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Foreword

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Foreword

THE IDEA FOR THIS ISSUE surely derives from the issue we presented one year ago on innovative, experimental, or avant garde fiction. (That issue appeared simultaneously from The University of Iowa Press as *Transgressions: The Iowa Anthology of Innovative Fiction*.) By continuing with the present collection, we imply a promise for the year to come since now only one of the genres we normally present lacks special representation in this sequence. In fact we have already established the outlines of a collection subtitled “Some Poetries of America” for this season a year from now. But our plan for this issue takes at least equal direction from our own very local and personal interest in the essay, as it does also from a certain pleasure we find in being less reactive, for one issue a year, to what just happens to appear on our desks.

From the beginning of my tenure as editor of *The Iowa Review*, in 1977, I have been inclined to favor essays that tend to stand as writings on their own over those that are justified chiefly by their getting something right, or at least seeming to, about other works of literature. I say “inclined to favor” with care; this is a tendency, not a dogmatism. But on the whole I have been interested in the possibility of the essay’s progress according to a poetics of composition more than according to a rhetoric of argument. Consequently the critical essays that we have presented have usually—Gerald Bruns (9/3), Marianne Boruch (20/1), and Patricia Wallace (22/2) come quickly to mind—had the flavor of the imagination upon them. Meanwhile the memoir or personal essay began to appear as early as the second issue I edited, 9/2, in 1978. All this time I have also been teaching in the nonfiction program that has by now become a second MFA program at Iowa and have published elsewhere a few essays myself.

When Mary Hussmann began working with me in 1983, I gained a colleague, truly a partner, who also writes essays, reads essays, and thinks like an essayist. A short piece of hers at the end of one issue a couple of years ago brought more friendly notes and comments than has any other single thing we have ever published. Her leanings have fortified my own, and for the last couple of years, Rebecca Childers, one of our three assistant editors, has shared our interest. You might say, therefore, that the plan for the

fiction issue that we seized upon almost two years ago was ripe for takeover by the essay.

It has been during this period too, by which I mean from the late '70s to now, that the essay has reasserted itself as part of our literature and has begun again to flourish. A few essays crept into early *Pushcart* volumes, and the *Best American Essay* series, the youngest of those three series, is on the verge of its tenth year. When I began with this magazine, there was little way of cultivating much of an expectation for essays since so few were offered to us. We still do not need an "essay desk" as such, as we need poetry and fiction desks in our office; essays don't arrive each week by the hundreds or by the dozens. But they come in fairly regularly, and we now have a small reading circle for essays as we do for stories and poems, one that is usually active.

This then is the context for the issue you have in your hands. As with the fiction issue of last year, we solicited most of this work. We made up a list of essayists we had published and solicited from a number of them. We made a second list of essayists we wished we had published and solicited from them as well. Along the way, we allowed room for serendipity, since one of the chief pleasures of this work is to note the serenity which serendipity often provides. This time, one such provision, came as a poem. That at least is what your first glance will suggest as you see it on the page. But then one of our first solicitations arrived in the same manner, at least more so rather than less; and it has often seemed to us, as I assume it has to you, that the division between essay and poem is not now all that distinct, if it ever was.

A number of these essays tell stories too, so if a primary result of our serial attention to these genres were to undermine further whatever authority, as such, any one genre retains, we would smile and say, yes, that's at least half the point. It has been over a decade since we indicated genres in our tables of contents, preferring to let readers read as they will the signals our writers provide. We even offer here one essay as a series of prints.

One sadness clings to this issue, one cultural problem that we have not overcome. Many women are among our essayists, but our representation of minority writers is thin, given the cultural variety of writers alive and working among us. We solicited more than appear here, several Black writers in particular, but most were caught up in other things and chose not

to answer our call. We should have doubled or tripled our solicitations, which is a promise we make for our poetry issue.

While working on this issue, we have also been preparing a retrospective anthology covering the first quarter century of *The Iowa Review*, a volume scheduled for publication next year, again by The University of Iowa Press. In selecting around 350 pages to represent 15,000 or more, in choosing, that is, no more than a fortieth of the whole, we kept our choices to stories and poems, since those are the genres for which the *Review* has been best known. We made one exception, however, that being Albert Goldbarth's "Both Definitions of *Save*," (21/3), which has been a favorite of all of us here for a number of years and which will be the longest single item in that anthology. Goldbarth seems a striking example of what I mentioned before, a writer guided more by a poetics of composition than by a rhetoric of argument. We have carried two more of his essays subsequently, and a fourth is in this volume.

In retrospect, his early essay, "*Save*," seems a defining moment for us. Here and there, for over a decade, essays and memoirs had been appearing in our issues, with their appearance seeming piecemeal, haphazard. But the sheer weight and force of "*Save*," its forty pages, one fifth of that issue, must have made it clear that we would give pages to essays just as we give them to any other genre; we have only to receive one that wows us. Almost half that issue was devoted to the essay, which certainly amounts to a declaration of some sort.

Consequently, though we slighted essays in our retrospective anthology, I can imagine another volume, all from our magazine, that would represent pretty well what the essay has been up to during this period of its reawakening. Take the Goldbarth essay just mentioned, add the essays by Boruch, Bruns, and Wallace alluded to before, add however many you decide to favor from this present issue, and then, since we may as well be mythic about it, consider another forty:

Laurence Goldstein, "'Kitty Hawk,' and the Question of American Destiny," (9/1);

Laura Shahera, "The Girl in Striped Socks," (9/2);

Joan Swift, "Recovery," (9/2), (with Shahera, early examples of what Carl Klaus discusses in this issue);

Douglas L. Wilson, "The Other Side of the Wall," (10/1);

Frederick M. Manfred, "Ninety Is Enough: Portrait of My Father,"

(10/2), which includes two sequences I cannot forget after eighteen years of editing;

Paul West, "Field Day for a Boy Soldier," (10/2);

David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips, "Will You Please Be Quiet Please? Voyeurism, Dissociation, and the Art of Raymond Carver," (10/3);

Wayne Fields, "Politics, Grandfathers and Fish," (11/2-3);

Ed Folsom, "America's 'Hurrah Game': Baseball and Walt Whitman," (11/2-3);

Jonathan Holden, "Boyhood Aesthetics," (12/1);

Padma Perera, "Spaces of Illiteracy," (12/1);

Margaret Atwood, "Bread," (12/2-3), offered, we assume, as a prose poem, but . . .

Kathleen Fraser, "Energy Unavailable for Useful Work in a System Undergoing Change," (12/2-3), ditto;

Audre Lorde, "Abortion," (12/2-3);

Clark Blaise, "Tenants of Unhousement," (13/2);

Donald Justice, "Notes of an Outsider," (13/3-4);

Stephen Menick, "Roland Barthes—A Reminiscence," (13/3-4);

Elmer Suderman, "Unstuck," (15/3);

Lee K. Abbott, "The Beauties of Drink, An Essay," (16/2), which lost its chance to be in *Best American Essays* when I naively remarked to Atwan that Abbott had insisted it was a story;

Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Language Acquisition," (16/3);

Alicia Ostriker, "Job: Or, the Imagining of Justice," (16/3);

Perdita Schaffner, "Running," (16/3);

Jennifer Atkinson, "The Thing We Call Grace," (17/3);

Phyllis Rose, "Graffiti in the Cave of the Mammoths," (17/3);

Michael Martone, "The Flatness," (18/2);

Dennis Young, ed., "Selections from George Oppen's *Daybook*," (18/3);

Allan Gurganus, "Local, Usual, and Rare," (19/1);

Diane Morgan, "Ambiguous Pigs," (19/2);

Mark Axelrod, "PIZD' óSH: Nikolai Gogol, Abner Doubleday, and the Russian Origins of Baseball," (19/3);

Vicki Armour-Hileman, "China Journal," (19/3);

Rebecca Blevins Faery, "On the Possibilities of the Essay: A Meditation," (20/2);

Ruth McCollum, "Sleepwalking," (20/2);
Carl H. Klaus, "Montaigne and His Essays: Toward a Poetics of the Self," (21/1);
Sigrid Nunez, "Christa," (21/1); talk about an essay issue!
Carol de Saint Victor, "Women on the Go," (22/2);
Patricia Foster, "Miracle Boys," (23/2);
James A. McPherson, "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," (23/3); see *Best American Essays* 199
Andrew Cozine, "Hand Jive," (24/1); though we read this as an essay, it was taken recently for *Best American Short Stories*, 1995;
Maribeth Fischer, "Stillborn," (24/3); soon out in *Pushcart*.
Patricia Hampl, "The Smile of Accomplishment: Sylvia Plath's Ambition," (25/1).

All in all, one could find here a rather good representation of the variety, intelligence, artfulness, and force of the essay during this time. What's more, in going back over these pieces, you would be bound to find a few others that you would prefer to favor; and that's what magazines are for.

D.H.