

Brevity

An Online Magazine Report by Ryan Sabin

May 2008

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Fact Sheet

Online Magazine: Brevity

Web Address: <http://creativenonfiction.org/brevity>

Email: brevitymag@gmail.com

Founded: 1997

Mission Statement: To publish well-known and emerging writers working in the extremely brief essay form, in the style of memoir, journalism, or lyrical prose.

Founder: Dinty W. Moore

Current Editors: Dinty W. Moore, Rachael Peckman

Frequency: Three times a year

What They Publish: Creative nonfiction of 750 words or fewer, book reviews, craft essays

Circulation: About 12,000 visitors per issue

Submission Guidelines: See Web site for details

Reading Period: Check Web site to see if they are reading

Simultaneous Submissions: Yes

Contributor Payment: Currently non-paying

Amount of Submissions: About 2,000 a year for three issues of twelve essays

Acceptance Rate: About 2%

Why I Chose *Brevity*

I discovered *Brevity* as an assignment for my first market sheet in Jotham Burrello's *Fiction Writing and Publishing* class. I was struck at first that this was a literary magazine dedicated solely to extremely short creative nonfiction. As I tend to write mostly creative nonfiction, I was excited to read it, eager to see how well it could be done in the flash format. I was impressed by the quality of the prose, and that the writers could include so much story in such a small amount of space. I wanted to research further about the process of writing this type of prose in hopes of understanding and improving my own work.

Comparison of Issues over Time

| | Issue 24 Summer 2007 | Issue 25 Fall 2007 | Issue 26 Winter 2008 |
|---|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Prose: Review: Craft | 10:0:0 | 10:1:1 | 8:1:1 |
| POV 1 st :2 nd :3 rd | 8:1:1 | 10:0:0 | 8:0:0 |
| Prose Writers M:F | 3:7 | 4:6 | 1:7 |

Brevity is dedicated to only publishing creative nonfiction, but they do include craft essays or book reviews that relate to CNF. Though this form is most easily geared towards the first person narrative structure, there are some writers who took the risk of second or third person and were successful. It's interesting that each issue has more female writers. It would be worth investigating if women tend to write more personal memoirs.

Prose Reviews

Issue 24; Summer 2007

Nine Days by Suzanne LaFetra is a plainspoken essay told in the third person in the form of a list. The narrator begins her piece with the words “Number of:” then continues the rest of the story as a list of details about her trip alone to Mexico for her birthday. A number, signifying certain quantities about the trip, follows each detail; such as how many minutes it takes her to find the vacation home, or the bottles of tequila she bought once she’s there. Interspersed are character background and thoughts, such as the years she lived on the beach before marrying her husband. The story ends with her blowing out the candle on her birthday cake, surrounded by old friends.

Though the structure of the essay is untraditional, it manages to tell a complete story. LaFetra carefully picks details that move the narrative forward while developing herself as the character. There are sight details such as the number of songs she sings on the car ride to the beach house, or the number of stretch marks across her belly. Interspersed are backstory details, such as the number of years she and her husband have been in couples therapy, as well as the number of times they have swum in the ocean together. Details are particularly telling when the numbers are zero, such as the amount of time she spends putting stuff away before running to the beach, or the amount of things she carries with her as she goes, ending in the amount of fabric covering her body. The story conveys the freedom LaFetra feels along with her sadness.

Openings by Jennifer Sinor is a plainspoken essay told in the second person in a domestic setting. The narrator asks her father to help her open a jar of pickles. He has trouble opening it; his hands aren’t as strong and steady as they used to be. The narrator leaves the kitchen, unwilling to watch her father, who she remembers having big strong hands, struggle with the jar. The story moves forward to the next day, when the narrator nervously watches her father carry her newborn son through the dessert. It then moves back to the present, where the narrator returns to the kitchen to find the pickle jar open. She worries that he’s developing Parkinson’s disease just like her uncle. She thanks her father, and he tells her that her mother opened the jar.

This simple essay about opening a pickle jar tells much about the relationship between Sinor and her father. The second person narration works well as it puts the reader in the narrator's shoes as she watches her father struggle. The present tense helps create immediacy, but the story also switches to past tense to tell how things were, and future to tell how things will be after. This is a crucial event, and the switching of tenses adds to the meaning of the father being unable to open the pickle jar.

Issue 25; Fall 2007

Enormous by Jean-Michele Gregory is a plainspoken first person essay in a domestic setting. The narrator is in love with a large man. She details her love for him in the way he envelops her at night in bed, or in the way they have nicknames for each other of "bear" and "bird." He tries to lose weight from time to time, but she feels like a bad person for wanting him to change. He always fails at his diets, sneaking food behind her back that she later discovers. After failing at the diet, they always share in a food orgy. Gregory asks what they are going to do about him. He questions why she's so sure something needs to be done.

This story, by virtue of being told in the first person, has a very direct address to the reader. At one point, the narrator directly talks to the reader, asking: "Will you laugh if I say I wanted to be that burrito?" This refers to how she fell in love with him watching him eat a burrito on their first date. All of this is a model telling of the details of this woman's love for this man, from their time in bed together to the diets that always fail. But it also relates the complicated feelings she has for her husband and his weight. By combining showing with telling, Gregory gives a good sense of their relationship.

Scream by Joel Peckham is a plainspoken first person essay in a domestic setting. The narrator has fallen down on a patch ice outside his apartment while getting apple juice from the car and can't move. His young son is inside playing with a friend. He doesn't feel the pain yet, but he will. Trying to pick himself up, he feels like a failure, after all the hard work trying to learn to walk again after the accident. Later, at the hospital, he reflects on his life, how he's made progress in a year, but all of it feels false. As the doctors and nurses load him onto the X-ray

machine, he remembers the accident: flying through the air; watching Cyrus crash through the windshield. He wonders if Cyrus felt any pain, and if he screamed when it happened.

This is a story about a man plagued by his past actions. Though Peckham never comes out and tells the reader that there's been an accident, he gives enough details so we can figure it out. The pain he can't feel isn't just physical pain. It's the pain of regret; of doing something horrible he can't change. He feels the pain inside him more when he can't actually feel the physical pain, and then when the physical pain does come, it helps wash away the pain of memory. Peckham's story is affected by a past event that isn't even mentioned: the accident. This past event motivates current feelings and actions. This is a "discovery" that Brevity editor Dinty W. Moore speaks about as being so important to the memoir form.

Issue 26; Winter 2008

Oatmeal by Patricia Twomey Ryan is a first person lyrical essay in a domestic setting. Set in the kitchen on a winter morning before school, the Ryan is watching her mother make Irish oatmeal for breakfast. But as the oatmeal is being prepared, she thinks about herself and her desires for things in her life to be different: for the world outside not to be so cold; for school not to be so unpleasant; for her mother to be more stylish and pretty. But the story shifts from cold and unhappy to warm and safe once the oatmeal is served. For this one moment she is happy.

Ryan uses descriptive language which makes this simple story much more dramatic. We can feel the cold air of the kitchen, and see the steam rise from the oatmeal, and taste the warm milk. We get a strong sense of place, as well as character in a short amount of space. We can tell who the author is as a little girl, and what makes up her world. But Ryan is also taking a step back from the scene, and seeing things as both the little girl she was and the grown woman she is now. This effective reflection is an essential element to the creative nonfiction form.

The Widow's Trailer by Aaron Teel is a first person essay in a domestic setting. Teel and his brother steal their father's beers and drink them by the ditch where they like to skateboard. After downing several beers, the brothers check out a nearby trailer park. Teel's older brother, Ryan, tells him of a trailer where a woman sleeps naked in the window. Intrigued, they both go over to the trailer where in fact a woman is sleeping naked in a window that doesn't even have a

screen covering it. Teel feels an unexpected desire for this widow, despite her age and plump body. Overcome by this and all the warm beer, he begins to vomit on the grass. His brother takes him home and takes care of him.

This simple story creates a strong sense of character and movement. We know the boys are brothers because Teel tells us, “Ryan stole twelve Shiners from dad’s stash in the shed.” We get a sense that Ryan is older because he’s the one who knows about the naked woman, and he’s the one who helps his brother when he gets sick. The author does a good job of showing, and telling just enough to help with the showing. He also makes good use of action verbs: “... he kicked me squarely in the behind. His aim was such that my eyes watered and my ear rang and afterwards we sat quietly for a while on either side of the ditch, waiting for our pain to pass.” Again, Teel is looking back and seeing things from both the character in the story and the writer reflecting at the desk, a perspective that makes this memoir more than a simple “scrapbook of memories.”

Interview with Editor Dinty W. Moore

May 6, 2008

1. How many submissions do you receive per issue? Or, if it makes more sense, how many in a year?

The numbers have climbed rapidly over the past year. We are probably nearing 2,000 annual submissions for three issues. Each issue averages about ten or twelve essays, so we have to reject a lot of work, and some of it is good work. The choices are hard.

2. Do you think the online format is better suited to what's called flash fiction, or in your case, flash creative nonfiction?

I don't personally like reading longer works on the screen, and printing it off seems to defeat the purpose, so yes, I think there is a natural union between shorts and the web. I like short essays, and short fiction, and for that matter, short poems. There is just something about the compressed form – like the diamond made out of coal. If done well, the form produces something like a miniature dollhouse, with windows, and furniture, and the tiniest little lamps you've ever seen. You draw close in, stare through the windows, and you keep seeing new things inside.

3. What is your editing process for Brevity? Do you suggest changes to essays that you like but think need some revision?

In any given issue, maybe six or eight of the essays were accepted as is, and another two to four had some minor suggestions and back and forth. In one recent case, an essay had four sections, and I asked the author to cut the very first section and make it three, because the first section just seemed like warming-up. Much of the work we reject *could* work for Brevity, but it would need a lot of editing. Writing tight, compact, spare prose takes a lot of work on the part of the writer. Many revisions. I suspect much of the work we reject hasn't been revised enough before it is sent out.

4. In his essay, *"The Facts Behind the Fact,"* Philip Gerard speaks about a memoir being "...not simply a scrapbook of memories to brood over or cherish, but a reckoning." Can you speak a little on the importance of the writer of memoir taking a step back and being both the participant in the story as well as the writer at the desk reflecting on the meaning and importance of what has happened?

I like to use the term "discovery" to cover what Phil Gerard is talking about. If a writer is merely relaying a story—look, this happened to me—there will not be the tension or energy that is derived when a writer is *examining* a story—this happened to me, and the memory intrigues me still, and parts of it puzzle me, and I keep turning it over and over in my mind. That latter impulse is the one to follow.

5. In another one of the craft essays in a past issue of *Brevity*, Lia Purpura writes "...in the miniature, everything is significant. Everything counts." Do you think that is true of the short memoir or essay? Does every word or sentence need to have meaning?

Yes.

6. What do you see too much of, and what would you like to see more of?

This is hard to say without sounding cold, but we see too many pieces about the death of a loved one. The problem with such work is that the death of a loved one has such enormous, natural significance for the grieving author that it is hard for that author to see where or how to make this significant to the reader. We see too many travel pieces that follow the line "I went, I saw, it was exotic, and now I'm reporting back in beautiful language." That's just not enough. There has to be some story, some question, some conflict.

What would I like to see more of? Simple stories, urban or rural, of people trying to survive at work, in love, in families, in everyday existences. Like "Openings," by Jennifer Sinor, in a recent issue.

And of course, reporting. I like memoir, I write with the "I" pronoun all of the time, but that's not the only way.

*A question I didn't ask because it was answered so thoroughly on **Brevity's** webpage is: "Does **Brevity** only publish 'Published' writers?" Check out Dinty Moore's response at <http://creativenonfiction.org/brevity/ednote.htm>*

*Also, please check out <http://www.dintywmoore.com/index.htm> for more information about the wonderful editor of **Brevity**. You can also see more interviews with Dinty on **Submit: The Unofficial All-Genre Multimedia Guide to Submitting Short Prose**.*