

The Essay and Form

Introduction

“Energy is Eternal Delight”
— *William Blake*

Writing that is too soft-hearted will not save us. Consider the nature of the prose collected here—its use of narrative devices, characterization, poetic imagery, metaphorical leaps, and its particular obligations set forth by a fidelity to fact. We at *New Letters* take our lead from one of today’s authorities on the essay, Phillip Lopate, who once offered the following advice for essayists: “Unless one begins to turn the material over and find something that goes against the grain of conventional thinking, or that implicates oneself more deeply in an ironic, complex vision, it is probably—sad to say—going to turn out dull and trite on the page.”

Lopate’s advice disregards subject and focuses entirely upon the writer’s character. Any subject can transform us, as writers and readers—can be woven with a strong cultural, political, or spiritual chord—if, that is, the writer is willing to get beyond his own self-interests, self-absorbed ideas, and let the details of the experience lead the way.

Here, we have collected from the most recent two decades of *New Letters* magazine, 20 essays—fact-based prose works—that quietly have been defining the contemporary essay as a form. Lopate’s injunction, to go against the grain of conventional thinking, drives the structural integrity of the contemporary essay. It forces our best writers to continually turn the essay against convention and ideology, toward narrative, which humbles us.

The kind of writing presented here goes by many names. I like the term *essay*. It has an elegance not found, to my ear, in the term “creative nonfiction.” Other terms roughly synonymous—“literary journalism,” “new journalism,” “personal essay”—do not encompass enough range for what the essay can do. The essays here are not the kind, I assure you, that many of us wrote for freshman English class: “themes” in which an often overwrought thesis statement led into three main “points,” or ideas, and some supportive facts, all with the apparent objective at the end of some pure, irrefutable proof of the writer’s correct position on the topic.

We choose to present the essay, not as delineator of ideas or even as conduit for the alternating current of facts—as composed by critics and journalists—but as experience, dramatic and unforgettable, primary as jet and train travel, a walk in the desert, a night in a foreign city. One quality that makes an essay fresh must be its immediacy, its narrative style, its desire less to analyze experience than to be the experience. In this collection, you can fly an airplane upside down, perform surgery, hike a mountain in Spain, run for your life.

Yet I follow that statement with a caution. What matters about the essay, about true, literary writing, is not so much what is said but how the writer says it. The essays here matter as art, and I can point to the first sentence of the first essay in this collection, by Laurence Gonzales, to illustrate at least three principles important to the art of the essay.

When I was a boy, kicking around the dying oil fields of southeast Texas with my grandfather’s .22 rifle and a stolen package of Chesterfields, I had the idea that the highest achievement in coolness would be to fly an airplane upside down.

The sentence performs the hard, journalistic work of laying out time and place, while suspending its own punch line. It introduces, in its second half, the dual topics of the overall

essay—flying and being cool—and in that sweep, it measures the character of the writer by drawing attention away from the speaker as the essay's the primary focus. Finally, the most vivid and eccentric image in the sentence arrives at its very end, as if to assure us, as Phillip Lopate suggests, that we seek an ironic and complex vision.

The existence of this collection, itself, illustrates how seriously we take our obligation to our readers. During the more than 30 years under the title *New Letters*, this magazine has discovered, edited, and published some of the most engaging personal essays, memoirs, nonfiction works—whatever you want to call them—in modern literature. While these pieces found readerships at the time of their original publications, I recently began to feel terrified that our growing numbers of new readers have missed them. I couldn't stand it. This writing is too vital, powerful, downright important, to slip gently into the archival history of American letters. You, our current readers, deserve to know and enjoy this work. Start, and you won't be able to stop.

In making these selections, I enlisted the help of a long-time colleague and friend, a great writer, himself, Conger Beasley Jr., who helped me sift and siphon what amounts to the editorial genius of several generations of editors, with due reservations on the present—from 1934 onward. We originally intended to incorporate a selection from each decade: essays from the far past, by artists Thomas Hart Benton and Diego Rivera, literary icons such as Vance Randolph, James Laughlin, Edward Dahlberg, and Pearl S. Buck, to mention a few from when the magazine was titled *The University Review*. Then Conger Beasley and I moved into the era of David Ray's editorship (1971 to 1984), when the title became *New Letters*, and brilliant essays by Paule Marshall, Ishmael Reed, Jack Conroy, and Chinua Achebe; yet many of those essays could not be reprinted, for legal reasons.

We decided, ultimately, that we had to focus this collection

on essays that represent the newest, most vital elements of the essay today, which means that most of these essays were selected from the editorship of my immediate predecessor, James McKinley (1985 to 2002). As any anthologist will tell you, the narrowing process finds its own organic rationale, and that was ours—to stay with the new, both in style and chronology, and to make sure every essay here has the capacity to change someone's view of the world.

This task allowed Conger Beasley and I to enter the core of this magazine's artistic tradition. For the sake of a clear and fresh vision, a literary intensity, *New Letters* has been willing to take on any topic it must, and not flinch. That means we readers must step, at times, into an autopsy room, a psychologist's office, across physical, spiritual, and psychological borders. Every essay here is designed to displace our complacency and to show us—in private, public, or spiritual ways—what heroism looks like.

– Robert Stewart