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The Story of an Essay

1.
The essay, “On Drowning”, begins like a buzz in the back of my brain while I sit in traffic and think about a Briscoe Boy I know. We’re on a bridge over the Green River and my four-year-old son yammers nonsense in the backseat of our rumbling 1998 Toyota Previa. Since 2017, my research of the Briscoe Memorial School for Boys, a Catholic orphanage run by the Irish Christian Brothers, which stood near my home for sixty years, from 1910 to 1969, fills my thoughts with Catholic school boys, like my own three but separated by time. The boy, Francis Bellar, lost his mother when he was five years old and then drowned at Briscoe School in 1916 while swimming in the Green River. Francis tried to save another boy—seventeen-year-old Edmond Carroll—from drowning but they both succumb. Each time I rediscover the long-forgotten stories of a Briscoe Boy it infects my thoughts like an illness. The only cure is to make sense of it in writing.

“On Drowning” is a sharp departure from my thesis work, a coming-of-age memoir about the year I spend in national service with AmeriCorps’ National Civilian Community Corps. Because my advisor, W. Ralph Eubanks—author, Guggenheim Fellowship recipient, and Ole Miss Faculty—is also a parent to boys and because we share the Catholic faith, I reluctantly include a very rough first draft of the essay, at the time barely more than a stream-of-consciousness, which explored home, faith, family and how they transcend time to weave themselves with history and the places we move through. While it’s a risk, passing the draft onto Professor Eubanks is a serendipitous decision that changes the semester’s path and the way I see myself as a writer.

Ralph agrees that the piece is still in its infancy, but he sees its potential and helps to identify where I'm stuck. "…*you have studied this historical incident and researched it, but I believe you feel as if you are cheapening that history by tying it to yourself…we all live through history and have a connection to the past. But memory and history are often woven together, and I can see how this essay could be a strong weaving together of the ways the historical evokes connections to the personal in the here and now."* Instead of reading like the personal essay I'd intended it to be, the first draft is a clunky AP history paper. The story is well-researched and compelling, but in all the places where personal narrative belongs, I skim the surface of vulnerability like a dragonfly over a pond. This is the root issue; I need to decide what I want the work to be and then be brave enough to make it that.

2.

Once I summon the courage, a path for my career, one that makes history as personal for readers as it always has been for me, becomes as clear as a mountain stream. Luckily, there are writers who've blazed a trail. Sandra Vea's book *Rising Son: A US Soldier's Secret and Heroic Role in World War II*, is the story of her father-in-law, Masao Abe's, time as a Japanese American interpreter for U.S. in-the-field intelligence, a top-secret role he is forbidden to speak of for thirty years. For the telling of Masao's stories, Vea positions her reader as a fly on the wall spying on the author's visits to the old man. She makes his favorite fried egg sandwich, or they drive to the casino while Masao gets lost in the past and the reader gets lost with both of them. Vea writes, "Hey, Mas, remember when we were talking about San Bernadino before the war?" He nodded; it looked like a go. "How did you find out you were drafted?" He looked out the window, calling his history forth, "Let's see now…" (p. 64).

In Sarah M. Broom's National Book Award Winning book, *The Yellow House* the author shows how the history of her city—New Orleans—impacts the history of her family. She writes, "Before it was the Yellow House, the only house I knew, it was a green house, the house my eleven siblings knew. The facts of the world before me inform, give shape and context to my own life" (p. 9). These reminders of how the past impacts the present seem to me a type of activism. When writers like Broom create history that's personal and relevant, particularly at a time when a vocal faction of Americans would have us forget the more difficult periods of our past, they are torchbearers against ignorance, time-travelers that will be picked up for generations.

In Debra Gwartney's memoir about growing up misplaced in the West, despite being a third-generation Idahoan, she superimposes herself on the missionary Narcissa Whitman, the first white Anglo-Protestant woman west of the Mississippi, who also spent her life as a stranger in the West. Before the narrative begins, Gwartney notes: "I approached this material as neither scholar nor historian. My intent with this book is to offer a personal account rather than an exhaustive examination or analysis of historical events. The interpretation of those events is my own" (p. ix). In other words, her goal is to make history personal, and it's this work, not scholarly work, that I am most interested in reading and most interested in writing.

My hesitation, which Ralph identified, with personal-historical narrative is the fine line writers walk when telling these types of stories. When history and memoir are woven together there is a perception of exploitation if the connection between the two is unclear. In *The Third Rainbow Girl,* the author Emma Copley-Eisenberg weaves two stories. First, her own: a New York City native living, working, and coming of age with AmeriCorps deep in Appalachia's

National Radio Quiet Zone, a place set apart from time, where radio, television, internet, and cell phones are forbidden. Her story is braided with the true stories of two women, dubbed 'The Rainbow Girls' for the West Virginia festival they were hitchhiking to when they were murdered in the summer of 1980. As a reader, I enjoyed the book for Eisenberg's storytelling and as a writer for its craft. But many of the book's online reviews are vitriolic in their accusations that the author exploits the murdered women for personal gain—as if literary nonfiction writers are in it to get rich. In either case, I'm given pause. Is writing about the tragedy of a hundred-year-old drowning and setting it against my own suffering, a pittance laid aside two dead boys, exploitation? Is my son's disability my story to tell at all? The answers aren't clear yet, but I keep at it and follow the sage advice: 'Write without fear and edit without mercy.'

3.

At the end of my semester with Ralph, the essay has taken unexpected roads and still isn't ready to share. I have, before, considered writing about my adult conversion to Catholicism, which surprises no one as much as my mostly Catholic family, but all attempts feel forced and are sticky with sentimentality. And then, I find in *The Northwest Catholic Progress*—a publication of the Seattle Archdiocese—a 1916 article outlining the afternoon the boys drowned. It notes that "*The one consoling feature about the two deaths is that they took place on the first Friday of the month and both boys had gone to confession and Communion on that day*." And that, "*While on their way to the river two of the boys missed Bellar and coming back found him kneeling before the altar communing with his God, little thinking that he would appear before his Lord in such a short time*". From those short paragraphs, my direct connection with Francis becomes our shared faith, a communion of saints. Another surprise, obvious in retrospect, is how deeply the landscape intertwines with the narrative. Like Broom in *The Yellow House,* I'm unable to

separate life, family, and home, from the physical places that surrounded me. Broom describes New Orleans with loving poetry, and I find myself desperate to do the same for the mountains, valleys, and Salish Sea of Washington. By the light of the Christmas tree, I work draft after draft to get the elements of setting and personalized history right.

The goal is to have a sharable draft by the first of the year. Early on New Year's Day, the essay gets a last review before sending it off to Ralph, no longer my adviser but a Contributing Editor to *The Common*, the University of Massachusetts-Amherst's literary journal "*whose mission is to deepen our individual and collective sense of place*." I send "On Drowning" as if unto the universe, with a promise that I will wait with grace, so it's a thrill to hear straight away with more encouragement and a few suggestions. Ralph's main concern is unclear transitions. Because the narrative hops back in time to 1916, the year Francis drowned, then to the present day, and then to several years ago when I convert to Catholicism, the transitions need to act as a milepost in time for the reader. Because my draft transitions are too abrupt, the reader isn't always centered in the confusing timeline.

The first and most important example and the first transition through time, occurs after my son Emmett and I are introduced in the first section. The second section abruptly introduces Francis in 1916 with only a scant connection between the two boys. Ralph advises that these transitions need not require major revision, only a sentence or two for clarification and connection. In the end, I add this simple transition, "*I imagine the river's power pulls him under and drags him away. The thought tugs so hard that I swallow sobs, which aren't for my son but for another little boy, like Emmett, who is rendered voiceless by circumstances. When the light turns green, I let go of my white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel and whispered the boy's*

name–Francis Bellar–so that even after a hundred years, he is not silenced by the river." I revise for clear transitions throughout and then pass it back. Throughout this process, Ralph never loses faith in the piece. If *The Common* passes, he knows others who might be interested, including an editor at *America Magazine*, a 100+-year-old Jesuit publication, and a pilgrimage for progressive Catholic writers. But because of the essay's lush sense of space, it seems to best belong with *The Common*. Ralph agrees and passes it on to Jennifer Acker, founder and Editor in Chief at *The Common.*

Next, is the hardest thing of all: the waiting. A month goes by. I scour back issues of *Writer's Digest* and Google without end to decide when it's appropriate to bug an editor. I don't want to be annoying but also want to be clear that I take the process seriously. I haven't forgotten; I'm only being patient, or at least attempting the façade of patience. Exactly one month after Ralph passes on the essay I follow up with a friendly email, and he assures me the time we've waited is appropriate and not to give up hope.

4.

A week later there's good news. *The Common* would like to publish "On Drowning", with some edits. I am thrilled. *The Common* is a well-respected publication—the 2022 edition of *The Best American Essays*, edited by Alexander Chee includes, in a list of Notable Essays and Literary Nonfiction of 2021, the essay "New Methods in Tooth Brushing" (A.L. Phillips Bell) originally published in their spring print edition. The opportunity to work with an editor the caliber of Jennifer Acker—MFA, Bennington College—who teaches writing and editing at Amherst College, is a privilege. Her novel *The Limits of the World* was honored by the Massachusetts Book Award and her short stories, essays, translations, and reviews have appeared in *The*

Washington Post, Literary Hub, n+1, Guernica, The Yale Review, Off Assignment, and *Ploughshares.*

Ralph makes an email introduction and tells me that I'm in good hands with Jennifer, something he knows personally. Before accepting a Contributing Editor position in 2018, Ralph is a member of its community of writers; his essay "Passing Strange", about returning to live and work in Mississippi after being away for forty years, is published in a 2016 issue. Jennifer welcomes me to *The Common* and introduces me to Elly Hong, Amherst College's Literary Editorial Fellow, who will be my primary editor. Although Jennifer has decades of experience writing and editing, I suspect working with Elly will be a positive encounter. Our family nurse practitioner is a professor at the University of Washington School of Nursing, and on clinic days he often asks patients' permission to include a nursing resident, many of whom are earning Ph. D.s in Nursing. Our family loves Nurse Bob's students. At the beginning of their careers, they're not yet jaded by the weight of a tangled U.S. medical system, and they are endlessly thorough, eager not to miss anything their advisor catches. I guess working with an advanced editing student might be similar.

Despite assurances, I am enormously nervous. This is the first time I'll work with an editor who is more invested in their publication than in my education. Publishing my first piece is a thrill, but it also fills my soul, which leans heavily towards anxiety, with tiny shards of dread. I am filled with the self-talk of imposter syndrome. "This essay is shit; they're just humoring you." "You don't deserve this." "Your work is mediocre at best." "It's only a matter of time before they'll change their minds." I also worry about advocating for my work against changes I disagree with or changes that alter my voice, but the first round of edits comes from Jennifer

whose comments begin to persuade me *The Common* is genuinely invested in the progress of their writers, especially MFA students. There's no red pen, no vitriol, and no changes, at all, to the core of my narrative. Instead, the margins are filled with provocative questions and feedback that help me push the piece along on my own terms. Determination begins to replace the sickness in my core.

5.

I take the three most important pieces of feedback from Jennifer and get to work on the first revision. First, I need to clarify the essay's thru-narrative. She gives me this to consider: "*The most important story here is the narrator and the factors that drive her conversion to Catholicism*." This is a surprise. I thought "On Drowning" was about Emmett and Francis, and that I function to narrate their story, but it turns out they operate to frame mine. Jennifer's feedback reminds me of advice given to me by my advisor—award-winning author, and director of Northwestern University's Litowitz MFA/MA Program in Creative Writing—Dr. Chris Abani. On a different piece he'd commented, "*The past is important only as it reveals something in the present*." Clarification of the thru-story seems to be a consistent issue in my work, but now that the problem is clear so is the road toward a solution. In fact, Jennifer's permission to explore my story more deeply, a path I avoided, gives me permission to be more vulnerable, which is both liberating and terrifying. In addition to clarifying the essential narrative, Jennifer urges me on toward divining a motivation. She writes, "*I'd like to understand better why this story from 100 years ago has such a hold on you*." Finally, Jennifer identifies an issue of craft; the chronology I'd worked hard to clarify is still sticky in a few spots.

In retrospect, I have two regrets about this first round of edits. First, I should have shared this piece with someone aside from Ralph before submitting it to *The Common*. The work's

vulnerability made me reluctant to do so. Had I relied on fellow writers in my community, issues, especially those of confusing chronology, may have been at least partially resolved before it was in Jennifer's hands. In that case, she could have provided advice of greater depth on other aspects of my writing. Another regret of similar consequence is not spending enough time reading the piece aloud. This semester Chris provided recorded feedback on a packet and read aloud a short passage he thought was especially well-written. To hear my words read so kindly and eloquently forces me to hear the work in a way I haven't before. My writing has been described as rich, and when Chris reads the passage, I truly hear the lushness of the language for the first time; the recording is something I'll treasure. While I'll never read aloud like Chris can, spending more time thinking about my work orally and listening to myself and others read it before it's ready to share will make for better writing.

One thing I'm glad I did on each round of edits, the first with Jennifer and two rounds with Ellie, is to create detailed handwritten notes in my journal. These notes help to analyze where change can occur, identify patterns, and include direct quotes from comments made by either editor. The notes allow me to see clearly how to move forward and provide a record that makes the work tangible, more valuable, and has made this process of reflection more meaningful.

In response to Jennifer's edits, I add to "On Drowning" a section about my years-long obsession with the history of the Briscoe Memorial School for Boys. Because I don't want the story to get too carried away with the school at large, and because I'm apt to do so, this narrative isn't included in early drafts. Instead, it's my intent to focus on the story of two boys separated by time and how, in different ways, they're connected in the present. But without providing

context, the reader is left bewildered as to why this matters. As Jennifer points out, it's the narrator who drives the piece, and it's critical to understand her motivation. To continue to clarify the chronology of the piece, I revise the order in which the narrative is presented and focus time through Emmett's age like this: "*Emmett is nine months old when all three boys are baptized at Holy Family Catholic Church."* While Elly will keep these edits and others I make because of Jennifer's suggestions, there's still more to do.

6.

Whereas Jennifer's edits focus on the clarification of thesis, motivation, and chronology, Elly and I get down and dirty into the details of what drives the things Jennifer pointed out. While the details about Briscoe Memorial School for Boys have been expanded since the first round of edits, Elly advocates making it even more of a character in the essay. Currently, I'm working on another piece about a Briscoe Boy whose mother is found murdered in a rowboat floating offshore of Guemes, an island in Washington's San Juan archipelago. Here too finding the balance of what context is necessary for the reader to understand my motivation where Briscoe is concerned is a challenge. Elly's essential message is that the reader still needs more. Her willingness to pull from me was, honestly, the opposite of what I thought working with an editor would be.

After a second round of edits, the reader has a better description, upfront, of what the Briscoe Memorial School for Boys is, who it serves, and who runs it. The reader must understand that Briscoe School is essentially a Catholic orphanage, not in any way an elite school and that it served indigent children for whom Briscoe was a last resort. I had failed to be thorough enough, to do as Annie Dillard advises, "Always locate the reader in time and space—

again and again…hit the five senses; give the history of the person and place, and the look of the person and the place…As you write, stick everything in a place and time" (xiii). Elly agrees with Jennifer's analysis that the essay's primary story is my conversion to Catholicism and challenges me to expand this story even further. Finally, to complete the drowning metaphor, it's critical to be vulnerable about my own guilt around Emmett's language delays and connect it to the universal guilt that parents now, then, and everywhere around the world have about what may or may not happen to their families. These are major revisions, I admit to being overwhelmed, but the autonomy I'm given to continue to build what's mine gives me confidence.

I add 1500 words to the original draft and again reorder large chunks of the narrative. The edits involve two all-nighters. I have strange dreams for a week, and then hand over the new draft to Elly. To my astonishment, she comes back with a few small changes, mostly grammatical, and says we're ready to publish.

7.
"On Drowning" goes live online at *The Common* on March 21st, and I spend most of the day in abject terror, praying that no one will find or read it despite *The Common's* excellent efforts to promote the piece on all their social media outlets. The next day, I take a deep shaky breath and get to work because I do, in fact, want people to read it. There is value in vulnerability. I am called to be a voice of faith for families with disabled children, and the story of Francis' drowning deserves to be told. Because my career goals include teaching in higher education, I understand, from a professional standpoint, the importance of publishing literary work. Falling back on my experiences as a non-profit executive, I write a PR plan that includes updating all social media and reaching out personally to members of my writing community to ask them to share. I share the piece with those who've assisted me in research including the White River

Museum, the Archdiocese of Seattle archives, and the archivist for the Dominican Sisters in Tacoma who ran Briscoe School before the Irish Christian Brothers arrived. Sharing the essay is an opportunity to thank the editors at *The Common*, the professors at Pacific University who pushed me along the way, and the first person who called me a writer, high school English teacher, Steve Valach. I share with Emmett's teachers, his godmother, and Father Roy.

"On Drowning" is one short piece in a small literary magazine but it's also millions of words read, thousands of lonely hours writing terrible first drafts, and hundreds of words of encouragement and criticism by kind teachers, editors, and fellow writers. The essay is also a beginning, a stepping-off point, a place from which I gather the tenacity to try again. The stories of the Briscoe Boys still fill my thoughts, and there are others to make sense of but for now, at least, I've put Francis' story to rest.

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