Tell It Slant

Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction

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Franzen, Jonathan, from "First Reactions"
Hesse, Douglas, "The Boundry Zone"
Hoffman, Richard, *Half the House*
Kenko, *Essays in Idleness*
Lopate, Phillip, *The Art of the Personal Essay*
Montaigne, Michel de, *Essais*
Roorbach, Bill (ed.), *The Art of Truth*
Root, Robert L. Jr., and Michael Steinberg, *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*
Shonagon, Sei, *The Pillowbook*
Solomon, Andrew, *The Noonday Demon*
Talese, Gay, *The Bridge*
Vidal, Gore, "Drugs" and "Some Memories of the Glorious Bird and an Earlier Self"
Wolfe, Tom, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*
Zinsser, William, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*

Chapter Ten

The Lyric Essay

I go out of my way, but rather by license than carelessness. My ideas follow one another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance. . . . I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols. . . .

—Michel de Montaigne

I find myself thumbing through an encyclopedia of Jewish religion I happened to pick up at the library. As I turn the pages of this marvelous book, I'm struck by how little I, a Jewish woman who went to Hebrew school for most of my formative years, know about my own religion. I start writing down the quotes that interest me most, facts about the Kabaliah and ritual baths and dybbuks and the Tree of Life. I've also started noodling around with some other stories: a recent trip to Portugal, and the news I received there of my mother's emergency hysterectomy; notes on the volunteer work I perform at the local children's hospital; and musings about my on-again, off-again yoga practice. As I keep all these windows open on my computer, the voice of the encyclopedia emerges as an odd, binding thread, holding together these disparate stories in

a way that seems organic. I begin to fragment the stories and to move these fragments around, finding the images that resonate against one another in juxtaposition.

I feel like a poet, creating stanzas and listening for the rhythms of the sentences, using white space, reading aloud to determine when another quote from the encyclopedia is necessary to balance out my personal story. Sometimes I have to throw out whole sections that no longer fit, but this editing leaves room for new segments, new phrases, new images that build and transform over the course of the essay, weaving in and out, but always grounded on the thread of prayer and the body. It takes some time, this shuffling gait, but I finally have an essay, "Basha Leah": a spiritual self-portrait in the form of a complex braid.

This lyric essay allows for the moments of pause, the gaps, the silence. The fragmentation feels correct: It allows for the moments of "not knowing," the unspoken words that seem truer than anything I could ever say aloud. —**Brenda**

What Is the "Lyric Essay?"

"Lyric." "Essay." How do these two terms fit together? At first, they may seem like an oxymoron, diametrically opposed. The lyric implies a poetic sensibility concerned more with language, imagery, sound, and rhythm over the more linear demands of narrative. The word "essay," however, implies a more logical frame of mind, one concerned with a well-wrought story, or a finely tuned argument, over the demands of language. When we put the two together, we come up with a hybrid form that allows for the best of both genres.

One simple way of putting it is this: Lyric essays don't necessarily follow a straight narrative line. The root of the word "lyric" is the lyre, a musical instrument that accompanied ancient song. Lyric poetry and essays are "songlike" in that they hinge on the inherent rhythms of language and sound. Lyric essays favor fragmentation and imagery; they use white space and juxtaposition as structural elements. They're as attuned to silences as they are to utterance. By infusing prose with

tools normally relegated to poetic forms, the lyric essayist creates anew, each time, a work that is interactive, alive, and full of new spaces in which meaning can germinate. The *Seneca Review*, in its thirtieth-anniversary issue devoted to lyric essays, characterized them as having "this built-in mechanism for provoking meditation. They require us to complete their meaning."

The lyric essay is quite an ancient form. Classic writers such as Seneca, Bacon, Montaigne, and Emerson all wrote in forms that were inherently lyric. Bacon, in 1597, called his aphoristic essays "dispersed meditations." Sei Shonagon, in the tenth century, wrote lovely works that can be characterized as lyric: She wrote lists of "Depressing Things," "Hateful Things," "Adorable Things": pages and pages of observations that together form a compelling self-portrait. Montaigne ruminates in his castle on everything from the workings of his own digestive system to the state of local politics, the thoughts meandering in an associative style that mirrors the working of the mind and memory. As John D'Agata, lyric essay editor for the *Seneca Review*, puts it:

> The lyric essay takes the subjectivity of the personal essay and objectivity of the public essay, and conflates them both into a literary form that relies on both art and fact—on imagination and observation, rumination and argumentation, human faith and human perception. . . . The result of this ironic parentage is that lyric essays seek answers, yet they seldom seem to find them.

This last statement—"lyric essays seek answers, yet they seldom seem to find them"—could be the credo of the lyric essay. In a lyric essay, the *quest* is the focus, not its fulfillment.

Such a stance leads to a diversity of forms and styles that defy neat categorizations. Many excellent writers and thinkers have tried to pin down the lyric essay, defining it as a collage, a montage, or a mosaic. It's been called disjunctive, segmented, and sectioned. All of these are correct. All of these definitions recognize in the lyric essay a tendency toward fragmentation that invites the reader into those gaps, a structure that emphasizes what is *unknown* rather than the already articulated known.

The writer of the lyric essay brings the reader into an arena where the questions are asked; it's up to the reader to piece together possible answers and interpretations. Fragmentation allows for this type of reader interaction because the writer, by surrendering to the fragmented form, declines a foregone conclusion. Writer and literary theorist Rebecca Faery notes, "In the essays that have in recent years compelled me most, I am summoned, called upon. These essays are choral, polyphonic; there are pauses, rests. . . . The rests in these essays are spaces inviting me in, inviting response."

The Role of Intuition

> *"The lyric essay chiefly concerns the essayist's perception. . . . And since it's concerned with perception, it is ultimately concerned with the essayist's own mind in action. . . . It must unfold in the very act of writing, and writing should itself be an act (or acts) of unanticipated discovery."*
> —Sydney Lea

The lyric essay requires an allegiance to intuition. Since we're no longer tied to a logical, linear narrative or argument, we must surrender to the writing process itself to show us the essay's intent. In so doing, we reveal ourselves in a roundabout way. When we write in lyric essay mode, we create not only prose pieces, but a portrait of our subconscious selves, the part of us that speaks in riddles or in brief, imagistic flashes.

As Charles Simic puts it in his book about the work of artist Joseph Cornell: "To submit to chance is to reveal the self and its obsession." Cornell was famous for his "boxes," artworks that bring together disparate objects under glass, three-dimensional collages that make an odd, aesthetic sense. In *Dime Store Alchemy,* Simic elucidates the intuitive stance necessary not only for an artist like Cornell, who brings different objects together to create a sculpture, but for us writers too, the ones who look for the disparate strands of experience to come together and form a lyric essay. As Simic imagines Cornell might put it: "Somewhere in the city of New York there are four or five still-unknown objects that belong together. Once together they'll make a work of art."

We must train ourselves into this state of "meditative expectancy," as poet Carolyn Forché calls the writer's stance; the world, after all, flies by us at millions of miles an hour, spewing out any number of offerings—it's the writer at her desk, the artist out perambulating, who will recognize a gift when she sees one.

Robin Hemley, while writing "Reading History to My Mother" (see the anthology section), immediately knew he had a lyric essay in the making when different incidents and images in his life started resonating against one another: the jumble of eyeglasses on his mother's dresser; his daughter reading books about a mouse going to visit his mother and getting "new feet" for the occasion; the mysterious "L" drawn on the wall of his mother's apartment; the box of macadamia nuts mistaken for a book. A nonwriter would, perhaps, see nothing inherently artistic or coherent in these disparate images, but Hemley saw them as obvious "gifts" that, put together in a segmented essay, create a beautiful and original rendition of what it means to care for an aging parent.

Finding the "Container": Forms of the Lyric Essay

Stephen Dunn, a poet, has written an essay that succinctly describes the way form and content work in concert with one another, especially when we venture into the realm of the lyric essay. Here's his essay in its entirety:

LITTLE ESSAY ON FORM

We build the corral as we reinvent the horse.

In lyric essays, nothing is fixed or predetermined. Lyric essays are fluid forms, bending to fit the content as it arises. Form can also lead to modifications in content, leading you into new areas you never expected. If you glance into the *Seneca Review's* lyric essay issue, you will find a plethora of forms: essays written in fragmented, numbered sections; essays written as interviews; essays written as lists and catalogues; essays that have single lines broken by white space; essays that contain only one single paragraph. As Annie Dillard has written: "The essay is, and has been, all over the map. There's nothing you cannot do with it; no subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed. You get to make up your own structure every time, a structure that arises from the materials and best contains them."

Since the forms of the lyric essay are essentially infinite and still to be known, since you'll create new forms we've never experienced before, we won't be able to delineate them all in this chapter. Part of the fun of the lyric essay will be in making up your own form as you go along. But for the sake of argument, we'll break the lyric essay down into four main categories that seem to encapsulate the lyric essays we see most often: prose poem (or "flash nonfiction"), collage, the braided essay, and a form we've dubbed the "hermit crab."

Prose Poem or "Flash Nonfiction"

For the introduction to their anthology *The Party Train: A Collection of North American Prose Poetry,* the editors begin with this piece by S. C. Hahn:

IF MY FATHER WERE TO ASK

"What's a prose poem?" I would turn my face and look into the distance away from our farm house, into a wild copse of trees which runs from the road's edge and on up the hill to the far fields. Box elder, green ash, and black locust tangle in a net of branches, tied together by thorny greenbrier. I know of a coyote den beneath one old box elder tree, on the edge

of a gully cutting through the copse. If I were to stick my hand into the hole, I could feel cool wet air and perhaps the playful teeth of pups.

"Remember when you plowed the fields in the spring," I say to my father, "and the air behind you filled suddenly with sea gulls?" I can see him inhale the aroma of memory: the green and yellow tractor, the motor exhaust and dust, steel blades of the plow sinking into the earth and turning it, the smell all sexual and holy, worms and grubs uncovered into sunlight, then an unexpected slash of white as the gulls materialize behind the plow, a thousand miles and more from any ocean.

This prose poem is a lyric essay in itself and describes the focus and intent of such a form. The piece doesn't provide a logical explanation or a direct answer to a question; rather, "If My Father Were to Ask" prefers to use imagery as a way of getting at possible responses.

What's a prose poem? Well, maybe it's the feeling you get when you're standing in a landscape you know well and love, a landscape where you can imagine what lies hidden behind the trees, beneath the ground. Maybe the prose poem is the "aroma of memory" and all the sensual details such aromas evoke. Or maybe the signature of the prose poem is the unexpected surprise at the end, the improbable appearance of sea birds above the plowed fields of the heartland.

Maybe the prose poem is all these things, but most important, it speaks to the heart rather than the head. The prose poem is about what's possible, not necessarily what has already occurred. Even the title, "If My Father Were to Ask," privileges imagination over experience: The father hasn't asked the question, but what if he did?

In this way, the terms prose poem and flash nonfiction could be nearly interchangeable. Flash nonfiction is a brief essay, usually under a thousand words, that focuses on one particular image. It's tightly focused, with no extraneous words, and it mines its central image in ways that create metaphorical significance. The language is fresh, lyrically surprising, hinged on the workings of the imagination. Lawrence Sutin (see the anthology section) writes discrete pieces of flash nonfiction as he meditates on the old postcards in his collection. Though the pieces themselves are longer than anything one might write on the back of a postcard, they maintain that same kind of *compactness*, that intent to be concise and say only what's important for the moment at hand.

This form is fun both to write and to read. A new on-line magazine, *Brevity*, "publishes concise literary nonfiction of 750 words or less focusing on detail and scene over thought and opinion." W. W. Norton has issued two volumes of short nonfiction, edited by Judith Kitchen and Mary Paumier Jones: *In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*, and *In Brief: Short Takes on the Personal*. In the introduction to *In Short*, Bernard Cooper elucidates the stance of the lyric essayist working in the flash nonfiction form: "To write short nonfiction requires an alertness to detail, a quickening of the senses, a focusing of the literary lens, so to speak, until one has magnified some small aspect of what it means to be human."

Collage

Do you remember, as a child, making collages out of photographs, images cut from magazines, bits and pieces of text gathered from ticket stubs, documents, and headlines? Often, these mosaics represented the self in a way that no other form could quite accomplish. Our teachers gazed down at us lovingly as we showed them these renderings, our selves displayed in fragments made beautiful by their juxtaposition.

The collage essay works the same way. It brings together many different fragments and assembles them so that they create something wholly new. *Juxtaposition* becomes the key craft element here: One cannot simply throw these pieces down haphazardly—they must be carefully selected for how they'll resonate off one another. In this way, you act as a painter might, scrutinizing how this particular blue will shimmer against this particular yellow. You must listen for the echoes, the repetitions, the way one image organically suggests the next.

The writer must also provide some kind of grounding structure for the reader to hold onto. Going back to those collages you made as a child, they would be useless collections of fragments without the posterboard and glue used to hold the pieces in place. The supporting architecture for a collage essay can take the form of numbered sections, or it can be subtitles that guide the reader along. Or the structure can be as subtle as asterisks delineating the white space between sections. In any case, the structure needs to work in tandem with the content for a certain effect.

For example, in his short essay "My Children Explain the Big Issues" (see the anthology section), Will Baker relies on the title and the subtitles to hold together four stories he has culled from memory about his children. The subtitles—"Feminism," "Fate," "Existentialism," and "East and West"—do all the explaining he needs to do; they act as bridges, or supports, that allow him to write what appears to be four disparate fragments and turn them into one cohesive essay. Without the title or the subtitles, these stories would remain charming vignettes, but they wouldn't carry the impact or hold the focus necessary for an essay. However, if he had decided to *tell* us the meaning of these fragments within the prose itself, the stories would be too earnest, too contrived. The collage structure works well here because each fragment is allowed to stand on its own while still working in

concert with the others. The architecture of the piece works on a subtle level: We think we're "reading over" the title and subtitles, barely noticing them, but they work on our subconscious throughout the piece.

In the anthology section, two short essays act as minicollages: "Three Voices," by Bhanu Kapil Rider, and "Three Fragments," by Charles Simic. You'll see that the different sections, though quite separate from one another, remain connected through the reoccurrence of key phrases or images. Collages work through repetition, but not in a monotonous way: You must *transform* your recurring motifs from beginning to end. You must make transitions, but not in the conventional way: In the collage essay, transitions occur through the strategic juxtaposition of images, stories, and phrases. How does one story lead to the next? What image can you pick up from the last section to begin the next? What phrase can act as a repeating, and variable, mantra throughout the piece? You must trust yourself, and your readers, to make sense and meaning out of the gaps between steps, the pauses between words, but you must also act as a guide on this pilgrimage: a pathfinder who directs with a touch we barely notice.

The Braided Essay

On the Jewish Sabbath, we eat a bread called *challah*, a braided egg bread that gleams on its special platter. The braided strands weave in and out, creating a pattern both beautiful and appetizing. We eat a special bread on the Sabbath because this day has been set aside as sacred; the smallest acts must be differentiated from everyday motions.

The braided challah is a fitting symbol for an essay form closely allied with collage: the braided essay. In this form, you fragment your essay into separate strands that repeat and continue. There's more of a sense of weaving about it, of interruption and continuation, like the braiding of bread, or of hair. You must keep your eye on the single strands that come in and out of focus, filaments that glint differently depending on where they've been. At the same time, you must keep your eye focused on the single image or theme that holds them all together. As William Stafford wrote a few weeks before he died, "There's a thread you follow. It goes among/things that change. But it doesn't change." Within the challah itself, once you cut it open, you see nary a sign of the braiding. You have a chunk of bread: whole, fine-grained, delicious.

In his essay "After Yitzl" (see the anthology section), Albert Goldbarth braids several different strands together to create a highly textured

essay. Written in numbered sections that at first seem to have little to do with one another, the essay works through a steady accretion of imagery and key repetitions; it speaks in a voice that grows loud, then whispers, that cuts itself off, then rambles. The strands include, among other things, a sleepy conversation in bed with a lover, a fabricated "previous life," facts about the Mormon religion and the Piltdown Man, a story about a cult called the "Unarians," and stories about his own (real) ancestry. The sleepy conversation provides the overall "container" for the essay, an architecture that holds the fragments in place and provides forward momentum. But by fragmenting this narrative, Goldbarth allows for the other strands to have equal weight. He returns to the conversation over and over and repeats phrases from the other strands, so that the essay never seems to veer off topic.

And that topic reveals itself slowly: The essay turns out to be about how we fabricate our own pasts, constantly and continually; how memory itself is a myth; how we create ourselves anew in the stories we tell. The braided form allows this theme to emerge organically, to accrue in the reader's mind until it takes on the aspect of an inevitable truth. He explodes his prose to put it together again in a new pattern that's inordinately pleasurable.

When you write a braided essay, the fragmentation allows you, almost forces you, not to approach this material head-on but to search for a more circuitous way into it. You must expand your peripheral vision, focusing on images that at first seemed oblique to the stories. Sometimes your peripheral vision catches the most important details, those you might not have expected to carry significance. You give yourself over to chance sightings, arresting the image on the verge of skittering away.

The braided form also allows a way for research and outside voices to intertwine with your own voice and experience. Notice how many different sources Goldbarth is able to include in this essay without losing his own voice. When you write a braided essay, find at least one outside voice that will shadow yours; in this way, the essay will gain texture and substance.

For example, Melissa, one of our students, had been trying to write an essay about her mother's death from leukemia when Melissa was just 11. Her attempts to deal with this material head-on tended toward sentimental writing that could not get past the weight of her sorrow. When she turned this experience into a braided essay, however, she found the necessary connections, information, and metaphorical significance to make it work.

Melissa begins with the line: "Only you know what happens at the end of the trail." It's a story about being a camp counselor and telling her charges the myth of the Bat and the Sun. In the essay, she

weaves this myth in with memories of her girlhood in Texas and medical facts about leukemia. As she braids these strands together, certain images begin to resonate: the squirrel flying too close to the sun, so that its fur burns off and it becomes a creature of the night; the blood cells forming deep in the bone marrow; the circle of children at the mother's bedside. She carefully stitches these images from one segment to the next, so that the essay never veers off track. In the end, we've experienced a segment of Melissa's life along with her, with all its variant textures, meanings, and emotions. And it becomes an essay not just about Melissa and her mother, but about how we're transformed by things that happen in the night, in the dark, without our really knowing how.

The "Hermit Crab" Essay

Where we—Suzanne and Brenda—live, in the Pacific Northwest, there's a beautiful place called Deception Pass. It's prone to extreme tides, and in the tidepools you can often find hermit crabs skulking about. They look a little like cartoon characters, hiding inside a shell and lifting it up to take it with them when they hurry for cover. They move a few inches, then crouch down and stop, becoming only a shell again. Then they tilt, waver, and scurry away.

A hermit crab is a strange animal, born without the armor to protect its soft, exposed abdomen. And so it spends its life occupying the empty, often beautiful, shells left behind by snails or other mollusks. It reanimates these shells, making of them a strange, new hybrid creature that has its own particular beauty, its own way of moving through the tidepools and among the rocks. Each one is slightly different, depending on the type of shell it decides to inhabit.

In honor of these wonderful creatures and the transformative habitat in which they live, we've dubbed a particular form of lyric essay the "hermit crab essay." This kind of essay appropriates other forms as an outer covering to protect its soft, vulnerable underbelly. It's an essay that deals with material that seems to have been born without its own carapace—material that's soft, exposed, and tender and must look elsewhere to find the form that will best contain it.

The "shells" come from wherever you can find them, anywhere in the world. They may borrow from fiction and poetry, but they also don't hesitate to armor themselves in more mundane structures: the descriptions in a mail order catalog, for example, or the entries in a checkbook register.

For example, in her short story "How to Become a Writer," Lorrie Moore appropriates the form of the "how-to" article to tell a personal narrative. The voice of the narrator catches the cadence of pedagogical manuals, but at the same time winks at the reader: Of course, these are not impersonal instructions, but a way of telling her story. And by using the literary second person, she draws the reader unwittingly along into the place of the narrator. A natural interaction develops:

> First, try to be something, anything, else. A movie star/astronaut. A movie star/missionary. A movie star/kindergarten teacher. President of the World. Fail miserably. It is best if you fail at an early age—say, fourteen. Early, critical disillusionment is necessary so that at fifteen you can write long haiku sequences about thwarted desire. It is a pond, a cherry blossom, a wind brushing against sparrow wing leaving for mountain. Count the syllables. Show it to your mom. She is tough and practical. She has a son in Vietnam and a husband who may be having an affair. She believes in wearing brown because it hides spots. She'll look briefly at your writing, then back up at you with a face blank as donut. She'll say: "How about emptying the dishwasher?" Look away. Shove the forks in the fork drawer. Accidentally break one of the freebie gas station glasses. This is the required pain and suffering. This is only for starters.

Though "How to Become a Writer" is fiction, the story can act as a fine model for innovative lyric essays in the "how-to" mode. What are the aspects of your life that you could render in this form? How will the second person enable you to achieve some distance from the material and thus some perspective? This type of essay can be quite fun to write; the voice takes over and creates its own momentum.

In his essay "Primary Sources," Rick Moody appropriates the form of a footnoted bibliography in order to write an autobiography. In her essay "Nine Beginnings" (see the anthology section), Margaret Atwood takes on two different forms; ostensibly, it's a question/answer piece (with only one persistent, annoying question!), but the title also suggests crumpled first drafts, fished out of the wastebasket. Nancy Willard has written an essay called "The Friendship Tarot," which begins with a sketch of a tarot card layout; she then goes on to insert her autobiographical story into the interpretation of that layout. Several writers have fashioned essays in the form of "to-do" lists. Sei Shonagon has written her lists of "Depressing Things," "Adorable Things," and so on. The possibilities are endless.

Look around you. The world is brimming with forms that await transformation. See how the world constantly orders itself in structures that can be shrewdly turned to your own purposes. A recipe for making soup, handed down by your grandmother, can form the architecture for an essay that fragments a family narrative into the directions for creating something good to eat. An address book that shows the many different places you've lived, or your family has lived, can begin

to shape the material of memory and history. A table of contents, an index, an itinerary, a playlist—all these speak with recognizable voices that might work as the right container for your elusive material. The movements of a sonata, the parts of a dance. Your class yearbook from 1976. A wedding album. All these—and endless variations, as infinite as the things of the world themselves—offer to lend you their shells and their voices when your own voice falters and quits.

One of our students, Raven, wrote an essay in the form of complex math problems. He took a difficult subject (his tempestuous relationship with his girlfriend) and "contained" it in the voice and language of the word problems you might find on a test. Form and content work in beautiful harmony here: The relationship often tested the limits of Raven's understanding and also provided complex logical problems almost impossible to solve. The resultant essay is both very funny and very sad, the perfect combination when trying to write about difficult subjects.

By taking on the voice of an exterior form for your internal story, you automatically begin the process of creating an artifact out of experience. The form, while it may seem restrictive, actually allows you a great deal of latitude. Suddenly the second-person or the third-person perspective is available to you. You can take a step back and view your experience through a new lens. Often, the form itself will lead to new material you never even suspected.

Think in terms of *transformation*. The word itself means to move across forms, to be changed. Think of the hermit crab and its soft, exposed abdomen. Think of the experiences you have that are too raw, too dangerous to write about. What if you found the right shell, the right armor? How could you be transformed?

Try It

What Is the "Lyric Essay?"

1. Read "Three Fragments" by Charles Simic and "Three Voices" by Bhanu Kapil in the anthology section. Read them out loud. How are these essays different from a traditional essay such as E. B. White's "Afternoon of an American Boy?" What's the effect of the white space? What images recur in the different fragments? How do you feel as you read these pieces? Is it a satisfying or an unsatisfying experience? Why?

Variation: Using these essays as a model, go back to one of your own pieces and turn it into fragments. Take a pair of scissors to it and cut it up into at least three different sections. Move these around, eliminating what no longer fits, juxtaposing the different sections in various ways. How can you make use of white space? How can you let the images do the talking for you?

The Role of Intuition

2. Pretend, for an afternoon, that you're Joseph Cornell. Wander the streets of your town or the pathways of your campus, looking for objects that "belong together." Gather as many of these as you like, then bring them back to your desk and start arranging them in an artistically pleasing way. Then write for several minutes on each object and see whether you can create a fragmented essay that juxtaposes these elements in the same way.

Variation for a group: Go out and gather objects individually, but come back together as a group to sift through the pile. Use each other's objects to create three-dimensional collages. Then write for an hour to create a collage essay using these objects as a guide.

Prose Poem or "Flash Nonfiction"

3. Write an essay of fewer than five hundred words. Give yourself a time limit—a half-hour, say—and write about one image that comes to mind, or an image that has stayed in your memory from the past couple of days. Use vivid, concrete details. Don't explain the image to us, but instead allow it to evolve into metaphor. If you're stuck, open a book of poetry and write down the first line you see as an epigraph. Write an essay using the epigraph as a starting point for form or content or imagery. If you write over five hundred words (about two pages), trim and cut to stay under the limit. Find out what's essential.

Variation for a group: Each person brings in a line of poetry as an epigraph and offers it to a partner. Write for fifteen minutes, then pass the epigraph to the next person. Write again for fifteen minutes. Continue this process for as long as you like. Try shaping one of these experiments into a complete essay of less than five hundred words.

4. Study a painting or a photograph that you've looked at often. What is it about this image that appeals to you so much? Begin a short essay of under five hundred words that focuses on some unexpected detail that catches your eye in this artwork. Explore this detail for metaphorical significance.

Variation for a group: Each person brings in a postcard of an artwork; these are all set on a table in the front of the room. Each person browses through these postcards and chooses one that intuitively appeals to him or her. Begin writing. You can do this as many times as you like until an image sparks a piece of writing that interests you.

Collage

5. Using Will Baker's "My Children Explain the Big Issues" as a model, take some large concepts (such as "shame," "anger," etc.) and translate them into short, concrete stories. Try this with several different concepts, and see how you might pull them together with a title.

6. Structure an essay around a journey of some sort, using brief, discrete sections to build a collage. This can be a journey to somewhere as commonplace as the mall, or it can be more romantic. What kind of purposeful journey can you imagine taking, such as a visit to the Hall of Fame or a pilgrimage to a sacred place?

7. Choose at least three distinctly separate time periods in your life. Begin each section with "I am _____ years old," and free-write from there. Stay in the present tense. After reading what you've written, see whether you can find any thematic connections or common images that would link the sections together.

8. Experiment with transitions and juxtaposition. Find one image to repeat in the essay from start to finish, but transform this image in some way so that it takes on new characteristics by the end of the essay.

The Braided Essay

9. Read "Basha Leah" (on the website) and "After Yitzl" and "Reading History to My Mother" (in the anthology section). Analyze how these essays weave at least three separate strands throughout the piece. Where do they leave off and pick up again? What's repeated? What's the overall effect?

10. Go back to an essay that's been giving you problems. Look for the one image that seems to encapsulate the abstract ideas or concepts you're trying to develop. Find at least one outside source that will provide new information and details for you. Explode the essay into three or more different strands, each focused on particular aspects of that image, and begin weaving, transforming that image from beginning to end.

11. Cut apart an essay (or two, or three) with scissors and lay the pieces out on the floor or a long table. Start moving them around like pieces of a puzzle and see what kind of patterns you can make through different juxtapositions of the texts.

The "Hermit Crab" Essay

12. Write an essay in the form of a "how-to" guide, using the second person. You can turn anything into a "how-to": Lorrie Moore, in her book *Self-Help,* has stories titled "How to Talk to Your Mother" and "How to Be the Other Woman."

13. Choose a field guide to the natural world as your model ("A Field Guide to Desert Wildflowers," for example, or "A Field Guide to the Atmosphere.") Write an essay in the form of a field guide, inserting your own experience into this format.

14. Write an essay in the form of an interview or a series of letters.

15. Using Bernard Cooper's "The Fine Art of Sighing" (see the anthology section) as a model, write an essay titled "The Fine Art of _____." What mundane act can you transform into art?

16. Brainstorm a list of all the forms in the outer world that you could use as a model for a hermit crab essay. We've done this with classes that have come up with lists of sixty entries and more! The possibilities are endless. Some of the ones they came up with were crossword puzzle clues, horoscopes, fortune cookies, letters to the editor, and missing milk carton kids. Choose one of these forms and begin an essay, using your own material to flesh out the shell. Let the word choices and tone of your shell dictate your own approach to your topic: How would the vague cheeriness of fortunes or horoscopes, for example, inform your family or relationship tale?

17. Write a list of the topics/issues in your life that are forbidden to speak about, things you could never write. Choose one of these and begin to write about it in a hermit crab form.

Suggestions for Further Reading

In Our Anthology

Atwood, Margaret, "Nine Beginnings"
Baker, Will, "My Children Explain the Big Issues"
Cooper, Bernard, "The Fine Art of Sighing"
Goldbarth, Albert, "After Yitzl"
Hemley, Robin, "Reading History to My Mother"
Rider, Bhanu Kapil, "Three Voices"