't the case. Ego is a part of who we are. We can fight against our baser instincts but inevitably we all give into selfishness. In "civilized" society, there are times when the need for violence seems so distant but I urge you not to be so naive. The need is real. It's with an appreciation of this truth that I continue boxing, attempting to perfect the art I started so long ago. The capacity for violence is like a cushion, a safety net designed to protect me and mine from the uncertainties of life. The trick is not losing sight of the

fact that there is still a cost even if justified. This is how we keep our humanity while still being acquainted with violence.

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# Writing about Our Worst Experiences: Reshaping Memories



Max Ernst's *The Stolen Mirror* (1941)

As many artists have noted, memory underpins imagination. Creating new artistic and intellectual works depends critically on the reshaping of what has gone before.

—Charles Fernyhough. *Pieces of Light*

At our recent MFA residency, I gave a workshop on writing about your worst experience, using a number of examples to illustrate how writers confront personal crises like madness, divorce, stillbirth, and the death of an adult child. To emphasize the role of craft in the nature of the telling, I chose two examples for each subject to illustrate possible approaches. The point I hoped to make was that there is no “natural” way to write about a traumatic event, no inevitable way of retelling. Choices and strategies can't be avoided. Memory is only a starting point, and often not reliable. What results is, in effect, an inevitable reshaping that involves re-imagining and re-detailing.

My choices for stillbirth were passages from two memoirs, Elizabeth McCracken's *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My*

*Imagination* and Ariel Levy's *The Rules Do Not Apply*. Although McCracken's embryo had been declared dead, she still had to go through a delivery, in her retelling focusing on what other women had told her about stillbirth and on her concern that she might upset the pregnant woman outside in a waiting room. She doesn't address her own feelings, at least not directly. Levy, on the other hand, uses a very different strategy. Hers was not a literal stillbirth. The premature baby lived briefly outside the womb. Her telling focuses on precise observation of the visual details of the child in her hands and, to a lesser degree, on her uncertainties about logistics, such as what to do about the umbilical cord. Contrasting approaches to the same harrowing experience, both avoiding explicit rendering of their emotions.

My choice of the worst experience topic was not merely academic, which is why I used examples about madness. Just a few weeks before, *Broad Street* magazine had published my essay "Commitment," about the trials of coping with the extreme psychosis of my first wife, Judy. Living through the experience had been a hell. But writing and revising an essay about it had been a process of seeking an opening tactic, choosing and arranging incidents as best I could recall, finding words and images—essentially absorption into the strategies of a creative process, not unlike writing a completely fabricated short story.

Vivian Gornik, in *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, distinguishes the events that are the starting point for the act of writing from the representation that results:

Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.

But while fiction allows the writer's persona to exist in the background, memoir places the writer himself or herself in the foreground. Gornik calls it an "unsurrogated" persona and explains the demands on a writer of revelatory nonfiction: "The unsurrogated narrator has the monumental task of transforming low-level self-interest into the kind of detached empathy required of a piece of writing that is to be of value to the disinterested reader."

### **The Dilemma of Memoir**

That certainly was my dilemma in writing "Commitment." How would I provide vivid descriptions to convey what I remembered experiencing and turn them into meaningful insights? Ironically, though I was hoping to give the reader an emotional frisson, I—while composing—was compartmentalizing, concentrating on finding effective words rather than reliving the decades-old agonies. Yet reading the magazine's proof months after completing the essay turned out to be an emotional experience, even though the events had taken place some forty years ago, and I was long remarried. But at this point I was just a reader, not the author.

This wasn't the first essay I had written about Judy; the earlier, called "Fade Far Away," was based on the intense presence of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* in our lives. The relationship and the title choice of another phrase from Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" had become the basis of my deliberate essay design. (When that work was selected as a "notable" in *Best American Essays*, I felt an unease about exploiting pain for praise.) With "Commitment," a title I had long been contemplating before the actual writing, I worked with the ironic dichotomy of commitment to marriage vows and commitment to a mental institution. It became the basis of my strategy.

Living with the nightmare of Judy's madness had been, by far, the worst experience of my life. Yet, for me, writing about it

was inevitable, just as many other writers find themselves drawn to creating poems, essays, stories, and novels about their most distressing times. An old saw among writers is, everything is material. Even, or perhaps especially, trauma. While non-writers often can't stop replaying the worst in their brains, writers use the page to recreate the awful, much like picking at a scab. Some have to do it immediately, while it's still raw, others—like me—decades later or on several occasions over the years.

During our MFA residency, for example, one colleague read the opening section of a book about her husband's dying at age forty. Another read the beginning of a memoir about being harassed by her graduate school mentor, and her anger at university officials who, unable to deny her evidence, badgered her into silence about it.

Other colleagues in the audience had published essays about topics such as their father's suicide and their own teenage indiscretions. Students I've worked with have also written about the painful deaths of spouses, about the abuse of a dead spouse's family, about post-traumatic stress from serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, about recovering from addictions. These are only the examples I'm aware of, certain many others exist.

### **Why Do We Do It?**

Why do we dredge up emotional pain? Why do we spend so much time immersed in reliving the most terrible times of our lives, times most people strive to suppress? Why don't we just cry and scream?

Regarding screaming, I recall what I had been told about a former faculty colleague, a clinical psychologist with a private practice. He was an adherent of Arthur Janov's primal scream therapy, treating a patient who had dropped her infant from an upper story apartment window. Every visit, she came into his office and just screamed and screamed and screamed.

Although some writers may have screamed their own distress, as I once did, that's not sufficient for individuals with a commitment to finding words for emotions. Rather than screaming, we seek the language and the craft strategies to present our greatest unhappiness. The process is not simply a matter of writing as therapy, a raw verbal outpouring, even though that might be a help to non-writers desperate for immediate psychic relief. Those writing for therapy are really just pouring feelings onto paper or screen, seeking a release rather than—like the serious writer—seeking to produce a creative work. The writer knows first and foremost that he or she is seeking methods to best convey the core of the experience, and make that core resonate with a reader.

Some writers certainly have deliberately written about worst experiences with a goal of emotional consolation or even healing from a trauma. And some may be unaware that such ends lay behind their creating. Whatever the writer's goal—relief, healing, or just a crafted memoir—the writing itself cannot avoid revision, embellishing, and reorganizing the materials evoked through acts of memory. While any person who relives a worst experience is involved in a similar process, that person is almost always unaware of the shaping. Writers do it consciously and deliberately as they employ literary techniques to turn life into art.

### **Remembering as a Creative Act**

When we write about our worst experiences, we are, of course, accessing memory; but memory is not a reliable tool. What we retrieve from the dark nights of our souls is some recollection of emotional anguish and some sense of the events behind that anguish. Such recollection is far from an exact replication of what actually took place.

The way we remember—as the psychologist and writer Charles Fernyhough explains in his book, *Pieces of Light*—belies the common notion of retrieving a literal reproduction stored

whole in some mental file cabinet. Each remembering, in fact, is a recreation from the bits and pieces stored in different areas of our brain. Remembering itself is, in essence, a creative act. Fernyhough writes:

The truth is that autobiographical memories are not possessions that you either have or do not have. They are mental constructions, created in the present moment, according to the demands of the present. ... Memory is more like a *habit*, a process of constructing something from its parts, in similar but subtly changing ways each time, whenever the occasion arises. This reconstructive nature of memory can make it unreliable.

Daniel Schacter, a Harvard psychologist, in *The Seven Sins of Memory*, explains one aspect of this unreliability by noting the impossibility of separating the actual events of the past from all that has happened in one's life since then. In effect, memory is an interaction of past happenings and ongoing inputs derived from our later happenings:

We extract key elements from our experience rather than retrieve copies of them. Sometimes, in the process of reconstructing we add on feelings, beliefs, or even knowledge we obtained after the experience. In other words, we bias our memories of the past by attributing to them emotions or knowledge we acquired after the event.

In addition to the "intrusion" of new after-the-fact material, even the roots of the original memory are not contained as a whole in some corner of our brains. Instead, they are scattered throughout a number of different cerebral areas, requiring a reassembly that in itself introduces uncertainties. Fernyhough calls them "close collaborations between the medial temporal lobe circuits."

While Schacter addresses the "bias" that results from subsequent living, Fernyhough adds "distortion" from the

workings of the brain. Fundamentally, it's impossible for anyone to recall past events with anything like photographic accuracy and reliability (excluding the rare memory savants with hyperthymesia, the ability to recall most details of their lives.) But even a photograph from our past, while complete in itself, is seen through the eyes of our present.

While I suspect that few writers who find words to relate and contemplate their worst experience are experts in the psychology or memory and the functioning of the human brain, they know instinctively that their work will only be an approximation of what "really" happened, not unlike a movie that purports to be a retelling of historical events. But while the screenwriters' fabrications are conscious choices for dramatic effect, the writer no matter how intent on avoiding falsifications cannot avoid creating something different from the actual events. Beyond matters of selection and organization, even the choice of a single word to describe an aspect of an experience brings connotations unlike those of a different word, and no "right" word exists.

Certainly, the primal-screaming mother who dropped her baby is accessing a raw, excruciating emotion. If she were forced to put what happened into language, the result would be only the shadow of a retelling, probably different each time she constructed sentences.

### **How Memoir Writers Remember**

The novelist Jack Smith recently interviewed several memoir writers for a 2018 article in *The Writer*, "Is the Memoir Market Oversaturated?" Two of the writers address the reorganizations and limitations of memory.

Kate Braverman, author of *Frantic Transmissions to and from Los Angeles: An Accidental Memoir*, states:

Memoirs are not acts of journalism, either. The writer selects from the monumental possibilities, strategizes,

omits, truncates, and then surprisingly expands. One examines and revises, denies and exaggerates, and in that active engagement with the page, the unexpected emerges. Memoir writing is about the illusion of truth.

Peter Selgin, author of *The Inventors*, emphasizes the role of imagination:

Among the memoirist's greatest challenges is to rescue memory from imagination, and to do so with the understanding that the one can't survive without the other. The trick in writing memoir as faithfully as possible is to be aware of the role imagination plays in shaping our memories, in making them cohere into scenes.

Both writers emphasize the central role of creative choices and the awareness that what will result is not a literal replication, but rather a shaped imaginative work based upon actual events and people.

At our MFA residency, when questioned about their essays and chapters about a worst experience, the authors all noted a detachment, a compartmentalizing, as they immersed in creative strategies to get a reader to share their distress. And they knew what they were producing was a literary approximation. Because the creation was—invariably—separate from the actual experiences, the biases and distortions of memory were givens. The inevitable choices of vocabulary, selection, and organization made while writing produce additional alterations.

### **A New Version of What Happened**

Fernyhough goes further in distinguishing memoir from memory. As a conscious art form, memoir is much more detailed and specific, and “vividness does not guarantee authenticity.”

Writing about our worst experiences produces remade memories, which, as Fernyhough and Schacter demonstrate, is true for all

remembering, but even more so for the writer aware of consciously manipulating his or her past for literary goals. In a real sense, finding words, images, and relationships results in a new imaginative version of that worst experience.

In light of Schacter's explanation, any future remembering of that painful event will incorporate the "fabrications" of the written piece as one more influence when trying to reconstruct what has happened since the original. As hard as I tried to capture the "real experience" in my essay "Commitment," I couldn't avoid reshaping and, no doubt, recreating. Any of my future attempts to remember those painful long-ago events are now inseparable from the details of my reconstruction.

As much as a writer may strive to recapture the authenticity of how it was, an accurate depiction of awful events, no matter how painful, both the nature of memory and the consequences of craft choices will result in a variation of what actually happened, an echo of experience. The result is not a falsification. Beneath all literary remakings of worst experiences lies the core of something real that shook the writer's life. When the result is successful literature, the writer has something to say that matters to readers, perhaps not discovered until the process of recreation.