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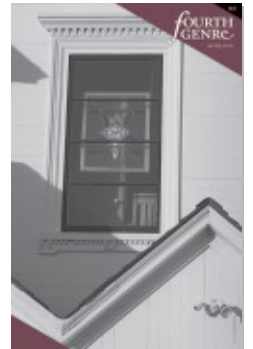
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Getting "Grip"

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Getting “Grip”

JOY CASTRO

When I finished my memoir *The Truth Book*, I thought I was done with life-writing. I looked forward to returning to fiction and poetry, the genres in which I had trained. *The Truth Book* was harrowing to draft, harrowing to revise—even harrowing to read from when I toured: I would return to my hotel rooms exhausted and febrile, trembling, drinking Airborne like a toddy in town after town. When the book’s launch was over, I felt relief. I’d gone public with all that awful old material I’d secretly carried (child abuse, fundamentalism, adoption, confusion about my *latinidad*, prison, suicide), and I could let it rest.

I was done drawing on my life for material. *Good-bye to all that.*

So “Grip” came as a surprise.

GENRE

“Grip” came as a poem, initially—a free-verse poem all in one long stanza that obsessed over its central remembered image: the dark, torn paper target hanging over the baby’s sweet crib, the contrast of which struck me as strange and compelling in a way it had not when I’d hung the target there myself many years and many dwellings ago.

I can’t remember now whether I originally wrote the poem longhand—which is likely, because that’s how I draft almost everything, including this essay—or on my computer in my office, which is where I tinkered with the piece between classes and committee meetings, reading it aloud to myself,

gradually seeing that it wanted to break into stanzas. White space helped mark the temporal and topical shifts.

Eventually, the lineation seemed to want to fall away. As a reader, I always wonder if a free-verse poem needs to be a poem. Sometimes the line breaks do seem important, but sometimes they don't. In the case of "Grip," they didn't. So I let them go, and the piece melted into paragraphs that were indented where the stanzas had begun.

"Grip" came to make more aesthetic sense to me as a very short essay that cares a lot about sound—repetition, rhythm, rhyme—than as a poem.

A U D I E N C E

I am usually very unsure about my work—about whether the material that surprises or moves me will matter to anyone else—and it was so with this essay, too.

During the time I was composing it, I was obliged to give a reading every six months at the Pine Manor College MFA program, where I teach. Since most of the faculty and students are there each time, you always have to read something new (or else look washed up). I tried "Grip" out on the audience, and they were very enthusiastic. I was lucky: the audience included poet and editor Steven Huff, who later read "Grip" aloud on his radio show; and the poets Meg Kearney and Laure-Anne Bosselaar, who said kind things about it; and Mike Steinberg, a founding editor of this journal.

Their enthusiastic reception encouraged me to try submitting it. The audience can be very important. It's such a reciprocal relationship.

My real audience, though, is young mothers from backgrounds of poverty and violence, women desperate like the woman I was. I hope "Grip" reaches them.

S U B M E R G E D

When I submitted "Grip" to *Fourth Genre*, it did not include paragraphs six through eight ("My mother lived . . ."). There was a leap, a gap, and it sounded

almost as though my mother could have been dead. She wasn't, but I sort of liked the drama and the absence of certainty.

The editor at *Fourth Genre*, Marcia Aldrich, suggested some changes:

The unanswered question as to your mother's fate is troubling, and a bit more on the roots of the fear that motivates the need to protect your son was identified in our readers' reports. Speaking for myself, I wanted a bit more grounding, or a slight nod in that direction.

This seemed like a simple request for fair play with the reader, so I expanded the essay to address those concerns. I added the clarifying material: my mother lived. I agreed with the request for changes, which made it a stronger, fuller piece.

However, I wanted to make sure the essay still said that you could survive something and yet not be alive in quite the same way you were before. To convey something about the way violence can catalyze a kind of poetry of action—not does, *can*—I got the idea of “scrimshaw cut in living bone,” which expressed, I thought, an untenable violation that nonetheless might produce a desperate sort of beauty (like hanging a target over a crib). Then I got carried away with literalizing the scrimshaw notion and felt obliged to include the whole whale—an actual whale, swimming about the paragraph. I ran a revised version past my friend and colleague James Engelhardt, a poet and the managing editor at *Prairie Schooner*, who kindly suggested that my inclusion might be a bit over the top, and he was right. It was too abrupt: the reader is first in my old apartment and then at the shooting range, and then sees my mother get attacked, only to be dragged to the depths by a whale that's only metaphorical anyway. Ugh.

So I cut the whale but kept the scrimshaw line, which was all I'd really wanted, and a couple of other phrases that were salvageable: “we learned to hold our breath, dive deep, bare our teeth to what fed us.”

In this way, the whale is there, yet not there, and posterity will be relieved to find no krill in the piece.

SYNECDOCHE

My stepfather’s sexual abuse of me has caused long-lasting damage, but I didn’t want to go into all that in “Grip.” I’d hashed through it in *The Truth Book*, and I thought that bringing such an explosive topic into so short an essay could derail the piece.

But while I tried to squelch it, it was there for me, psychically, as I was writing. I kept telling it, *This isn’t about you: it’s about my mom, and my son*, but it wouldn’t let itself be silenced. So I compromised with it: I looked for a concrete, true detail that would let me allude to it, which I found in this image of the target: “But that dark, torn thing did hang there, its lower edge obscured behind the wooden slats, the flannel duck, the stuffed white bear.” That hidden lower edge of the outline—hidden behind the crib slats, hidden in the essay—stood in for my stepfather’s abusive sexuality. It functioned as a synecdoche for all of it.

My psyche accepted that line as a reasonable compromise, a sufficient acknowledgment of that issue, and left me in peace.

The reader doesn’t need to know.

TITLE

The title “Grip” was simply a gift. It just came, early on, very soon after the initial poem was down on the page, and although it isn’t a word that occurs in the body of the text, it seemed right: my grip on the gun, the grip of fear, trying to keep a grip on yourself, the urgent but futile project of gripping your children to keep them safe. For me as a writer, it even referred to my grip on this particular material, which always felt a little tenuous.

“Grip”: short, apt, evocative, and easy to recall. I kept questioning and testing its rightness throughout the revision process, but it stuck.

POV

One writerly rule of thumb is not to switch POV in tight quarters, so I worried over the last section of “Grip,” which opens by talking about “my son” in the

third person, but then pulls a swerve at the very end and speaks directly to him: “like these lines I will never show you, shielding you from the fear I carry—like a sort of oath I swore over your quiet sleep.” The whole thing, I hope the reader can see at that point, has been addressed to him all along—but won’t be disclosed to him. To know the pain and intensity your parents carry is too heavy a burden.

That’s what I believed when I composed it, anyway. When I learned it was going to be on the air and might eventually be published, I worried. We’d had a bad moment a couple of years before, when a high school friend had told him something from *The Truth Book*. He had decided earlier not to read it, knowing from the subtitle (*Escaping a Childhood of Abuse among Jehovah’s Witnesses*) that it would make him sad. I thought that was a healthy boundary for him to draw.

But then his friend read the book and asked him about something. When he came home, he cried. “Did that happen to you?” he said. It really hurt him.

I didn’t want to put him through anything similar again, so I gave him a copy of “Grip” to read, and by then, he was older and in college and thought it was a good idea to do so. When he read it, he was pretty unfazed. Kids will surprise you.

The POV switch had troubled me from a technical standpoint, so I tried a number of alternatives to make the piece more consistent; but nothing else felt true. I gave up temporarily, and when I read the piece aloud at Pine Manor with the POV switch intact, it didn’t seem to baffle or bother anyone. I left it alone after that.

FORM

In form, I prefer short over long, the slap to the lecture.

This preference may come from being raised to be seen and not heard, raised as a girl in what was then a very male-dominated religion. Women were exhorted to be silent, and my family echoed that precept and enforced it with violence. In such a context, if you open your mouth, you’d better have something important to say.

Of course, I don’t agree with that now, but it was my world from birth to 14, and it had its effect on my aesthetic. Although I’ve been a professor for

12 years, the lectern remains an uneasy space for me (even though I now say things like “space”). Holding forth: very difficult. The sound of my own voice in public for any stretch of time makes me nervous, and it’s that way on the page, too.

Also, I get bored easily, and I resent writers who bore me, so I don’t want to bore anyone else.

Short works for me. Compression. Urgency. Get in, get out.

It’s funny to me that this essay is longer than “Grip” itself.

PATIENCE

I always encourage students to let things lie. Let them settle. When you’re going through the thick of something—whether you’re breaking up your marriage or climbing Mount Kilimanjaro—it’s hard to do anything except journalism. Take notes, sure. But don’t try to force art from it. It’s too close. You can’t see it yet.

The patterns—the ones that really illuminate, reveal, show something new—don’t emerge that quickly. They can take years to surface from the welter of immediate detail.

I was 21 when I hung that bullet-holed target over my son’s crib, and it didn’t strike me as macabre or even as a possible strange form of oath until my very late 30s, when I suddenly *saw* it: saw that dark target hanging there over the crib in my mind’s eye and thought, for the first time, *Hey, that’s weird. What was I thinking?* I saw it in conjunction with the fear I’d carried and my mother’s attack by her abusive husband long after she’d left him, moved to another state, and believed herself safe. I could see her failure to protect my brother and me juxtaposed starkly against that black gun in my hands. But at 21, I couldn’t have told you any of that.

My son, as I write this, will be 21 himself in October. A lot of time has passed since the events “Grip” narrates.

What I’m saying is that it takes time to see. You have to acquire a different perspective to see your old self anew, to see the patterns that have been lying there all along. That’s what creative nonfiction’s about for me.

Be patient. Don’t rush your work; don’t force it. Keep writing and reading while you wait.

I've been helped by teaching and studying literature from an analytical, scholarly standpoint. When I'm teaching a story by Daniel Chacón or a poem by Elizabeth Bishop, I have to approach it in a cool, neutral way to see how its parts work to make meaning, and how the writer is recreating a world in language. Doing that constantly, for a living, could kill the creative impulse outright, and I worry about that, but in the meantime, it has schooled me to a kind of alertness about language and effect. If you're a professor, there's a danger of your work becoming professorial: too suffused by the living death of committee meetings and the unacknowledged privilege of having the leisure to pick over small things at great length. But if you can manage to avoid that, analyzing a lot of literature can be a good way to build your tool kit.

Keep training. Keep gaining skills. Write sonnets and haiku and villanelles—write a novel!—so that you have multiple techniques at your fingertips. Then, when something about your experience does strike you as genuinely provocative or strange, you'll be able to bring it full-force to the page.