

WE MIGHT AS WELL CALL IT
THE LYRIC ESSAY

WE MIGHT AS WELL CALL IT
THE LYRIC ESSAY

WE MIGHT AS WELL CALL IT
THE LYRIC ESSAY

WE MIGHT AS WELL CALL IT
THE LYRIC ESSAY

JOHN D'AGATA

We might as well call it the lyric essay because I don't think "essay" means for most readers what essayists hope it does.

Or, we might as well call it the lyric essay because "nonfiction" is far too limiting.

Or, we might as well call it the lyric essay because "creative nonfiction" — let's face it — is desperate.

Then again, as literary terms go, "lyric essay" is no less an example of lipstick on a pig — which I think is why you'll find that it has fallen out of favor with a lot of the writers in this book.

It has fallen out with us as well, its editors.

And yet, fifteen years ago, when I was a student in a nonfiction writing program, the term felt like an extraordinary gift. I was in grad school during the late 1990s, and at that time it seemed that memoir was all that anyone was talking about. I wasn't writing memoir, however, and because I was young and naive and phenomenally self-involved, I started to believe that I had made a mistake, that nonfiction was not the genre for me, that I didn't have a literary home. I joined our university's neighboring poetry program, yet because I insisted on submitting 20-page-long essays to my poetry workshops, it was clear that that genre was not going to be home either.

Nevertheless, I liked the challenge of writing in-between the two worlds of poetry and essay, and as these things go when you're fully immersed in a new and exciting passion, I started to see everything through the lens of that hybridity.

Anne Carson came to our program with her first American book, and I swear I heard her use the words "lyric" and "essay" in close proximity to one another, describing what she liked about some ancient Greek writer. Then Michael Ondaantje visited soon after, and he used the term "lyrical nonfiction" to describe what he liked about Carson. In class, one of my favorite professors often casually referred to "lyric forms of the essay," as if it were a loosely held secret that we were being let in on, like

directions to the world's swankiest bar that had no signage and only a back door. And then one day over email, my old college mentor, Deborah Tall, told me that the frustrations with genre that I was experiencing at the moment were not particularly new. She pointed me in the direction of a dozen or so texts from antiquity, the middle ages, and contemporary Europe that all toyed formally with lines between poetry and essays. "Check out these 'lyric essays,'" she wrote.

And soon enough, the term seemed to appear everywhere thereafter. Tom Simmons, our graduate school professor, offered a course on the lyric essay. *The New Yorker* referred to some new book as a series of lyric essays. And many of us started submitting new work in our classes with the willfully forceful subtitle *A lyric essay*.

Initially I liked the term merely for how it sounded, and then for its slight implication of literary nonsense, and later for how it seemed to eschew the story-driven ambitions of fiction and nonfiction for the associative inquiry of poems.

Eventually, I was sold. And within a year of first hearing the term I started editing a section of *Seneca Review* that was devoted to lyric essays. Fifteen years later, I am still editing that section.

During the intervening years, however, I've moved away from using the term myself. These days I don't refer to what I like to read or write as "lyric essays," even though I still read a lot of the same stuff. I don't teach the term often either, and hardly use it in criticism. It's not that I've stopped finding the term interesting or useful; instead, as I got older and started to explore the history of the good old-fashioned essay, I began to find that everything that I loved about "lyric essays" was already represented in much of the essay's past. What I therefore hoped, or what I naively assumed, was that if we could remind ourselves as essayists of the variety of essays that have been written in our genre, we'd have no need for terms that try to stake their claim on narrowly conceived interpretations of the genre.

But then something changed my mind. I wrote a book, *The Lifespan of a Fact*, that proved to be controversial. It upset people because it suggested that some kinds of essays don't always need to be verifiably accurate, that we can appreciate some essays for the experiences they are sharing, and the emotions that they are conjuring, rather than the facts or information they relay. I was shocked by some people's reactions, however. I was expecting some kick-back from journalists, who huddle with us beneath that big umbrella term of "nonfiction," but who clearly are

engaged in a sacred social service whose stakes are considerably higher, more timely, and thus more consequential — socially speaking, I mean — than the stylized recollections that we share in our memoirs.

Except, according to many other nonfiction writers, that “sacred social service” that journalists are engaged in also apparently applies to memoirs — and to travelogues, meditations, portraits, etc. If it’s called “nonfiction,” many colleagues insisted, then it needs to report the facts as accurately as the news.

One famous writer went as far to say in a tweet that if a nonfiction text does not adhere to the rules of journalism then that text is nothing but a “hoax” — thus swiftly rendering everything that’s huddled under that big umbrella term of “nonfiction” as either 100 percent verifiable . . . or not nonfiction at all.

And that’s what was most disturbing. Because what I love to read in nonfiction often exists between those poles of what’s verifiable and what’s simply not. I love the in-between, which is where I think the most truthful struggles with reality exist. The history of our genre attests to this, rich as it is with woefully unverifiable essays by Virginia Woolf, Plutarch, George Orwell, Herodotus, E. B. White, Cicero, Joseph Mitchell, Daniel Defoe, Jorge Louis Borges, James Thurber, Natalia Ginzburg, Truman Capote, W. G. Sebald, Mary McCarthy, Sei Shonagon, and many, many others.

I don’t want to lose them, cast them out of this genre. And neither do I think we can afford to lose whatever writers are yet to emerge in our genre who might be inspired by those nonfiction forebears who have interpreted the rules differently. After all, is there any single term that could possibly describe how we each process the world?

In some ways, twenty-five hundred years ago, Plato asked the same. In *Symposium*, he tells us a relatively simple story about some friends at a dinner party who talk about love. Surrounding Plato’s story about that party, however, is the philosopher’s own story about how he heard the story.

According to Plato, a man named Aristodemus, who had attended the dinner party, told his friends Apollodorus and Phoinix about the conversation that evening. Phoinix then told his friend about the party, and that friend told it to Glaucon, and then Glaucon told it to Plato. But Glaucon isn’t sure that he remembers the story correctly, so he looks to Apollodorus to clarify some details, even though Apollodorus wasn’t actually at the party, but instead had only heard about it from Aristodemus,

who was.

Why is this important? At first it's hard to say why any of it is important, and so we temporarily forget about these elaborate machinations once Plato starts telling us about the party itself. What we learn is that several people made speeches at the party, and all of them had opinions about the meaning of love. Socrates too was at this dinner party, and when he finally speaks up he tells his dinner companions about a woman named Diotima, a priestess whom he knew while growing up in Athens and who had once shared with Socrates her own thoughts about love.

When we're young, she said, we begin by loving a body, and then we learn eventually how to love different bodies, and then how to love souls, and then customs, and then finally knowledge.

Love, it turns out, is multilayered, like most things. But by the time we learn this in Plato's *Symposium*, we're hearing it from a fifth-hand source, so the story is a little fuzzy. On top of this, the story comes from a party that took place back when Socrates was still alive — fifteen years earlier than when Plato is writing *Symposium* — and the crux of Plato's essay isn't even that story about the party itself, but the story that's told by Socrates at the party about his youth — a story within a story within an essay, it turns out — remembered from a moment in Socrates's life that happened sixty years earlier than when he shares it with his friends. So seventy-five years and six retellings later, what we learn in the *Symposium* is that knowledge is layered, too. It's complicated, multidimensional, unpredictable, very messy, and we probably couldn't agree on what it really is or how it's ever made or the best way it to frame it for someone else to appreciate.

And this is why the *Symposium* is itself so very messy, multidimensional, multilayered, and difficult to interpret with any kind of confidence. Knowledge, real knowledge, is problematic the moment we start trying to nail it down.

The lesson here, to my ear at least, is wonderfully applicable to the nonfiction world. If Plato were with us now, I'd like to imagine him intervening in the hothouse debates that fester in our genre, casting a simple question into the fever swamps of the internet: Do we really all believe there's only one way to make an essay?

Despite its clumsy title, then, this is not an anthology about the dangers or virtues of “nonfiction,” “creative nonfiction,” “flash” this, “long form” that, or any other terms we might throw against the genre in hopes of finding something that might finally stick. This is an anthology about the beautiful gangly breadth

of this unnameable literary form, and how nomenclature, while often limiting, polarizing, inadequate, and always stupid, can also be the thing that opens up our genre to new possibilities and new paths of inquiry, helping us to shape our experiences in the world in ways we have not yet imagined. We might as well call it the lyric essay, therefore, because we need as many terms as there are passions for this form.