



Author Asks

from Patricia Vigderman,
author of *Possibility: Essays Against Despair*
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- 1 This is a book of essays on many different topics that nevertheless has a shape—what are some of its recurring themes? Do they seem to progress?
- 2 Montaigne said the essay form is at once monstrous and miraculous—it allows leaping into, away from, and ahead of one’s mind. The essay called “Monkey Mind” explicitly deals with that process, how does it defend the monstrosity?
- 3 Several of the essays turn on literary topics—W.G. Sebald, or Grace Paley, or David Foster Wallace, or Proust. What makes them not literary criticism?
- 4 Are you drawn into the narrative voice of these essays? Are there places where you feel close to the author?
- 5 How is the same landscape used differently in the essays on west Texas (“Sebald in Starbucks” and “Boxes in Texas”)?
- 6 The book declares itself against despair, so how does the language create spaces for humor and laughter even in the essays about death or depression?

Writing Exercises

- 1 Describe a person or an animal doing something simple (crossing the road, eating, listening) in a way that allows the reader to know something about you and your relationship to the person or animal described.
- 2 Try tapping back at an author whose work has meant a lot to you: find a passage that you find resonant with your spirit and talk back to it in your own language, with your own associations.

Author Interview

You explore a myriad of subjects in this collection (the depression of a close friend, landscapes, commentary on the dissolution of a marriage, literary criticism, etc.)--how did you work to pull these subjects together, and how do you feel they speak to one another?

When I came to assemble the essays for the collection it didn’t seem that my different subjects were so disparate, perhaps mostly because the voice in all of them is consistent. The encounter with each subject, with art, or love, or nature, with language and everyday (or, as in the case of my sister’s depression, not so everyday) life depends on that voice. I don’t think the essays that are about literary subjects, such as W.G. Sebald or Marcel Proust, or Grace Paley, are in fact literary criticism; they are records of an intense engagement with literary experience in the same way that the ones on landscapes or animals or loss engage with *those* things.

When I looked at the essays as a whole, they fell quite easily into the four sections that now make up the book. That is, first comes a series of internal conversations about how direct experience and narrative play in and out of each other. Then, comes a section in which I'm trying out different ways of being with grief, letting different ways of writing it take its measure. The subtitle of the book is *Essays Against Despair*, so the third section moves outward from there, to look at how wide and strange and interesting indeed is the world--in spite of time's bite, in spite of the losses. How curious and amusing is our presence as visitors in and inhabitants of the natural world, as players in our own lives. And in the last section the play of narrative focuses on the freedom of art, reflecting on the way art interacts with our time-based lives, and how we are free to walk in and out of that experience. In a way the book is a history of different ways pleasure in language led me deeper into whatever the experience was.

How does the essay as a form lend itself to these investigations?

I take the essay to be a form that allows leaping into, away from, and ahead of one's own mind—as Montaigne said, at once monstrous and miraculous. It's a capacious form, allowing a welcome looseness while still assuming serious faith in literary shapeliness. As that form has evolved for me, it has come in lengths varying from the 500 words of "Eggs" to the twenty pages of "Henry Adams in Japan" or "Inventing Cinema." Writing my way into and out of landscape, painting, literature, affection, loss, and even death, has been a happy discovery of constant motion. It allows for digression, and for noticing the way the mind works. It allows me to be very close to the way our constantly shifting mental vision allows us to see things both whole and in fragments at the same time.

References to the act of translation arise throughout your essays. Can you talk about how your experience as a translator informs your own writing?

My experience of literal translation from other languages has certainly deepened my respect for language itself, but I don't feel it's where my talent lies. Metaphor and implication lurk everywhere, and can be all too easily flattened in translation. My essay "The Task of the Translator" turns to Walter Benjamin's essay of the same name (an essay that is itself a stream of metaphors) as a companion in thinking about how I translate the world for myself. Thus in my own accounts of being with those peaceful whiskered blimps, the manatees, for example, or with the spacious and rigorous installations at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, or with the vast unfolding sentences of Proust or Sebald (translated indeed by abler hands than mine), I want also to make the possibilities of metaphor and implication become as well the pleasures of precision and insight. I want to make a place for myself and for others by being simultaneously inside and outside what Benjamin calls the forest of experience.

When discussing what rhymes with the word "despair," you write: "the suggested accompaniments to despair suggest a world of comic juxtaposition." Do you feel like the collection itself enacts this?

Well, I suppose the juxtaposition of my essays is comic in the larger sense: that sense of happy ongoingness that comedy implies. I do think that all my serious meditations keep coming up against humorous or playful possibilities—the escape hatch of laughter. The ordinary absurdity of life is always undercutting the tragic stories we tell ourselves, or at least running alongside them. When Grace Paley begins a story, "There were two husbands disappointed by eggs," it's a funny line that opens into a story of larger disappointment as well as good humor and human connection. It's a funny line about marriage and divorce and food. It's like rhyming *despair* and *Sancerre* and *outstare* and *shank's mare*.

Similarly, I am both sobered and amused when I find myself taking up a family story passed on to me via an inherited shawl: the story includes in the same breath silk and prize livestock, genealogical earnestness and heartbreaking loss. I think all my essays are written in language that looks in more than one direction, and assumes sorrow and laughter lie close together--or even depend on each other for their intensity. So, yes, the collection is endlessly aware of comic juxtaposition, but I hope it's a comedy of unfolding insight.

In what ways is your writing informed by location and place?

Writing for me is a way of being where I am; it's a way of feeling my way into the world. So when I find myself in a new place, it's always a pleasure to have the new material—in the deserts of New Mexico or Texas, by the warm springs in Florida, or with the ordinary wildlife in a small Ohio village. Sicily is an important location in my next book, and of course writing was inextricable from the experience of being there. However, while I love to be in spectacular landscape and in cities, in the natural world and with the ruins of ancient civilization, I often find that the way a place reappears in writing feels quite different from what it felt like to be there. Writing about a place is a way of creating it, or making it meaningful. So in fact when I return to a place I've written about it's no longer exactly itself, it's now informed by my writing.

In a similar way, being in places I've had an imaginary relationship with through literature can be very intense. Writing is a way of making myself at home in a place, so when I'm writing, it of course matters where I am. But I think I am also quite capable of feeling at home in a place another writer has created. Interestingly, I don't think this is true of places in movies.

Suggested Reading

Lydia Davis, *Almost No Memory*

Grace Paley, *The Little Disturbances of Man*

Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory*

Mary Ruefle, "Monument"

W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*

David Foster Wallace, "Good People," "Everything Is Green"

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