

2017 Baker Artist Award: Work Sample Supporting Document

Interview about the writing of “On Nostalgia” with *Passages North* magazine.

Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson is a journalist, essayist, and author whose work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Slate*, *PANK*, and *Post Road*, for starters. *Passages North* is excited to have selected Dickinson’s essay “[On Nostalgia](#)” as the winner of the 2015 Hrushka Memorial Nonfiction Prize. Dickinson lives in Baltimore, enjoys writing about architecture and man-made environments and teaches MFA students design writing and research at the Maryland Institute College of Art.

Passages North: At one point in “On Nostalgia,” you write about “anticipatory nostalgia.” You say: “I find myself growing sentimental about something even as it is happening: a slant of light, a good meal, my daughter’s laughter...” At this point in particular, and also throughout the essay, I wondered: what inspired the essay first? Was it research, or narrative? Did you know you wanted to write about nostalgia first, or did you want to tell your family’s story?

Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson: This essay didn’t start as piece about nostalgia. Its roots go back to 2010 after my father died from pancreatic cancer and I began writing my way through that loss. My father and I were close. He was a mentor and a confidant and a decent and kind man, yet I realized after his death how much he had kept secret from my older brother and me. I had questions about his past and he was no longer here to answer them. For me, that was the acute shock of grief—the loss of that ability to talk. I wanted to examine my father’s secrecy and consider his motives. I also wanted to understand the ripple effects that my grandmother’s suicide had on my life.

A good friend and fellow writer had warned me that writing too soon about grief is difficult. You need to give it some time and space, she said. Looking back, I see how I tried to contain and structure the writing too early. I wrote essays that I thought were finished, but deep down I knew I hadn’t yet hit on the true thing I was trying to

comprehend. I was attempting to make the writing manageable when, in truth, I was exploring something so vast, so emotional, so deeply personal, that I couldn't yet manage it.

One day I told myself to let go of structure and theme and the hope of a finished piece and just give in to the threads of my thinking. I allowed myself to follow these seemingly unrelated and divergent ideas—an ancient palimpsest, the house where I live, my childhood dreams about my dead grandmother, my father's secrecy, the specific nature of this melancholy that I've felt most of my life—and to understand why these ideas kept emerging for me. It was like mapping my brain. That's how I eventually got to nostalgia. The process of writing this felt like a breakthrough for me in that it functioned as an essay should, in the classic sense. I entered into a dialogue with a host of questions in order to find some understanding at the end of that journey.

PN: Your writing career has touched on many different genres, from journalism to fiction. Do you prefer to write in a particular genre?

EED: I don't know that one takes priority. Lately I've been gravitating to essays and fiction, but I still enjoy journalism. I tend to toggle between genre depending on the nature of the story and its requirements, and where my curiosity takes me. My preference is for telling true stories and sometimes you need fiction to get at a truth.

PN: What other writers inspire you?

EED: I'm inspired by so many writers, but off the top of my head: Virginia Woolf, Annie Dillard, Joan Didion, Ralph Waldo Emerson, MFK Fisher, Lia Purpura, Maggie Nelson, George Saunders. Poets like Carl Dennis, Rita Dove, Kay Ryan, Mary Oliver, and Edward Hirsch. In Baltimore, where I live, we have an exceptional and hard-working literary community and those who show up to write and keep at it always inspire me. Circling back to that genre question, I'm also encouraged by writers—

like E.B. White—who build a diverse writing life and publish across genre, as well as those who defy being pigeonholed within those genres. The British writer Kate Atkinson is an example. She writes a damn fine mystery but she’s not just a “mystery” writer.

PN: When referring to the historically rich home you renovated in 2004, you write, “Nostalgia made me buy this house.” Were you previously aware of its history, and how was the experience of remodeling and changing the floor plan?

EED: I had a gut reaction to this 1840s stone home. It’s a modest house, originally built to house the workers of a nearby mill. My need to buy it and restore it and to live on this particular patch of land probably needs its own essay. The nostalgia aspect was that it reminds me of where I grew up in the Blue Ridge Mountains, even though it’s in the heart of Baltimore city. My family lived outside Roanoke, Virginia, near Tinker Creek, the body of water made famous by Annie Dillard. Place has always mattered to me. I began my career as a journalist writing about architecture, design, and urbanism and I still write about these topics today.

The experience of renovating has been long and slow and it’s ongoing. Living with an old house means living with something that’s never “done” and I think that’s part of the appeal to me. I’m but one of the many inhabitants passing through these 18-inch thick stone walls. I’m a caretaker. My husband and I have brought in friends and craftspeople along the way to help and it feels like we’re adding to the material culture of the place.

As for the stories of the people who have passed through here over the years, those came slowly and over time. It wasn’t until after I bought the house that I learned about the connection to the filmmaker John Waters. That discovery came when my husband, a photographer at the time, assisted John on an art project and John told him about filming here.

PN: Section headings appear in this essay and a number of your other works. How do you know how much belongs in a section, and what title to give each?

EED: This is a great question because I realize now that I do this intuitively and not necessarily consciously. With this essay, I braid together a set of ideas and I instinctively felt that one long narrative would be untenable for the reader. I cover a lot of ground. The sections were born out of where my thinking on the topic coalesced, as well as a sense of pacing. I needed to bring the palimpsest back in, for example, and weave the personal story with the research on nostalgia. I thought sections would help. In some cases, these section titles came before the writing to help me focus. For instance, I knew the first section would be about the palimpsest. In other instances, I went back and wrote the section title after better understanding where that section had gone. The use of sections may also be influenced by my work as a journalist, one who is often encouraged by editors to use sections within a long feature story.

PN: What do you take into consideration when writing about family? How much do you include, and how do you decide what is important to the story?

EED: I'm not an exhibitionist by nature. I'm rather private and don't feel compelled to share personal details about my life. And yet here I am writing about the most personal of topics. It took a long time for me to believe that I was allowed to write about this, especially since no one outside of our family knew about my grandmother's suicide. I worried I was betraying my father somehow. But I kept coming back to this story. I couldn't shake it. The most important person to consider was my brother, Michael. I needed to know that he was okay with me writing about our family and he was. I always give him drafts to read.

I see our specific story as part of a larger, human story. What's the nature of inheritance? What do we do with secrets? What accounts for the pull many of us feel for previous generations and to deceased relatives we may have never met? What's

the nature of nostalgia? I've been doing the work of unraveling the mystery of my brilliant but troubled grandmother and reconciling my father's secrecy. In that work is the more universal story of a human's attempt to resolve the mysteries of what we inherit and to understand how we inhabit our present while living with the ghosts of our past.

Phillip Lopate once wrote about balancing the personal—the ego—and the universal in the personal essay. This always resonated with me: “The trick is to realize that one is not important, except insofar as one's example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish,” he wrote.

What you reveal in a personal essay, then, must always be in service to the larger story. In early drafts, readers said I wasn't giving enough of myself. I kept myself at a distance. What they helped me to realize is that the power of a personal essay comes from the essayist moving beyond his or her natural defenses and moving to a deeper, more authentic place by the end. I want to be an honest writer, and that guides me both in what I divulge and what I don't. I'm not going to share a salacious fact just for shock value.

PN: What is your writerly white whale, the dream destination or achievement of your career?

EED: I have the same dream as many writers, I suspect, which is the ability to write about what I want while also paying the mortgage. I want the freedom to choose where my curiosity and interest take me. I write because it's how I palpate the world. It's how I unpack the human experience and try to understand it. I write to learn. So being able to spend my days reading, researching, writing, and earning a viable living doing so, that's my dream.