

“COMING HOME”: WRITING CREATIVE NONFICTION ESSAYS

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THE CRAFT OF NONFICTION

Phillip Lopate’s *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction* categorizes the creative nonfiction essay as “tracking the consciousness of the author” (6).

Important aspects of the genre:

- **Curiosity**

Curiosity is a gentle action; it’s not forced obsession, but a looking into even the hardest of topics in order to fully understand the mundane and the extraordinary in a new light. The writer of nonfiction restrains their imagination, making their curiosity a microscope through which they study reality, specifically, the human condition.

- **Showing and Telling**

The nonfiction essay needs to do two things: show and tell the story. Showing and telling the story immerses the reader in the essay’s experience, not just narrating events but giving the reader an enjoyable experience. A writer must meet and change the reader’s expectations and keep the reader on their toes.

- **Perspective and Retrospection**

Perspective is the most important part of the nonfiction essay. An essay’s perspective conveys the personality and other personal elements such as background, ethnicity, and even the class of the persona into the foreground. Retrospection is the act of deeply looking into the past through the factors that make up the persona’s perspective.

- **Honesty**

Like fiction, nonfiction has a conflict central to the essay. This conflict is not imaginary; nonfiction is about an honest, true-to-life experience. The deepest and most profound moments of human experience don’t need embellishment, just honest, straightforward narration.

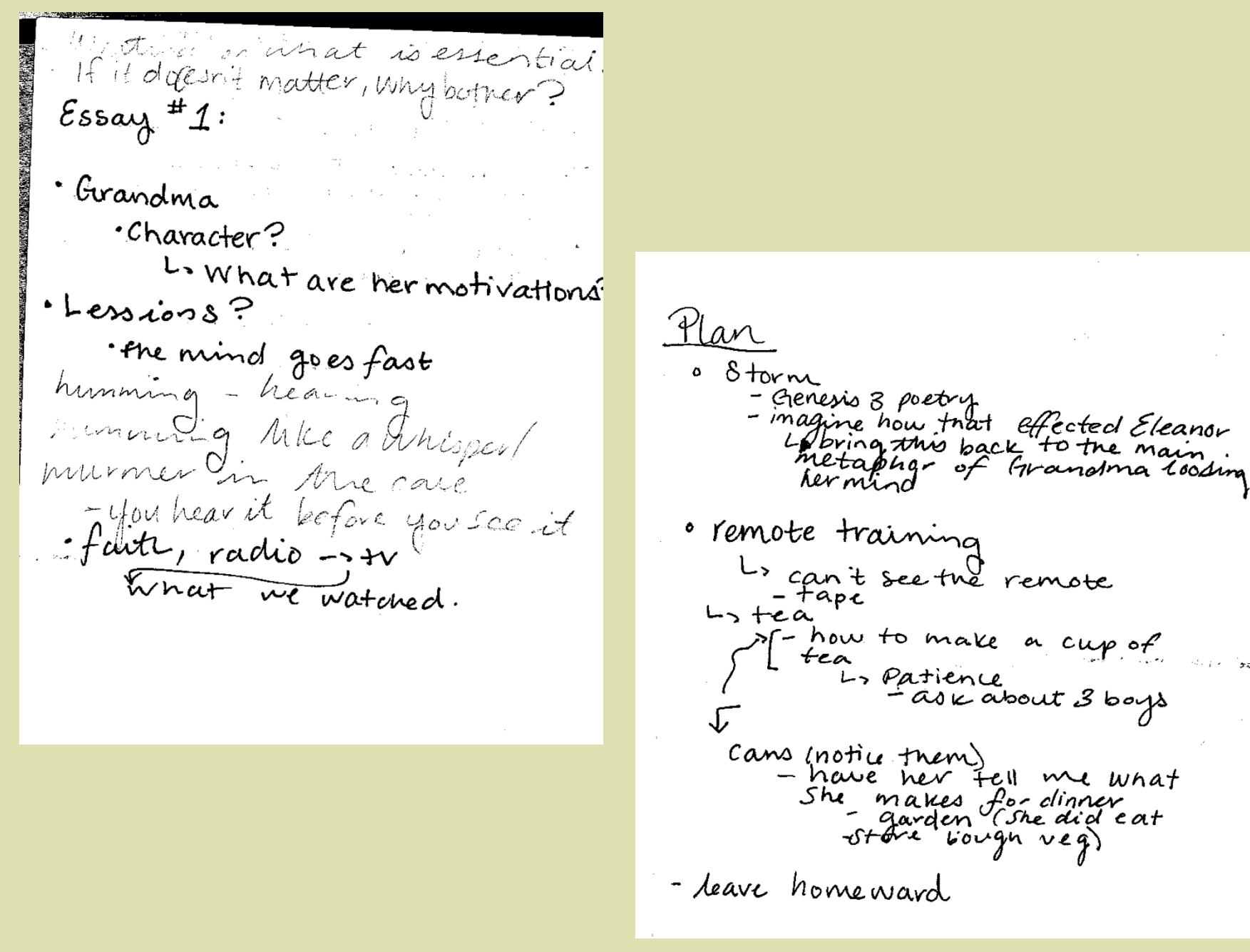
ABSTRACT

“Coming Home” is a collection of creative nonfiction essays that explore what home can represent. The essays explore the importance of family and finding belonging in the midst of an ever-changing environment. The idea and reality of place is at the heart of the collection, in which I reflect on my personal experiences of growing up on a farm in Northeast Iowa. The essay “Emerald Green Beans” is a reflection on a visit to my grandmother’s home after receiving a suicidal phone call from her, and further exploring her memories of her now-vanished hometown of Eleanor, Iowa. In “When the Grass Speaks,” I weave natural science and my passion for my farm’s yard into an extended metaphor for the ongoing destruction of agricultural lands in the Midwest due to harmful farming practices. And my essay “Going Home” is an abstract reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic and the seasonal change of a small field buffer near my family’s farm. After studying essayists who hold differing views on the subject of place, paying heed to their subject and craft, I brought my own views on place to the page in drafts that were workshopped by my peers in the Advanced Writing Project class with Dr. Martin. Through those workshops, I was able to sharpen my craft, find my writer’s voice, and explore my particular place in the world.

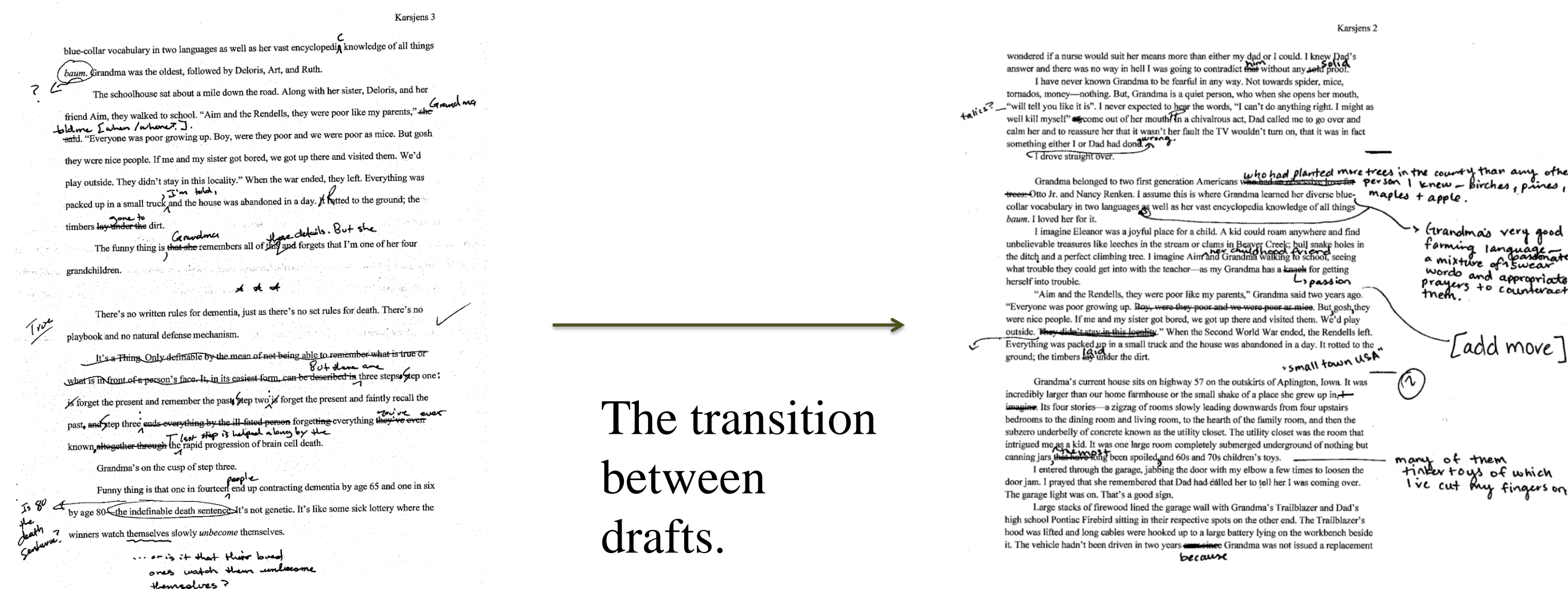
THE WRITING PROCESS

I. Building the Roadmap

My first essay started with one image: a can of green beans. My grandma gave the can to me when I visited her after the suicidal phone call my dad received. The can became the metaphor for the changing of my grandma’s essence—almost as if that essence was captured in the can of beans. When I build a roadmap for an essay, I like to write down abstract observations or my general thoughts on the subject. I don’t like to get too detailed, but I write just enough to get my mind rolling.



II. Workshop



The transition between drafts.

III. Edit, and Revise Again

The workshop is an on-going process. Multiple drafts can go through the cutting board until one is left. For example, though I planned for 10 pages, “Emerald Green Beans” turned into a 20-page essay.



LEARNING FROM THE ESSAYISTS

“Travels with Charley: In Search of America” by John Steinbeck

Steinbeck offers what seems to be a series of essays that are quite simple in style yet poignant. Much of his prose starts with a “Truth” followed by an example of that truth on the journey. The overarching metaphor is the act of “going” on the journey. The prose styles of the essays, which are short and episodic, help connect the essays in the grand story arching through the book, highlighting the age-old adage: it’s not about the destination, it’s about the journey.

Steinbeck’s journey parallels much of my journey in writing “Emerald Green Beans.” The essay started with one visit, but soon blossomed into me accepting the reality of my grandmother’s crippling dementia. The journey was unpredictable and at the time of the first incident, I didn’t know how to cope. Steinbeck writes, “Maybe understanding is possible only after” the fact (84). The truth for the essayist comes only after the fact, after the first draft. A writer’s journey is a continuous, every-changing one, and the essayist tries to capture a moment in that journey.

“The Abundance” by Annie Dillard

In this collection of essays, Dillard earns her reputation as a “wide awake” author who pays careful attention to small, often forgotten things in our fast-paced world. In these essays, she captures specific moments and puts them under a metaphoric microscope. Dillard’s essay “Seeing” is one poignant example; she writes, “Nature is like one of those line drawings of a tree that are puzzles for children: Can you find hidden in the leaves a duck, a house, a boy, a bucket, a zebra, and a boot?” (154-155). As I learned from Dillard, I began more and more to concentrate on the naturally mundane: on grass, trees, dirt, and even on a creek. I also focus on the mundane in human experience, like the heartache of losing a beloved to dementia.