



# The Lightning Room with Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson

POSTED ON SEPTEMBER 12, 2014

–Interview by Diana Clarke

## RECENT POSTS

REVIEW – Weird Girls: Writing the Art Monster by Caroline Hagood

---

DOUBLE CLOTHESLINE by Justin Bigos

---

[REVIEW] One Person Holds So Much Silence by David Greenspan

---

The Female Gaze Pt. III

---

*August author (and august author) Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson talks about pregnancy, palimpsests, and her story, “A Modern Girl’s Guide to Childbirth.”*

Going by the title of the piece, I expected “A Modern Girl’s Guide to Childbirth” to be a lot snarkier, since most guides titled similarly are so breezy, pragmatic, and of the moment. (Guides to bible study, life, and personal finance were my first three Google hits.) How did you choose instead to place your girl’s modernity in conversation with history—ancient Greece, 17th-century China, 18th-century France, the view of the cemetery?

That juxtaposition between the present and the past came out of a writing prompt. I had the great fortune of being in Lee K. Abbott’s fiction group at the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop back in 2013. The writer EJ Levy was Lee’s fellow that year and she challenged us to write a piece with a point of view that we rarely used. We discussed second person, and read short stories like Junot Diaz’s “How to *Date* a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie).”

I realized that I had rarely read anything in the second person (McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* is still on my to-read list) until I got pregnant in 2010 and picked up parenting books. Many are written in second person using the

[REVIEW] Big Gorgeous Jazz Machine  
by Nick Francis Potter

---

## RECENT COMMENTS

Rosie Castillo on A Conversation with  
Amir Hariri

---

Rosie Castillo on A Conversation with  
Amir Hariri

---

G H on Ask the Author: Dan  
Piepenbring

---

62 year old slave on [REVIEW]  
Scattered Clouds by Reuben Jackson

---

Kimberly Larson on [NEW FICTION]  
Through the Rabbit Hole

---

## CATEGORIES

Art

---

Beautiful Ashes

---

Between the Bones

---

Bizarre Love Triangle

---

BOOK REVIEWS

---

Books We Can't Quit

---

snarky style you mention. I wanted to riff on that, but to make it more sincere in order to subtly highlight what we've lost within that language. We've lost a connection to the insight of women as it relates to childbirth and mothering. Direct learning is replaced by the vapidness of these books.

EJ also challenged us to include research. I've been a journalist for nearly twenty years, so research is never my problem. For me, it's about dialing the research back, getting personal and not hiding behind facts. Here, I was interested in what was lost in translation between the generations. I don't have a large family, my grandparents are deceased, my father died while I was pregnant, and I often feel marooned in the nuclear family of modern parenting. I hate that I have to Google questions about teething or fevers. Like the woman in this story, I read books about breastfeeding, but still struggled. I finally went to a lactation nurse, this blunt but wonderful woman who in ten minutes showed me what to do. Our appointment was over and I didn't want to leave. It made me long for the wisdom of women who have been through it before. And by "before," I mean before \$1200 strollers and ergonomic high chairs and "colic" medicine took over for common sense. For this piece, I researched traditional ways in which women were supported to contrast that with the sterility of the modern-day hospital experience.

**This piece seems fascinated with naming things, anchoring them in relation to one another. You describe people by their relationships and occupations—**

Comics

---

Contributor Spotlight

---

Craft

---

Darkly Devotions

---

Dead or Alive

---

Eat Drink Book

---

Features

---

folio

---

Found Twitter Haiku

---

From the Gutter

---

Future Friday

---

Grit Gospel

---

Guest Editor

---

Guest Editor Feature

---

Guest post

---

Hauntings

---

Interview

---

head nurse, attending nurse, RA, husband, midwife—and note brands (Honda Civic) and cultural origins (Chinik Eskimo) without ever giving a character a name. Of course lots of creation myths involve bestowing names. As a writer and creator, how do you relate to your own name? What other nouns might be used to describe you?

Writer. Reader. Mother. Spouse. Friend. Sister. Daughter. Teacher. Whiskey Drinker. Feminist. Agnostic.

I listed occupations in the story to add to the disassociation of modern birth. When I delivered, so many people cycled in and out of my hospital room that I understood them by their function in the medical hierarchy rather than as individuals. My doctor wasn't on call when I went into labor so a doctor I never met swooped in at the last minute and delivered my daughter. I don't even know her name.

The narrator of this story describes the wisdom of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood—that is, traditional womanhood—as a disrupted oral history or mythology: “You, however, will not know that your great-grandmother soothed her baby’s whooping cough with ginger or that your grandmother warmed a finger in clove oil for teething.” What wisdoms do we inherit? What myths about womanhood remain?

Interviews

---

Latinx Lit Celebration

---

Lightning Room

---

Logophily

---

Marvelous Medicine

---

Micro Cultures

---

Monday Manifesto

---

National Poetry Month

---

New Fiction

---

New Flash Fiction

---

New Flash Nonfiction

---

New Nonfiction

---

News

---

Reviews

---

Self-congratulatory Nonsense

---

Shiny

---

The Dispatch

---

The notion of inheritance, and of innate versus learned wisdom, has been much on my mind. My father, who was an excellent parent to me, died from pancreatic cancer when I was three months pregnant. I lost my connection to his parenting knowledge just when I needed it most.

There is this myth that women instantly become “mother” when they deliver, but that wasn’t my whole experience. I had my daughter at 38 and I had no idea what I was doing. It’s not all innate; it needs to be taught. I also struggled to get pregnant and realized that there is still a pervasive myth that woman become fully realized only in childbirth. There is a cultural bias against women who do not have children, whether that is, to borrow a phrase from my friend and writer Nancy Rome, by chance or by choice.

There are also prevailing myths about manhood and fatherhood. I included the tradition of the Chinik Eskimo in the story because I wanted to acknowledge the experience of the modern-day partner, in this case a man (but it could be any partner participating in the delivery.) The role of the contemporary birth partner has also been neutered. Here he is a passive observer, versus the Chinik who took an active role in the birth with an offering to nature.

**You’re also a journalist. How do you relate to or balance between recording and interpreting more concrete reported truths (not that journalism need be**

[The Up Drafts](#)

---

[This Modern Writer](#)

---

[Throwback Thursday](#)

---

[Tiny Reviews](#)

---

[Uncategorized](#)

---

[Work: Surviving the Arts](#)

---

[Wrought & Found](#)

---

[Young Bright Things](#)

---

## ARCHIVES

Select Month



## META

[Log in](#)

---

[Entries feed](#)

---

[Comments feed](#)

---

[WordPress.org](#)

---

unemotional, or “objective”) and the kind of emotional truths and discomforts that arise in fiction like this?

I started writing fiction precisely because I wanted an outlet for those more challenging emotions and truths. I became a journalist because I am inherently curious about the human condition. I like to ask questions, to unpack our experiences, and to try and make some sense of life. I once believed that nonfiction was my best outlet because it was “true,” but fiction, of course, offers its own truth.

There were a number of chewy, toothsome word combinations in this piece that read especially poetic to me. I loved the internal and slant rhyme of phrases like “where you like to walk,” and “Wall-mounted dispensers wheeze disinfectant gel.” They render the ordinary and sterilized almost whimsical. We’ve talked some about mythology in your writing. What about poetry? What (or who?) influences you?

I have an affinity for what I would call narrative poets, those who tell rich stories in a modicum of words. On my bookshelf: Carl Dennis, Rita Dove, Kay Ryan, Pablo Neruda, Billy Collins.

I grew up on the campus of Hollins University where Tinker Creek—which played host to Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*—ran through my backyard. Dillard’s writing has always inspired me. Also E.B. White, both for the

breadth of his writing and his instruction on craft. I teach a graduate-level writing class and we re-visit *The Elements of Style*. It always reminds me of the power in grammar and sentence structure. I have what I call my “Strunk & White” edit of a draft, where I’ll go through and circle passive voice, adverb and adjective use, little qualifiers. And I’ll do my best to eliminate them. It was during that edit pass when I revised the sentence about gel dispensers. Originally, I had the nurses pumping the gel on their hands. But I really wanted the object to be its own character. I spent 18 months with my father in and out of hospitals, and those damn Purell dispensers were everywhere. That pervasive wheezing sound took on a life of its own.

**The last line of this piece haunted me: “layer upon layer, invisible beneath the surface because the past has been erased and a new story has been written over top.” What, if anything, do you see yourself writing over? Or being written over?**

The idea of the palimpsest fascinates me, both as a journalist writing about cities and as an author of fiction. The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore where I live has a famous one called the Archimedes Palimpsest. This is a prayer book written in the thirteenth century and scholars made the discovery that it contains, below the primary text, two never-before-seen treatises by Archimedes, one of antiquity’s greatest scientists. Archimedes’ words had been erased and written over. It’s a stunning metaphor. First, of the human desire to write over the past and be the author of the present; and second, of the fact

that there is a wealth of knowledge just below the surface, but we fail to access it. Unless we respect what preceded us. Unless we choose to dig and scrape and seek it out.

---

This entry was posted in [Interviews](#) and tagged [A Modern Girl's Guide to Childbirth](#), [Diana Clarke](#), [Elizabeth Evitts Dickinson](#), [The Lightning Rom](#). [Bookmark the permalink](#).

---

#### ALSO ON PANK MAGAZINE

##### **Letter from the New Editor and Owner**

4 years ago • 1 comment

Happy New Year! I'm very excited to share some of the wonderful things we have ...

##### **[REVIEW] Eat Only When You're ...**

5 years ago • 1 comment

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017  
REVIEWED BY MATT E. LEWIS \_\_\_ Lindsay ...

##### **[REVIEW] Mapping the Interior by ...**

6 years ago • 1 comment

Tor Books, 2017  
REVIEWED BY JESSE LAWRENCE – What can ...



# COMMENTS

0 Comments

 **Login** ▼

G

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS 

Share

Best Newest Oldest

Be the first to comment.

---

[Subscribe](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Do Not Sell My Data](#)

ONLINE

PRINT

PANK fosters access to emerging and experimental poetry and prose, publishing the brightest and most promising

BOOKS

TRANSMISSION

FOLIOS

[PANK] DAILY

writers for the most adventurous readers.

[SHOP](#)

[ABOUT](#)

[SUBMIT](#)