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### The Hidden Art of Flash Nonfiction

The flash nonfiction essay, a subunit of the “fourth genre,” creative nonfiction, is a unique form that has become more popular over the last half of this century, yet it is still considered “niche.” Although there is not a great amount of supplementary information to explain the trends in the form and how to write in it effectively, flash nonfiction is still important to study because it offers writers another outlet to use their creativity. Dinty Moore, founder and editor of today’s most popular flash nonfiction literary magazine *Brevity*, has become an advocate for the form and curated the first flash nonfiction style guide, *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*. His introduction to the book defining the conventions of the genre, paired with the Donna Margara’s advice to write in the form, can give writing students the guidance they need to write effectively in flash nonfiction.

The flash nonfiction essay, like its fiction counterpart, is primarily defined by its length, which is loosely defined by Moore as a work of creative nonfiction amounting to 1,000 words or less (XIV). Moore’s own online literary journal *Brevity*, which is arguably the most popular outlet for the genre today, has a lower accepted word count, restricting writers to 750 words or fewer, but the majority of accepted work is much closer to 500 words (Moore XXI). Interestingly, this short word count, Moore argues, is favorable in our increasingly digitized world as more and more literature is formatted for the computer screen. The online audience is physically inclined to be drawn to shorter works because of the eye strain caused by reading lengthy texts on a monitor, paired with the mental factor of their unlikely choice to scroll through long passages (XXI). As screens used to encounter this media continue to shrink in size, the

amount of text that can be displayed and the length of the consumer's attention span can handle also gets smaller. In other words, flash nonfiction and other short works will likely become more and more popular as our consumerism shifts further towards digital media and away from physical copies.

Nonetheless, the briefness of the flash nonfiction does not limit the creative abilities of the writers who use the form. The small leeway in word count forces these pieces to move along quickly, giving them a sense of urgency. But as Moore argues, this is not a weakness; this urgency makes a work of flash nonfiction stronger (XXII). As Moore writes, flash nonfiction “has attempted to capture the reader's attention and imagination in the first few words, and to hold it—uninterrupted—until the final period” (XV). Meaning there is no word count to be wasted on an introduction or conclusion in this form. Most often, writers start their piece in the middle of the action, giving the necessary information in their first few sentences. Rather than slowly getting to the climax, flash nonfiction pieces start there and often stay at this point until then end, forcing readers to ponder the rest.

Like other works of creative nonfiction, the flash nonfiction essay does not simply inform or persuade readers. What separates flash nonfiction from other short nonfiction forms like newspaper articles, is the unique voice created by the author as they explore “the deeply human—and often unanswerable—questions that concern all serious art” (Moore XIV). Similar to flash fiction, the form aims to hold readers' attention for its short length then keep them thinking about it off the page. This is fueled by previous memories paired with no shortage of literary devices like metaphor and sensory language to explain an intimate story that connects to the reader quickly by creating an image that sticks with them (Moore XIV). Through looking at a few pieces of flash nonfiction, it is clear that writers in the form have a lot of creative freedom as

they use varying stylistic elements like vivid recurring images, interesting points of view, specific word choice, and framing.

Although the conventions of the form are well paved by Dinty Moore as he has become an advocate for the flash nonfiction essay, the form like creative nonfiction itself is still niche. Compared to the amount of supplementary material for writing flash fiction, this is clear. Aside from the pieces themselves, there is not a great deal of advice about writing an effective flash nonfiction essay published by well-known writers of the form or academic research about what stylistic elements that make pieces effective. That isn't to say there are not any sources offering this guidance. Moore offers his advice in the introduction of his book when he claims that the flash nonfiction essay "needs to be hot from the first sentence...The heat might come from language, from an image, from voice or point-of-view, from revelation or suspense, but there must always be a burning urgency of some sort translated through each sentence, starting with the first" (XXIII). Unlike other stricter forms, flash nonfiction does not have many restrictions on what will make a piece successful, and no author has tried to tell readers how to create in the form, but it is the unique elements each writer adds to their piece that creates this heat, making it successful.

However, there is a list of general advice for the flash nonfiction essay, "Four Techniques of Effective Flash Nonfiction Writers" by Donna Margara, available on the online magazine *Artifice*, which features articles in several art forms. Although her authority on the topic is not clear, Margara gains credibility by using the work of Sonya Lee in her piece "First Bath" and Jill Christman's "The Sloth" to support each of her tips. The list starts with "beginning in medias res," which Margara explains is important because in an essay with a low word count, there is no space for a lengthy introduction. Margara argues that writers should instead start with a clear image, skipping the introduction but slipping in the necessary information within the image to

ground readers. Her next tip is to “run on the concrete,” meaning, relying on concrete images and sensory detail over abstract images to fuel the essay. She claims that this not only connects to the reader by drawing them in, but Margara explains that adding this detail controls the pacing of the story, which is especially important in a short piece. Similar to the use of concrete details, Margara’s next tip is to “objectify your emotions.” Margara acknowledges that the flash nonfiction essay often aims to explain feelings deeply rooted in abstraction, and she offers the use of objects as metaphors for the abstract as a way to quickly bridge this gap. This also allows distance between the writer and the emotion and prevents the use of clichés by limiting the explanation of their emotion directly and preventing disconnect with readers (Margara). Her final tip is to “ruminate” (Margara). The heart of the flash nonfiction piece is to discover and question some deeper meaning of life, so the story becomes secondary to its deeper meaning. But with the form’s short word count, there is no room to incorporate a concluding or reflecting section. What Margara offers as a solution to this is weaving the reflective moments within the story. This, in a way, is distilling the meaning, yet still offers it to readers but in a subtle way.

Using the conventions of flash nonfiction laid out by Moore and the advice of Margara, I attempted to write my own work of flash nonfiction. I started by trying to find a memory that I could use concrete images to tie to the emotion of my essay. As expected, this took a while and few bad ideas until finally, a memory of a fight I had with my mother in high school came to mind. What stood out to me was the object in the center of the fight—the broken glass. I thought the broken glass was not only an effective image to start with, using Margara’s tip to “begin in medias res,” but it also could stand as a metaphor to objectify the greater conflict between my mother and me. I used phrases like, “To her, it was just another mess I had made for her to clean up, but I thought I was old enough to clean it up on my own,” to conceal the deeper meaning of the essay within the metaphor. In addition to this, I tried to “Ruminate,” in the words of Margara,

by incorporating the deeper meaning of the piece throughout by using lines like, “We hadn’t been fighting about the glass itself; it was only a side effect of the greater problem, worsening the sting of a rocky relationship.” Then, I used Margara’s advice to “run on the concrete” by trying to incorporate a lot of imagery related to the glass. If anything, concrete imagery is what I feel the piece needs more of, but I was at a loss of ideas for how to do this. I met Moore’s length requirements of the piece by trying to keep it around 500 words, attempting to give it the urgency he explained. Overall, this exercise of applying the theory of writing a piece of flash nonfiction to my own writing challenged me. Still, it also offered me a greater understanding of a form I previously did not know much about.

Through learning the conventions of flash nonfiction with the work of Moore and gaining guidance for writing an effective piece from Margara, I was able to write “Broken” and learn something new about an interesting genre. Although short, the genre certainly offers great content and deeper meaning in a high concentration, as seen through Moore’s explanation of the genre’s overall sense of “urgency.” If anything, the briefness of these pieces paired with their great use of imagery and metaphor and the unique voice of their author is what makes the pieces so effective. As Moore explained, the compactness of the flash essay could make the form streamlined in a technology-driven society, so its briefness is not the flash nonfiction essay’s weakness. In the words of Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, “Since brevity is the soul of wit ... I will be brief” (Shakespeare 137).

#### Works Cited

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Margara, Donna. "Four Techniques of Effective Flash Nonfiction Writers." *Artifice*, 8 Sept. 2014, <https://the-artifice.com/techniques-effective-flash-nonfiction-writers/>.

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## Broken

The broken glass lies between us on the cold kitchen floor. Shattered in hundreds of jagged pieces, the clear barricade separates us. The cup had fallen in the background noise of one of the many arguments stemming from the inherent differences of mother and daughter. Her old wisdom and dogged opinions clashing with my young naïve masked with confidence more and more as grew older.

I had just told her something—the exact argument doesn't stand out because it was among many of its kind. It could have been the time I told her I didn't want to go to homecoming or when she told me I couldn't go to the concert, or it was one of the countless other fights we had before. *You'll understand when your older and I hope your kids are just as stubborn as you*, she would always say. This is how the fights always went. The importance here is that something happened that hadn't ever before. An object stole the show. As the glass I had been putting away hit the floor, time stopped.

Like her temper, the glass was fragile, and with the subtlest of force, a brush of an arm or slip of the hand, it too plummeted to the floor. At just the moment, the thick wall of glass met the tile floor, its rigid crystalline structure impeded in on itself with nowhere to go, no room to move, crashing down. It shattered, adding chaos to the chaotic. Yet, our exchange of jarring words stopped, bringing peace, but it only for a moment.

Her words flew through the space between us like shards of glass, this time about another kind of carelessness. *You should have been more careful. Now, look at this mess. Be careful where you step. I didn't mean to; it was an accident. I'll clean it up.* We hadn't been fighting about the glass itself; it was only a side effect of the greater problem, worsening the sting of a rocky relationship. But at that moment, it felt like the problem. We both could not put the pieces back together. To her, it was just another mess I had made for her to clean up, but I thought I was old enough to clean it up on my own.

But after the initial hurt, we swept up the pieces together. We found a way to mend a broken relationship. Sure, other glasses have fallen, and you never know when one might get bumped out of the messy cabinet, leaving another casualty. But somehow, we always figure out how to fix the messes we have made. While glass is fragile and can break with even the slightest of pressure, human relationships are built much stronger.