

Prompt 4: Playing with Form

In her groundbreaking memoir of 1990, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, Terry Tempest Williams juxtaposes the story of her mother's illness and death from ovarian cancer with the story of the flooding of a critical bird migration wetlands near her home in Salt Lake City. Using juxtaposition and word play, she merges the stories of the loss of two beloved refuges in her life. One example is when she ends a paragraph about the bird refuge:

"I could have never anticipated its rise." Then, after an ellipses she writes, "My mother was aware of a rise on the left side of her abdomen." Note how you can link two stories together in your memoir by finding a common language, even a single word, to narrate them both.

Eli writes about stumbling upon a city mosaic while immersed in a writing project in which he was bringing together multiple threads in disability literature, autobiography, and stories from intersecting social justice movements: "I started to see the patterns among these seemingly disconnected fragments and slivers." If the subject itself is about attempting to resist the categories of "normal" vs. "abnormal," what is called for is a shape for the material that aptly contains and speaks to what is rendered.

Aimee Baker juxtaposes an anguished story about her brother and a winter in which their trailer in Upstate New York was infested with rats with a natural history of brown rats. The contrast and comparisons these two storylines makes the story of what happens with her brother and the poverty surrounding their life that much more painful and poignant.

In "Crush," Larissa Pham juxtaposes her story of a teenage crush with meditations on the word, crush, itself: its etymology and discussions of this kind of love in metaphysics and philosophy and critical theory. By juxtaposing childhood narrative with threads of rumination she elevates her story into something more universal and thought-provoking. The "I" enters the "we."

Your task: What seemingly disparate elements might you want to yoke together in your self-portrait? Would you like to tell the story of your relationship with a sibling while also telling the natural history of, say, maple trees in North America (because you had one in your yard and your brother tapped it, or fell out of it once, etc..) Would you like to talk about how lacrosse became a sport, and look into its indigenous American roots, while you tell the story of your lax teammate who captained the team, dealt with hardships at home, and is now doing something else somewhere else and no longer your friend? Would you like to create a pattern in your essay that mimics the subject itself?

Brainstorm and create lists of other topics you could weave into a personal story/portrait. Then write two paragraphs: one that is narrative from your life. Then something that would require research to delve into (like Aimee Baker's brown rats): and yes, you can use your phone or computer to do this part. That's the prompt.