

Part 1: Reading/Discussing Prose Excerpts on Writing the Truth

Tim O'Brien's short story "Good Form," from *The Things They Carried* (fiction):

It's time to be blunt.

I'm forty-three years old, true, and I'm a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier.

Almost everything else is invented.

But it's not a game. It's a form. Right here, now, as I invent myself, I'm thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is. For instance, I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present.

But listen. Even *that* story is made up.

I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.

Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.

Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.

What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.

I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again.

"Daddy, tell the truth," Kathleen can say, "did you ever kill anybody?"

And I can say, honestly, "Of course not."

Or I can say, honestly, "Yes."

from Natalie Goldberg’s chapter “Composting,” from *Writing Down the Bones* (craft):

It takes a while for our experience to sift through our consciousness. For instance, it is hard to write about being in love in the midst of a mad love affair. We have no perspective. All we can say is, “I’m madly in love,” over and over again. It is also hard to write about a city we just moved to; it’s not yet in our body. We don’t know our new home, even if we can drive to the drugstore without getting lost. We have not lived through three winters there or seen the ducks leave in the fall and return to the lakes in spring. Hemingway wrote about Michigan while sitting in a café in Paris. “Maybe away from Paris I could write about Paris as in Paris I could write about Michigan. I did not know it was too early for that because I did not know Paris well enough.”

Our senses by themselves are dumb. They take in experience, but they need the richness of sifting for a while through our consciousness and through our whole bodies. I call this “composting.” Our bodies are garbage heaps: we collect experience, and from the decomposition of the thrown-out eggshells, spinach leaves, coffee grinds, and old steak bones of our minds come nitrogen, heat, and very fertile soil. But this does not come all at once. It takes time. Continue to turn over and over the organic details of your life until some of them fall through the garbage of discursive thoughts to the solid ground of black soil.

When I have students who have written many pages and read them in class, and the writing is not all necessarily good but I see that they are exploring their minds for material, I am glad. I know those people will continue and are not just obsessed with “hot” writing, but are in the process of practice. They are raking their minds and taking their shallow thinking and turning it over. If we continue to work with this raw matter, it will draw us deeper and deeper into ourselves, but not in a neurotic way. We will begin to see the rich garden we have inside us and use that for writing.

Often I will stab many times at something I want to say. For instance, you can look in my notebooks from August through December 1983 and see that I attempted several times a month to write about my father dying. I was exploring and composting the material. Then suddenly, and I can’t say how, in December I sat transfixed at the Croissant Express in Minneapolis and a long poem about that subject poured out of me. All the disparate things I had to say were suddenly fused with energy and unity—a bright red tulip shot out of the compost.

Part 2: Reading/Discussing Poems about the Self (Past and Present)

Saturday at the Canal

I was hoping to be happy by seventeen.
 School was a sharp check mark in the roll book,
 An obnoxious tuba playing at noon because our team
 Was going to win at night. The teachers were
 Too close to dying to understand. The hallways
 Stank of poor grades and unwashed hair. Thus,
 A friend and I sat watching the water on Saturday,
 Neither of us talking much, just warming ourselves
 By hurling large rocks at the dusty ground
 And feeling awful because San Francisco was a postcard
 On a bedroom wall. We wanted to go there,
 Hitchhike under the last migrating birds
 And be with people who knew more than three chords
 On a guitar. We didn't drink or smoke,
 But our hair was shoulder length, wild when
 The wind picked up and the shadows of
 This loneliness gripped loose dirt. By bus or car,
 By the sway of train over a long bridge,
 We wanted to get out. The years froze
 As we sat on the bank. Our eyes followed the water,
 White-tipped but dark underneath, racing out of town.

—Gary Soto

Those Winter Sundays

Sundays too my father got up early
 and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
 then with cracked hands that ached
 from labor in the weekday weather made
 banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
 When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
 and slowly I would rise and dress,
 fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
 who had driven out the cold
 and polished my good shoes as well.
 What did I know, what did I know
 of love's austere and lonely offices?

—Robert Hayden

How to Be Gay in Missouri

Keep watch over your children. Forget about linger and loaf. Think of all the yeses you've spoken. Aim to be small. Remember loving the sound of some place: a hum or a whoosh. When the men come, when they swell, chests puffed full of gospelled breath, let them come.

Be broken like kindling. Remember your mother's perfume. Think of the hills, deep and lasting. Keep watch over your feet. Slink into the cracks in the sidewalk. Be mud.

—Allison Blevins

1994

i was leaving my fifty-eighth year
when a thumb of ice
stamped itself hard near my heart

you have your own story
you know about the fears the tears
the scar of disbelief

you know that the saddest lies
are the ones we tell ourselves
you know how dangerous it is

to be born with breasts
you know how dangerous it is
to wear dark skin

i was leaving my fifty-eighth year
when i woke into the winter
of a cold and mortal body

thin icicles hanging off
the one mad nipple weeping

have we not been good children
did we not inherit the earth

but you must know all about this
from your own shivering life

—Lucille Clifton

I Invite My Parents to a Dinner Party

In the invitation, I tell them for the seventeenth time (the fourth in writing), that I am gay.

In the invitation, I include a picture of my boyfriend & write, *You've met him two times. But this time,*

you will ask him things other than can you pass the whatever. You will ask him

about him. You will enjoy dinner. You will be enjoyable. Please RSVP.

They RSVP. They come.
They sit at the table & ask my boyfriend

the first of the conversation starters I slip them upon arrival: *How is work going?*

I'm like the kid in *Home Alone*, orchestrating every movement of a proper family, as if a pair

of scary yet deeply incompetent burglars is watching from the outside.

My boyfriend responds in his chipper way.
I pass my father a bowl of fish ball soup—*So comforting,*

isn't it? My mother smiles her best
Sitting with Her Son's Boyfriend

Who Is a Boy Smile. I smile my Hurray for Doing a Little Better Smile.

Everyone eats soup.
Then, my mother turns

to me, whispers in Mandarin, *Is he coming with you for Thanksgiving? My good friend is & she wouldn't like*

this. I'm like the kid in *Home Alone*, pulling on the string that makes my cardboard mother

more motherly, except she is not cardboard, she is

already, exceedingly my mother. Waiting for my answer.

("I Invite My Parents to a Dinner Party" continues on next page)

While my father opens up
a *Boston Globe*, when the invitation

clearly stated: *No security*
blankets. I'm like the kid

in *Home Alone*, except the home
is my apartment, & I'm much older, & not alone,

& not the one who needs
to learn, has to—*Remind me*

what's in that recipe again, my boyfriend says
to my mother, as though they have always, easily

talked. As though no one has told him
many times, what a nonlinear slapstick meets

slasher flick meets psychological
pit he is now co-starring in.

Remind me, he says
to our family.

—Chen Chen

Loading a Boar

We were loading a boar, a goddamn mean big sonofabitch and he jumped out of the pickup four times and tore my stockracks and rooted me in the stomach and I fell down and he bit John on the knee and he thought it was broken and so did I and the boar stood over in the far corner of the pen and watched us and John and I just sat there tired and Jan laughed and brought us a beer and I said, "John it ain't worth it, nothing's going right and I'm feeling half dead and haven't wrote a poem in ages and I'm ready to quit it all," and John said, "shit young feller, you ain't got started yet and the reason's cause you trying to do it outside yourself and ain't looking in and if you wanna by god write pomes you gotta write pomes about what you know and not about the rest and you can write about pigs and that boar and Jan and you and me and the rest and there ain't no way you're gonna quit," and we drank beer and smoked, all three of us, and finally loaded that mean bastard and drove home and unloaded him and he bit me again and I went in the house and got out my paper and pencils and started writing and found out John he was right.

—David Lee

[& what is a country but the drawing of a line...]

& what is a country but the drawing of a line i draw thick black
 lines around my eyes and they are a country & thick red lines around
 my lips & they are a country & the knife that chops the onions draws
 a smooth line through my finger & that is a country & the
 tightening denim presses a soft purple line into my belly & when
 i smile like my mother a line flashes between my two front teeth
 & for every country i lose i make another & i make another

—Safia Elhillo

I Go Back to May 1937

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,
 I see my father strolling out
 under the ochre sandstone arch, the
 red tiles glinting like bent
 plates of blood behind his head, I
 see my mother with a few light books at her hip
 standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks,
 the wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its
 sword-tips aglow in the May air,
 they are about to graduate, they are about to get married,
 they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are
 innocent, they would never hurt anybody.
 I want to go up to them and say Stop,
 don't do it—she's the wrong woman,
 he's the wrong man, you are going to do things
 you cannot imagine you would ever do,
 you are going to do bad things to children,
 you are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of,
 you are going to want to die. I want to go
 up to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,
 her hungry pretty face turning to me,
 her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
 his arrogant handsome face turning to me,
 his pitiful beautiful untouched body,
 but I don't do it. I want to live. I
 take them up like the male and female
 paper dolls and bang them together
 at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to
 strike sparks from them, I say
 Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.

—Sharon Olds

Part 3: Writing Prompts and Sharing Our Work

We'll see how much time we have. Perhaps we'll be able to work through each prompt, but more likely we'll have to make some choices. If we don't get through each one today, this packet is yours, and hopefully you'll come to the remaining prompts another time. Also, since poetry is what I love, I attempt a first draft of a poem when I work through a prompt. Perhaps you'd rather think of what you write today as exercises, or journal entries, or the foundation for short stories. For that reason, I just use the word "write" in these prompts, and I don't specify *what* to write.

1. Write a response to the prose passages we read. You can focus on the "story-truth vs. happening-truth" concept O'Brien writes about by "making up a few details to get at the real truth" (something else he writes in *The Things They Carried*), or you can focus on whatever material has been "sifting for a while through [your] consciousness," as Goldberg discusses. Or do both at once! Why ignore whatever elephant is in the room of your mind? Begin today by writing what you most need to say.
2. Write about your home. "Home" can be the place where you physically live/lived (as in "Those Winter Sundays"), or your state of mind growing up (as in "Saturday at the Canal"), or how you define home now (as in "[& what is a country but the drawing of a line...]"). Try not to "tell" how you feel about that home; don't say "I loved living there" or "I couldn't wait to leave." Instead, give as many details as you can. If you get stuck, write "I remember" and write whatever follows. The more specific you can get, the better. Your poem will be stronger because you'll be showing the details from your home rather than telling them.
3. Write about fear. Dig past the first fear that comes to you—clowns or heights or the dark. What scares you to your core? Look to "How to Be Gay in Missouri" and "1994."
4. Write about a difficult relationship with someone you love. This could be a parent (as in "Those Winter Sundays," "I Invite My Parents to a Dinner Party," or "I Go Back to May 1937"), a child, a romantic partner, a friend. Try to get at the heart of what makes this relationship hard, and whether or not it's worth it to keep trying to reach a place of understanding. As always, root your writing in emotional honesty (more so than in factual honesty), and try to show the story with images rather than tell it. If you can, condense the relationship into a moment.
5. An "ars poetica" is a poem about the art of writing poetry. Look to "Loading a Boar" and "I Go Back to May 1937" for examples of what I like to call "sneaky ars poeticas." I love both of these poems because they helped me understand both why I should write, as well as why I should sound like myself and no one else. What compels you to write? Who or what gave you the voice you speak and write with? Explore that today.