

UNTIL THE PALE DAYBREAK:

Essays from the Periphery

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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The Interdisciplinary Centre for Culture and Creativity
University of Saskatchewan
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By

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ABSTRACT

Until the Pale Daybreak: Essays from the Periphery is a collection of personal essays, in the form of a commonplace book, primarily exploring my experiences and memories of grief. These emotions are accompanied by travel through cities in Europe, North America and Brazil, and while these are essays of loss - either a physical loss, such as that of a parent, or an emotional bereavement, for a place or time - the essays also touch on literature, film, religion, human nature, and melancholia. Throughout the collection I write from the periphery of my life, choosing how much to reveal textually, inviting the reader to gaze alongside me, and at me, but always from a distance. The pieces range from childhood experience through to adult reflections, and an acceptance of the cards life has dealt. Along the way I reflect on varied subjects and characters, from assisted suicide, to the French musical star Dalida, and from Quentin Crisp, to mountaineer Jonathan Conville. The intention of these parallel lives is to complement my own narrative and take a reader back to the fringes of my conversation. The writing in this collection is varied. Certainly some sections are very sad, an emotion that seems unavoidable when writing about bereavement, but there is also humour, poetry, and calmness. The pieces are conversations, often to myself, that I am allowing the reader to eavesdrop on, perhaps witnessing something of their own lives in the writing, and provoking moments of reflection.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Until The Pale Daybreak: Essays from the Periphery, is a hybrid work of personal meditations set out in the form of a commonplace book. The main title is taken from the final lines of a poem called "The Furies," by the American Poet Weldon Kees:

Possessors and possessed,
They keep the bedside wake
As a doctor or a wife
Might wait the darkness through
Until the pale daybreak—
Protectors of your life.

I thought this was an apt choice as the poem reflects on witnessing death. That quiet period between night and dawn. Grief, waiting, and bereavement are all recurring themes of this thesis.

The idea of each of the narratives in this collection arose from travel to different places in Europe, the United States, Brazil and Canada, and while this is not a travelogue or travel writing I have tried to include some details of place in each of the pieces, or at least my experience of it, as a setting. Each segment initially began as a journal note or a photograph from these trips.

Originally the commonplace book was a means of saving information. They could be filled with recipes, quotes, proverbs, personal thoughts, and prayers. They worked as a mode of recording a wide ranging mix of places, people and thoughts. As already mentioned, the ideas for each of the pieces in collection were initiated by notes and photographs I took while travelling, and the thesis could be seen as an extended form of that commonplace book, a series of vignettes that reflect on my life and experience, and a glimpse of other subjects or people that interest me.

My subtitle, *Essays from the Periphery*, while acting as an anchor for the thesis as a whole, is misleading. Defining the collection as a genre initially proved difficult. I asked myself: what is an essay? One of the most user-friendly definitions I found was from the writer Aldous Huxley, who called the essay form "One damned thing after another, a literary device for saying almost everything about anything," while Francis Bacon called essays, "dispersed meditations" (Nordquist, Richard).

As definitions go, both of these fit the style of the collection; however, these same definitions could also be used to describe commonplace books. The pieces in the collection are short and often fragmented, too ambiguous to be considered true essays, and though they contain memory, experience, and fact, the dispersion of the information I have provided distances them from the essay genre. In the introduction to his anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Philip Lopate writes:

{T}he essay form allows the writer to circle around one particular autobiographical piece, squeezing all possible meaning out of it while leaving the

greater part of his life story available for later milking. It may even be that the personal essayist is more temperamentally suited to this circling procedure, diving into the volcano of self and extracting a single hot coal to consider and shape, either because of laziness or because of an aesthetic impulse to control a smaller frame. (12)

I do not do this. I play with the notion of revealing aspects of my life up-close, but then step back, sometimes jumping topic or leaving the narrative unanswered. This form suits my writing process and fits my project as it offers an ideal opportunity to structure the collection less rigidly, or chronologically. It also allowed me write less formally about many topics and people, encapsulating an event separately, leaving it, and moving on to the next, yet still carrying forward a definite set of themes throughout. However, calling this thesis a commonplace book still presents me with some difficulty. I feel it has more structure than a straight-up collection of facts and meditations, but while the main thread of the writing follows my life and my experience of grief, and this theme is clear to readers, it also contains a hotchpotch of information collected by me over the years that I run alongside my personal story. Even the epigrams at the start of each piece are part of a collection, so perhaps *Until the Pale Daybreak-A Commonplace Book* might have been a more suitable title

I chose my view in these pieces as the periphery of life. The narratives offer glimpses into my own life, and the lives of other people who interest me, but both I, and the reader, remain on the fringes, looking in, as a kind of voyeur. With this as my point of view I aimed to distance myself a little from the stories and to avoid them reading like a traditional memoir, where the writer often features a single life-changing event. While facts included in this collection are intimate and very much private, and are indeed life-changing, I felt that taking this long view restricted the reader from seeing too much of me. The collection is a scrapbook of fragments linked together. The reader sees a pattern to the narratives, and an overall theme, but is also restricted by the information provided. This ambiguity is what differentiates the thesis from traditional memoir. I only reveal so much factually.

Part of my intention was for a reader to get a sense of me through the writing and I was influenced by Leonard Michaels the American essayist who says in a piece called "Writing About Myself."

The problem is how not to write merely about myself, I think this problem is endemic among writers, whether or not they are aware of it. The basic elements of writing - diction, grammar, tone, imagery, the patterns of sound made by your sentences - say a good deal about yourself before you even know you are writing about yourself. Regardless of your subject, the basic elements, as well as countless and immeasurable qualities of mind, are at play in your writing and will make your presence felt to a reader as palpably as your handwriting.

Thinking about this as an initial mode of writing, my goal was for the readers to get as much a sense of me as a character from my style of writing as they do from the anecdotes I relate. I believe my voice is strong in these essays and that I give as much away about myself by my style of prose as I do by providing literal facts about myself. My writing is generally sparse, poetic in places, humorous, melancholic, and particularly, here,

conversational, and I wanted readers to see all these attributes in the collection as they are all aspects of my own personality as much as my writing style. As an example of my conversational style I include this beginning to an essay called “Rome:”

If I wanted to make money writing I’d start penning self-help guides. Perhaps a *‘Dummies Guide To Becoming A Hermit,’* or *‘Face The Fear, Just Not Today.’* Ok, so maybe writing self-help guides is not going to be my thing, but I do enjoy reading them. I have become a self-help junkie of sorts, reading everything from Tony Robbins *‘Awaken the Giant Within,’* (I didn’t) to *‘An Idiot’s Guide to Dachshunds’* (until I realised owning a dachshund would be like having a caterpillar in tow). (24)

From a personal perspective writing each piece was not so much about personal discovery as it was about how I arrived at that discovery, and that was something I wanted the reader to relate to, a sense of discovering something about me, the place I was in, the people I write about, but more importantly, how I arrived at that reflection. In this way I hoped to form a relationship with the reader, allowing him or her inside my consciousness, developing a level of intimacy they would appreciate. This was the key in keeping them engaged in each piece and wanting to move on to the next. These windows of intimacy are mostly the shortest sentences in the collection:

My father was a poacher. (2)

This makes me sad. She would have loved it. (23)

Flavio had died. (48)

Like Kees, I too am drawn to melancholy. (84)

These short lines act as entry points for the reader to see something personal about me, a private sharing of information. They all make a statement that opens my thoughts to the reader. Through confiding, setting up this intimacy, I allow them in, providing a chance for them see how an event affected me, changed me, made me stop and reflect, and so, show them the story rather than just telling it.

Of course memory can be subjective and is definitely flawed but it was important to stick as honestly to the events as possible. Having kept journals and photographs helped immensely. It is also important to stress that the stories here are my versions of events; someone else in my family, or among from friends, is likely going to tell it differently.

Death is a strong theme in my collection and I felt by writing a traditional memoir collection it could quickly turn into an object of despair rather than a collection that touches on grief but also several other threads of human emotion and experience. Some of the essays, – “Nocturnal,” “Sao Manuel” and “Belfast” – follow the traditional memoir trend but the majority of the collection brings together my experience and sets it alongside someone else’s. For example, in “Montreal” I discuss my own sense of grief and bereavement and situate it against the city and the life and suicide of the French actress Dalida. In “San Francisco” I talk about my own melancholy and situate it alongside the poet Weldon Kees and his disappearance in the 1950’s.

Like Kees, I too am drawn to melancholy. I think sometimes I deliberately seek it

out. In the poem Robinson, he writes, “The world is a gray world. Not without violence.” The fog always reminds me of this, and of my mood. As my plane descended towards San Francisco’s International airport I gazed from the window at the rolling grey mass retreating into the distance. (84)

Using this strategy provides the reader with something more, something they can appreciate alongside my story. I think it gave my experiences some sort of context, rather than just a random memory. In reading memoir and essay writing for this thesis all the very best ones followed a pattern similar to this. In *The White Album*, Joan Didion connects her own nervous breakdown to the cultural disorder around her. In the multi-award-winning non-fiction book, *H is for Hawk*, the falconer, Helen Macdonald, talks about her grief after the death of her father parallel to the story of TH White and his book *The Goshawk*, and the task she undertakes to train a goshawk of her own as White described in his book. What I hoped to achieve through this method was looking at how other people’s experiences could highlight my own, and make them resonate further with the reader and these compositional blends worked well in this thesis.

Movement is another strong theme in the collection. Each piece is situated in a different place, and at a different time. Despite including an index of cities, I mentioned earlier that I do not consider the collection a travelogue, nor would I describe it as travel literature. I was more motivated by how a place evoked a memory, or strand of thought, rather than its physical setting, and this is where the thesis differs from either travel writing, where place is the dominant subject, and from travelogue, which is more visually driven. While travelogues can convey a deep sense of observation and emotion they remain focussed on the road-trip. Like the definition of essay, the lines are blurred. My thesis can be seen as a road-trip of sorts but for me the journey is emotional rather than geographical, place has less importance, and it is association that drives the work.

The order of narratives is loosely chronological and in order of events but there is some jumping back and forth. Just as memory moves back and forth I wanted the events and experiences to shift. I start with a fairly recent event in the first essay and relate it back to my father. I do this in the final essay, less closely, but still it hooks back to my childhood and my father: “My father was a poacher.”(2). My father’s voice ends the collection. Which is also framed in a rural setting. The shift in the order of the events also heightens the sense of restlessness and transition in the thesis. Memory doesn’t necessarily follow exact sequences; we remember events, mix them up, and often confuse them and I wanted to feel like I was moving back and forth in time and memory between the pieces.

Throughout the thesis there is a feeling of running away from grief, or childhood, but also of looking forward and living in the present, as suggested in the epigraph from Paul Auster: “I’m living in the present, thinking about the past, hoping for the future.” I believe the collection can be viewed in a similar way. While I am writing about my own, and other people’s pasts, I am also situated in the moment with flashes of optimism for the future.

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