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## On Voice, Concision, and 20 Years of Flash Nonfiction

By Dinty W. Moore

When *Brevity* celebrated its recent 20th anniversary, I took time to reflect on what I had learned as founder and editor of the journal. The key lesson, perhaps, is that editing a magazine is an unpredictable path lined with a series of happy surprises.

When I began this venture back in 1997, I expected *Brevity* to last maybe a year or two. The idea of an online magazine was untested, and few of my literary friends were active on what we then called “The World Wide Web.”

The idea of flash nonfiction was new as well. I chose the brief essay form because I admired the work in various flash fiction anthologies that were popping up at the time, and the word count that I chose—750 or fewer—split the difference between those fiction venues that limited authors to 500 words and those that allowed up to 1,000.

To be honest, *Brevity* was more an experiment than a commitment. The inaugural issue had five essays and an embarrassingly rudimentary design. The second issue didn’t look much better, and I made the naïve editorial gaffe of publishing my own work. In short, I didn’t know what I was doing, and my motivation was as much about learning how to code HTML as it was to build a lasting literary presence.

But *Brevity* limped along, and though submissions trickled in slowly at first, the number grew steadily with each issue. Soon enough we were

publishing award-winning writers such as Brian Doyle, Brenda Miller, Debra Marquart, Lee Martin, and Rebecca McClanahan. In many cases, it turned out, writers were crafting short pieces specifically for *Brevity*, intrigued by the possibilities of this new form.

In addition to learning what it means to edit a successful magazine, I've been granted a continuing education in what is possible in the extremely concise nonfiction essay. At the start, my thinking was that any true story limited to 750 words would need to be scene-based, and that the scene itself should cover the smallest period of time possible, maybe only a few minutes. That strategy works of course (read, for instance, Joey Franklin's "Girl Fight," included in this anthology), but as the magazine grew over time, the inventive writers who submitted their work challenged my initial assumptions, obliging me to stretch my expectations, and then stretch them again.

To see what I mean, consider Randon Billings Noble's "The Heart as a Torn Muscle," an essay on heartbreak in the form of a WebMD page, or Jill Talbot's "All or Nothing, Self-Portrait at 27," which manages to encapsulate an entire year in just over 400 words.

I'm done predicting what is possible—and what is not—in the flash form because each issue brings along the unexpected. But I do still believe there are a few basics that apply to the brief essay, no matter how expansive one's idea of plot, story, or form might become.

The first basic, of course, is a quick entry. In such a small allotment of words, there is no time to clear one's throat, to gently introduce the story before moving leisurely along to the point of tension, the moment the reader's curiosity is piqued. The water is fine, in other words, so jump right in.

And though it may go without saying, there is no time for redundancy in a flash essay. Say what you have to say once and move along.

What I've also come to realize is that the compression necessary to tell a story in a package this small means that every sentence should accomplish more than one task. While a simple prose sentence might merely introduce a character trait, or carry someone across the room,

or inform us of the weather, a sentence in a flash piece is most effective when it introduces a character, while she walks across the room, during a summer heatwave. Better still if that sentence adds something else: metaphor, image, mood, or voice.

That latter element—voice—seems to me most important, the one for which my editor sensors are always busily scanning. The late Tony Hoagland wrote that what readers want to feel is that “we are encountering a speaker ‘in person,’ a speaker who presents a convincingly complex version of the world and of human nature.” Hoagland had it exactly right. What *I* want is the sense that someone particular has experienced the circumstances of the flash story, and that someone is telling the story, and telling it as only they can, different than you might tell it, and different from the way any other author in that issue of the magazine might tell it. A particular voice on the page.

That’s no easy task, but the authors in *The Best of Brevity: Twenty Groundbreaking Years of Flash Nonfiction* have done so, in amazing and unexpected ways.

I continue to marvel at the literary resumés of the accomplished authors we have published over the years, but equally important to me is that we continue our mission to seek out new talent: writers at the beginning of their literary careers, and often writers who are publishing for the first time. I am proud that every issue over the past 20 years, as well as this *Best of Brevity* anthology, offers new voices, gifted writers at the on-ramp of what I expect will be an outstanding, lasting literary presence.

This is not an obituary, by the way. *Brevity* continues, and with luck, there will be a 50th anniversary anthology someday. My co-editor, Zoë Bossiere, has been the magazine’s managing editor since 2018, and I am grateful for her help on *Brevity* and in making the hard choices of who and what to include here. I am grateful, as well, for the many devoted volunteers who have helped keep our unlikely enterprise afloat.

I believe the future is bright for the flash essay, am excited to see newer magazines enter the brief nonfiction field, and marvel at the

extent to which *Brevity's* readership continues to expand. Thanks to the ease-of-access provided by the online format, we now regularly draw readers and submissions from North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Australia, and across Asia. We are working on Antarctica.

As the world grows more complex, flash nonfiction offers the opportunity for a great diversity of voices and viewpoints to be represented. Moreover, flash nonfiction allows us as readers to visit many worlds, many realities, many perspectives, in brief succession. For that reason alone, I feel strongly about the future of the form and the writers who work to craft these powerful but concise true stories.

I hope you enjoy the work included in these pages, learn from these authors and their stories, and that you are perhaps inspired to write your own flash essays, possibly forcing me someday soon to stretch my definition even further.