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Editor's Note

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EDITOR'S NOTE

“Story is story,” says DeWitt Henry. But is it? (The question is asked in the review of DeWitt’s *Safe Suicide* by Stephen Windwalker in this issue.) Does story in nonfiction work differently than story in fiction? Perhaps the subject of narrative has many functions, which vary according to the architecture of different genres. Perhaps in some cases the subject is a load-bearing façade, in others no more than a pretty skin. A collapse of the distinctions between genres may flatten the complexities and intricacies of generic context, leaving a structural rubble. So what can we note about the subjects of the nonfiction brought together in this issue?

In this issue the subjects are collecting dead birds, a family outhouse, the elements of the wind, alternative identities, humor—and others. Yet these subjects don’t exhaust the story in these essays, or fully say why they were written, or map their effects upon the reader. A defining feature of imaginative nonfiction is the obligation, even compulsion, writers feel to locate themselves in relation to their subject. They are not anonymous, nor distant from the page. They draw the curtain up on the scene of writing to reveal the author’s role—stage right or stage left, lit brightly by a spot or lurking in shadow. Readers of this issue will observe where the writer is located in relation to the subject; a creative essay has what Adam Gopnik calls “a certain double focus.”¹

Take Ander Monson’s “Geas.” Its subject is Gary Gygax, co-creator of the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*. But the essay is not simply about that. It’s about the author’s distance from the gaming of his youth, and the

1. Adam Gopnik, ed., *The Best American Essays 2008* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), xviii.

uncertainties of his future. “Geas” demonstrates beautifully how essays anchor in time. The writing begins a week after Gygax’s death, as Monson reckons with leaving his current home, job, and life for a new everything elsewhere. Vectors of departures, the author’s own and that of the role-playing gamester, crisscross the essay.

We readers want to know how the writers of nonfiction came to their material, how they felt a way through the experiential thicket, what artistic thing has been shaped from facts, feelings, thoughts, and anecdotes. To that end you will find in this issue the second in our new “Essay and Self Reflections” series, in which the author of an essay muses upon its history. Kim Dana Kupperman started us off in the previous issue with “An Exercise in Artifice: On Writing ‘See Me Slant . . .’” Herein Joy Castro considers her “Grip,” a 365-word lyric essay built around the image of a dark, torn paper target, riddled at the practice range and then hung protectively over her baby’s crib. The essay addresses the aftermath of a family’s history of violence, and its form is allusive, offering us small but telling fragments of that larger narrative. In the manner of the lyric essay, it makes the reader supply missing linkages, piece fragments together into an experiential whole, intuit what can’t be said directly. “In form,” comments Castro, “I prefer short over long, the slap to the lecture.”

Other means to reach the scene of writing are offered in *Fourth Genre*’s interviews and roundtables. It’s apropos that in this issue we talk with Brenda Miller, a particularly knowledgeable guide to the lyric essay. Her remarks make an excellent reading companion to Joy Castro’s contributions.

With this issue, we welcome Ned Stuckey-French as book review editor. Some of the books reviewed here, as Ned remarked in an email, assemble previously published material, written for various purposes, into something publishers are calling memoirs or other forms that avoid the label *essay*: Michael Martone’s *Racing in Place*, reviewed in the previous issue, is subtitled *Collages, Fragments, Postcards, Ruins*. In *Fourth Genre*, at least, the essay is free to be.

I hope you will read this issue with relish. It is the result of a complete visual redesign of *Fourth Genre* by Michigan State University Press. Pick it up, hold its compactness, smell it, cast your eye about. Read one essay slowly and deeply. Give yourself over to this one essay, then put the issue down, to pick up another time and taste another piece of creation. There is much to savor.

Marcia Aldrich