

A Braided Heart: Shaping the Lyric Essay

BRENDA MILLER

I. THE LYRIC ESSAY

On the first day of my class “Writing the Lyric Essay”, I bring in a loaf of *challah*, the braided bread traditionally eaten for the Jewish Sabbath dinner. I take it out of my bag and set it in on a white cloth at the center of the table. Before I say anything at all about it, I watch my students’ reactions: some eye it warily, their eyes narrowed in suspicion. They know there must be *some* predetermined reaction I’m looking for, and so they sit back and refuse to give any at all; they cross their arms over their chests or begin to rustle through their backpacks for pencils or pens. Some of them, the ones who recognize the *challah*, are worried that this is going to be one of those “spiritual” writing classes; they look at the bread and glance away, then lean over to whisper something to their neighbors. Some gaze at the bread only with suppressed delight, hunger evident in their eyes. *Snack time*, they think, and with it the promise of an “easy” class, one that coddles and nurtures.

Any of them could be right. I pass out the syllabus and watch the stapled packets make a circuit around the room, the *challah* still sitting placidly in the center of the table, innocuous yet full of mysterious power. I don’t talk about the bread, but I begin some forays into the “lyric essay” in general. What is it? That is the main question we all have; I might even write it on the board. *What is the lyric essay?* Not only *what is it* but *how do I make it?* What’s the definition? What’s the answer?

And I might tell them: *I don’t know*. I might tell them, though they won’t want to hear it, that we’ve entered a realm of unknowing, a place where definitions are constantly in flux, a place where answers are not as important as the questions to which they give rise.

II. THE CHALLAH

I loved *challah* when I was a child. It had to be bought from a special kosher bakery, the Delicious Bakery in the Hughes Shopping Center,

and we had to get there at just the right time on Friday afternoons: before the loaves were sold out, and after they had just come from the oven, still warm, the egg wash and the sesame seed gleaming like gold. They seemed, in fact, the golden loaves of some fairy tale, minted from a factory deep inside a hidden cave, emerging on a conveyor belt and counted out for all the Jews of Northridge. There were a good many conservative congregations in the San Fernando valley, the “California Jews” whom the east coast Jews frowned upon, or dismissed. There’s a joke: California Jews are not really Jews; they’re Jew-ish.

And I suppose my family fit that description. We went to synagogue when necessary, and my brothers and I went to Hebrew school, and I thought the men looked both distinguished and ridiculous with their *yarmulkes* on: it was the contrast between the elegant black silk and the womanish bobby pins used to hold them in place. My brothers took them off as soon as they could, but sometimes my father absently mindedly left his *yarmulke* on throughout the rest of that sanctified day, preoccupied with a piece of wood in his vise-grip on the bench in the garage, or sitting with his feet up on the La-Z-Boy recliner, watching a Lakers game, waiting for dinner to be served.

Though we were secular Jews, we were still Jewish enough to appreciate the quality of the Sabbath bread, that beautiful, glowing *challah*. I recently asked a rabbi on the Internet why the *challah* is braided, what is symbolic about it, and his e-mail reply said (in a voice so much like the rabbis of my youth! Slightly contemptuous, a little annoyed . . .) that the Sabbath bread must only look *different* from everyday bread, that it need not be braided; it could be circular or oblong or in the shape of a rhomboid, for that matter. The braid had become custom for eastern European Jews; some bakers used three strands, some four; this rabbi, he said with a hint of pride, used six!

As a child, I knew only that the braided bread simply tasted *better* than ordinary bread, the way texture will often affect flavor, the way presentation and form can sometimes offer sustenance in itself. I loved watching my mother cut through that jeweled crust, the heft of the buttered slice in my hands, the convoluted, lacquered outer surface giving way to the dense bread beneath. The inside was moist and delicious, tasted like an entire meal in itself. I often closed my eyes when I bit into it. Here was a bread that spoke of what it meant to have a sacred day: to bring the divine into one’s small and common body.

III. BRAIDING THE CHALLAH

“Divide dough into four equal portions; roll each between hands to form a strand about 20 inches long. Place the 4 strips lengthwise on

a greased baking sheet, pinch tops together and braid as follows: pick up strand on right, bring it over next one, under the third, and over the fourth. Repeat always starting with the strand on the right, until braid is complete. Pinch ends together. Cover and let rise in a warm place until almost doubled. Using a soft brush or your fingers, spread egg yolk mixture evenly over braids; sprinkle with seed. Bake in a 350° oven for 30–35 minutes or until loaf is golden brown and sounds hollow when tapped.”

IV. THE LYRIC ESSAY

“Lyric. Essay. How do you think the two fit together?” My students mull over the question, avoiding my eyes, their gaze landing on the glowing *challah* at the center of the table. “What would be the recipe for a lyric essay?” I ask, “What are the ingredients?”

“Imagery?” one student tentatively offers. I nod my head eagerly and lean forward in my chair. “Poetic language?” another asks. I get up and start writing on the board, as my students begin to call out words and phrases: *fragments, personal experience, metaphor, sentences, gaps, structure, white space, thesis, sensuality, voice, meditation, repetition, rhythm*. . . . When we’re finished I have a blackboard full of possibilities, really a panoply of all the ways of writing itself. It’s a little daunting. I sit down and ask them again: So what makes the lyric essay a lyric? What makes it an essay? Why not just write a poem, instead, if you want to be lyrical? Why not just write an essay, if you want to be prosaic?

Silence falls, so I tell my students that the lyric essay is quite an ancient form; it’s nothing new. Writers like Seneca, Bacon, Sei Shōnagon in the tenth century, Montaigne, hundreds of others: all could be said to write essays whose forms were inherently lyric; that is, they did not necessarily follow a linear, narrative line. Many excellent writers and thinkers have tried to pin down the lyric essay, defining it as a collage, a montage, a mosaic. It’s been called disjunctive, paratactic, segmented, sectioned. All of these are correct. All of these recognize in the lyric essay a tendency toward fragmentation that invites the reader into those gaps, that emphasizes what is unknown rather than the already articulated known. By infusing prose with tools normally relegated to the poetic sensibility, the lyric essayist creates anew, each time, a form that is interactive, alive, full of new spaces in which meaning can germinate. The *Seneca Review*, in its thirtieth anniversary issue devoted to lyric essays, characterized them as having “this built-in mechanism for provoking meditation. They require us to complete their meaning.”

So, I underline *fragmentation* on the board. I underline the word *gaps*. I write the words *explode the narrative line!* over the whole thing. My students nod; they write this down.

Then I go over and, with chalky hands, pick up the bread.

V. THE BRAIDED ESSAY

Writing has always—and always will, I’m sure—scared the hell out of me. I’ll do just about anything to get out of it, and have been known to spend whole afternoons circling my desk like a dog, wary, unwilling to commit to writing a single word. What is so frightening about it? I still don’t know. Perhaps it’s the horrible knowledge that no matter how well you write, the resultant product will never correlate exactly to the truth, will never arrive with quite the melodious voice you hear in the acoustic cavity of your mind.

When I first started writing personal essays, I didn’t know that’s what I was doing. I had written poetry for many years, but at some point felt restricted by the poetic line. So I started wandering past the line break and ended up writing autobiographical prose that had a lilting, hesitant quality to it, as if it still didn’t trust itself in this unfenced yard.

But what I found was that this yard had just as many fences, just as many restrictions. I was struggling to write an essay that seemed very important to me, an essay about being a massage therapist for several years at a small hot springs resort in northern California. This work had defined me and created a center of self based on serving others. By the time I was writing the essay, in 1989, this center had dissolved: I no longer practiced massage and had yet to find another guiding principle to replace it. The urge to write was the urge to explain the sense of loss I felt, to bring coherence to an identity that now seemed fragmented, in flux, chaotic.

While I wrote, I kept looking at a photograph of myself from that time: I’m naked, in the hot tub of Orr Springs. The photographer (my boyfriend) chose to frame this scene through a windowpane misty with steam; we get a fragment of jasmine bush, the blur of the water, my hands lifted to shield my face. The diffuse light centers on my abdomen (the site, it turns out, where much of my autobiographical material resides). I looked at this picture often, much the way I might gaze in a mirror: looking for a way into this body, a way for this image of the body to give up its secrets and make itself manifest in language. But as I tried to order this material of memory and image into a logical, linear narrative, the essay became flat, intractable, stubbornly refusing to yield any measure of truth.

By chance, I happened to be studying the personal essay form for an independent study class at the University of Montana. One of my classmates brought in an essay by the poet Albert Goldbarth. It was called “After Yitzl,” and I had never before read anything like it. Written in numbered sections that at first seemed to have little to do with one another, the essay worked through a steady accretion of imagery and key repetitions; it spoke in a voice that grew loud, then whispered, that cut itself off, then rambled. I found myself tripping over the gaps, then laughing delightedly as I found myself sprawled on the ground. Something cracked open inside me. I saw how cavalierly Goldbarth had exploded his prose in order to put it together again in a new pattern that was inordinately pleasurable.

So I turned to my own essay and tried the same thing. I deserted a narrative line in favor of images that intuitively rose up in the work. I allowed for silence, the caesuras between words, and the essay began to take on voices that hardly belonged to me. This fragmentation allowed for those moments of “not knowing,” which, to me, became the most honest moments in the essay. I abandoned my authority, and with that surrender came great freedom: I no longer had to know the answers. I didn’t have to come to a static conclusion. Instead, the essay began to make an intuitive kind of sense.

When I arrived at the final draft, I had fragmented three different narratives—my work as a massage therapist, the story of a life-threatening miscarriage, and the birth of my godson. All of this material was highly emotional to me; the fragmentation, however, allowed me—almost forced me—not to approach this material head-on but to search for a more circuitous way into the essay. I had to expand my peripheral vision, to focus on images that at first seemed oblique to the stories. Sometimes your peripheral vision catches the most important details, those you might not have expected to carry significance. You give yourself over to chance sightings, arresting the image on the verge of skittering away. In the resultant essay, “A Thousand Buddhas,” it was the image of my hands, those hands fluttering up in the photograph, that became a contextualizing force, yoking together the juxtaposed meditations on birth and death that surrounded it.

VI. TAKING RISKS

“For many bakers, kneading the soft dough is a lovely sensation, a sort of relaxing therapy. For others, the glorious moment comes with the first buttered bite of the fresh warm loaf. For everyone, the yeasty

aroma wafting from the oven as the bread bakes crowns the day with a sense of delicious achievement. . . .

Yeast bread baking has the reputation of being chancy and difficult. . . . It’s true that you do need to be careful at first. You have to protect the baby dough to get it started. But after that the bread almost makes itself.”

VII. CORNELL BOXES

“Somewhere in the city of New York there are four or five still-unknown objects that belong together. Once together they’ll make a work of art.”

In his lovely and diminutive book about the art of Joseph Cornell, *Dime-Store Alchemy*, Charles Simic elucidates the intuitive stance necessary not only for an artist like Cornell, who brings disparate objects together in order to create a sculpture, but for us writers too, the ones who look for the disparate strands of experience to come together and form a lyric essay. Simic portrays Cornell as a kind of wandering mystic, a man with a vision that looked beyond the surface of things to the inherent spirituality that lay beneath. “What Cornell sought in his walks in the city,” Simic writes, “the fortune-tellers already practiced in their parlors . . . divination by contemplation of surfaces which stimulate inner visions and poetic faculties.”

VIII. MAKING CHALLAH

There was a time in my life when I made all my own bread. I loved every part of it: reading the recipes, gathering the ingredients, kneading the dough, allowing it to rise. And all the praise I reaped from the task didn’t hurt either. I remember, when I was in college, laying out perfectly browned loaves of whole wheat French bread on the kitchen counter in a house I shared with four men in Blue Lake; such love in their eyes, such devotion! I remember baking bread every day for children in a summer camp: big, oversized loaves of white bread that we cut and spread with churned butter. And the *challah*, of course. Sometimes I got ambitious and tried the kind of loaves you saw in synagogue: a four-strand base, with a smaller, three-strand braid on top, so that the whole thing became a monstrous labyrinth. Mine always emerged a little lopsided, but that only added to its charm.

All good bread makers develop a finely honed sense of intuition that comes into play at every step of the process: knowing exactly the temperature of the water in which to proof your yeast, testing it not with a thermometer but against the most sensitive skin at the underside of your wrist, with the same thoughtful stance as a mother testing a

baby's formula. You add the warm milk, the butter, the salt, a bit of sugar. After a while you stop measuring the flour as you stir, knowing the correct texture through the way it resists your arm. You take the sticky dough in your hands and knead, folding the dough toward you, then pushing away with the heel of your hand, turning and repeating, working and working with your entire body—your legs, your abdomen, your strong heart. You work the dough until it takes on the texture of satin. You poke it with your index finger and it sighs against your touch.

You cover it and let it rise. You keep it in your mind as it combusts in the warm dark. You return to it, this living thing you've created with your hands. You shape it to please the eye and the mouth. You pull it apart and roll the dough into yeasty ropes and begin to braid it back into a different form. You hope it will come out all right, that the strands aren't too thick or too thin, that they aren't too long or too short, that they won't fall apart in the middle, or break. Sometimes you have to unravel what you've done, start again. You keep braiding with your heart in your throat, hoping for the best. You have the egg wash at the ready, to add the finishing touches, the small bowl of sesame seeds. In your mind you have a vision of the perfect *challah*, gleaming on its special platter.

You do what you can. At some point the bread "almost makes itself."

IX. FRENCH BRAIDS

When I first met Hannah and Sarah, the way into their hearts was to plait their hair into French braids. They had faith in all women over a certain age to be able to braid hair, and so when they came to me with combs and ribbons in hand, I didn't have the heart to disillusion them. It was like a test of my merit as an adult female companion, and their eyes were so eager, so trusting: How could I refuse?

But braiding hair is not as easy as braiding bread. Especially French braids, which require a certain dexterity of the fingers, an intuitive feel for the slippery hair of young girls. The hair slides from the fingers, breaks off, becomes unruly. I had to start over, again and again, and when I was finished they looked terrible, not really like braids at all but like some old sailor's rope, knotted and twisted and frayed.

But the girls were satisfied enough. They ran to the mirror and tilted their heads; luckily they couldn't see all the way around to the back. They patted their hair as if it were a nice, strange new animal and thanked me for my trouble. I knew why they wanted it so badly: Braided hair has an allure so much more exciting than "normal" hair;

it has texture and substance and mystery. Where does one strand originate and the next one begin? The eye travels, dizzy with delight, over the highlights, and the hair seems to shimmer more fully, takes on a coy illumination that beckons the hand to touch, to feel, to love.

X. A FINE CHAOS

The world is chaotic, certainly, and always clichéd. Face it: our lives are full of stories already told. Our parents die; our lovers leave us and, *surprise!*, begin to love others. The dog grows old and we watch our own aging faces in the mirror. What is new is not *what* we tell, but *how* we tell it. The lyric essay is one way to do this: it demands (or perhaps gently asks, with a knowing smile) that we stay awake to the chance associations and intuitive connections that make life bearable. Or really, to be more precise, it asks us to create those very connections through the act of writing, to follow a chain of those connections as far as they will go and pinch them together in the end.

XI. CORNELL

And this: "*Beauty is about the improbable coming true suddenly.*"

And this: "*To submit to chance is to reveal the self and its obsession.*"

XII. THE BRAIDED ESSAY

After that first essay, "A Thousand Buddhas," I began to adopt the structure of fragmented, numbered sections for much of my prose. And I began to see more clearly that this form wasn't just about fragmentation and juxtaposition; it wasn't really mosaic. I was after. There was more of a sense of weaving about it, of interruption and continuation, like the braiding of bread, or of hair. I had to keep my eye on the single strands that came in and out of focus, filaments that glistened differently depending on where they had been. At the same time, I had to keep my eye focused on the single image that held them all together. As William Stafford wrote a few weeks before he died, "There's a thread you follow. It goes among/things that change. But it doesn't change."

As I began to adopt the braided essay more and more in my work, a strange, wonderful, and mysterious thing began to happen. While I was still writing "personal" essays, essays that mainly relied for their material on the experiences of my life, I found that they started to expand more outward, taking on myriad facts and stories of the outer world as well as the inner. New strands began to develop, but ones that still intersected with memories most important to me. I liked this.

It was as if I were creating the more complex, double-braided bread of the synagogue.

For instance, while at my first writing colony on an island in the Puget Sound, I happened to pick up an encyclopedia of Jewish religion from the library in the farmhouse. “Happened to” is the key phrase here; the essays of my own that I like the best arise out of happenstance, out of the material finding its way into my hands rather than vice versa. We must train ourselves into this state of “meditative expectancy,” as ~~Caro~~ ~~Caro~~ Forché calls the writer’s stance; the world, after all, flies by us at millions of miles an hour, spewing out any number of offerings—it is the writer at her desk, the artist out perambulating, who will recognize a gift when she sees one. As I turned the pages of this marvelous book, I was struck by how little I, a Jewish woman who had gone to Hebrew school for most of her formative years, knew about my religion. In fact, I realized, I didn’t have the foggiest idea how to pray.

I started writing down the quotes that interested me the most, facts about the kaballah, and the ritual baths, and *dybbuks*, and the Tree of Life. At the time, I was also writing about a recent trip I had taken to Portugal, and the news I had gotten there of my mother’s emergency hysterectomy. I was also writing about my own yoga practice, and the volunteer work I did at a children’s hospital in Seattle. As I kept all these windows open in my computer, the voice of the encyclopedia emerged as the binding thread, a way for me to create a spiritual self-portrait in the form of a complex braid.

This is what I love about all braided things: bread, hair, essays, rivers, our own circulatory systems pumping blood to our brains and our hearts. I love the fact of their separate parts intersecting, creating the illusion of wholeness, but with the oh-so-pleasurable texture of separation. It is not the same as a purely disjunctive form, the bits and pieces scattered like cookies on the baking sheet. Rather, the strands are separate, but together, creating a pattern that is lovely to the touch, makes the bread taste even better when we lift a slice of it to our tongues.

Poets, of course, have known this all along. They blow the world apart and put it back together again. Cornell wanders the city and is “*lunged into a world of complete happiness in which every triviality becomes imbued with significance. . . .*” Charles Simic comments, “The commonplace is miraculous if rightly seen, if recognized.”

XIII. A BRAIDED HEART

Bread has always been a miracle. As has poetry. And language itself, this tremendous urge to communicate. To live our lives in our shat-

tered ways and still be happy: this is miraculous. The Sabbath bread helps us see that an extraordinary pattern binds our days together. The braided loaf, set on a table, makes of that table an altar. Our hearts may give the illusion of one muscular organ, but think how the flord chambers converge, and of the many veins and arteries that wind their way by design to reach this fleshy core. They come together; they intersect; they beat an urgent rhythm beneath our skin.

XIV. MUSIC

I once wrote for a month at an artists’ colony in upstate New York, and one of my fellow residents was a composer of operas. I am tone deaf, have no pitch whatsoever, and music for me has always been the most esoteric of languages. He played for us, on the piano, one of his arias. When he was finished, we applauded, and I asked him: “How do you know when a piece is finished?” I know now it was a naive question, even a little foolish.

But he answered me without pause. “When what I hear up here,” he said, clapping a palm to his forehead, “corresponds to what’s written down here.” He pointed to the score. I followed the line of his fingers, saw a page full of inky hieroglyphics that wound in and out of the lined bars.

A writer must spend a great deal of time ushering her piece into the world. There is the creation of bulk, then the cutting down to the essential, resonant notes. When Cornell walks around New York City, he must pick up and discard any number of objects before finding the ones that “*belong together*.” This process takes a terrible amount of patience, more than an inkling of faith. I wanted to spy on that composer through his window and see if he does what I do when I’m writing: sit with a blank stare, my pen poised over the empty page, my mouth hanging slightly ajar, waiting.

When I read the lyric essayists that I consider great—Albert Goldbarth, Anne Carson, Annie Dillard, Charles Simic, to name just a few—they all have the quality of a piece of music arrived whole from some distant place and played anew. I can go back and read these essays again and again because they seem neither static nor fixed. It’s always a live performance: the white space expands and contracts, and I feel guest in a charmed province, the same one occupied by prayer.

XV. THE CHALLAH

We pass the bread around the seminar table. I ask my students each to tear off a chunk and hold it in their hands a moment, waiting until

everyone has a piece. I want them to notice the heft of it, the yolky texture, the subtle yet amazing fact that within the loaf itself, once you cut it open, you see nary a sign of the braiding. You have a chunk of bread: whole, fine-grained, delicious.

The bread, of course, is good. All *challah* is good. And there are many ways to eat it. Some take it apart with their fingers, separating the strands, unwinding them and putting them one by one in their mouths. Some take big bites into the center of the bread, saving the golden crust for last. Some nibble at it, then leave it on their desks. After we're finished brushing off the crumbs, taking quick sips of water, we look at each other again. Some of the students seem a little more relaxed now, a little more willing; they look at me expectantly, their eyes bright, wondering what will happen next. Some of the students seem even more annoyed, already putting their pens away; I doubt I'll see them on the roster at the next class meeting.

What I'm hoping, for the students that remain, is that the idea of *braiding* has entered us, become a viable, perhaps natural, way of shaping our material, and even our lives, for the brief ten weeks we'll be together. What I'm hoping is that by the eating of this bread together we begin to respond to a hunger unsatisfied by everyday food, unvoiced in everyday language. We'll begin to formulate a few separate strands; we'll mull them over, roll them in our hands, and bring them together in a pattern that acts as mouthpiece to the sacred.

Recipe and quotes from *Sunset Cookbook of Breads* (Lane Publishing, 1978) and *Dine-Store Alchemy* (The Ecco Press, 1992).

EXERCISES

1. Take three disparate objects, at random, from your purse, your backpack, your shelves. Set them in front of you and begin writing, allowing fifteen minutes for each object. See if there is a common image or theme you can use to bind these together.

2. Go back to an essay that's been giving you problems. Look for the one image that seems to encapsulate the abstract ideas or concepts you're trying to develop. Explode the essay into at least three different strands, each focused on different aspects of that image, and begin weaving, transforming that image from beginning to end.

3. Cut apart an essay (or two, or three) with scissors, and lay the pieces out on the floor or a long table. Start moving them around like pieces of a puzzle and see what kind of patterns you can make through different juxtapositions of the texts.

Saying Good-Bye to “Once Upon a Time,” or Implementing Postmodernism in Creative Nonfiction

LAURA WEXLER

Once upon a time is the most seductive line in literature.

Hearing it, we're immediately tantalized and calmed. Tantalized, because we know the story that follows will involve heroes and villains engaged in a fierce struggle. Calmed, because we know the heroes will prevail and live “happily ever after.” The particulars may be different, but such a cocktail of excitement and ease can be found in nearly every fairy tale . . . and, for that matter, in every Hollywood blockbuster.

And yet, the fantasy of fairy tales has less to do with made-up characters and plot than with an illusion created about storytelling itself: the illusion that there always exists a single, true, and knowable version of What Happened.

Let's say that you, an aspiring creative nonfiction writer, decide to write about one of the most controversial events of the final decade of the twentieth century, the beating of Rodney King. Would it be possible for you to tell the story with the same calm omniscience as those who tell fairy tales? Would you be able to write the single, true version of What Happened, with a clear and certain idea of who did what to whom, and when and why?

Would your story paint the baton-wielding police officers as the villains and Rodney King the hero/victim—or would you cite the flawed use-of-force policies in the Los Angeles Police Department as a mitigating factor? And would you mention that Rodney King had been driving drunk and led the police on a chase? Would you tell the beating of Reginald Denney, a white man, by black men in the aftermath of the King trial, as a story about uncontrolled black anger—despite the fact those who rescued Denney were also black?

And how would you account for the fact that, in the rioting that followed the original not-guilty verdict of the officers, a conflict painted as a black-white thing, Korean businesspeople suffered the brunt of the property destruction? And what about the fact that one