torial skills and uncanny ability to keep the annual express train running smoothly and on schedule. A special thanks to other publishing people with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt—Liz Duvall, Carla Gray, and Megan Wilson. I’m extremely grateful to Jonathan Franzen for agreeing to serve as guest editor and for contributing an introduction that is a must-read for anyone interested in the art of the essay. What he says about the essayist's difficult embrace of risk and honesty can be felt throughout this exceptionally diverse and often emotionally turbulent collection.

R.A.

Introduction

If an essay is something essayed—something hazarded, not definitive, not authoritative; something ventured on the basis of the author’s personal experience and subjectivity—we might seem to be living in an essayistic golden age. Which party you went to on Friday night, who you saw there, and how you felt about it afterward: the presumption of social media is that even the tiniest subjective micronarrative is worthy not only of private notation, as in a diary, but of sharing with other people. Bloggers, both pro and amateur, operate on a similar presumption. Traditionally hard news reporting, in places like The New York Times, has softened up to allow the I, with its voice and opinions and impressions, to take the front-page spotlight. Book reviewers (who nowadays are basically all amateurs, since almost none of them earn a living wage) feel less and less constrained to discuss novels with any kind of objectivity; it didn’t use to matter if Raskolnikov and Lily Bart were likable, but the question of “likability,” with its implicit privileging of the reviewer’s personal feelings, is now a key element of critical judgment. And literary fiction is looking more and more like essay. Some of the most influential novels of recent years, by Ben Lerner and Rachel Cusk and Karl Ove Knausgård, take the method of self-conscious first-person testimony to a new level. Their more extreme admirers will tell you that imagination and invention are outmoded contrivances; that to inhabit the subjectivity of a character unlike the author is an act of appropriation, even colonialism; that the only authentic and politically defensible mode of narrative is autobiography.
And yet the personal essay itself—the formal apparatus developed by Montaigne and advanced by Emerson and Woolf and Baldwin—is in eclipse. Many large-circulation American magazines, including *The New Yorker*, have all but ceased to publish pure essays. The form persists mainly in smaller publications that collectively have fewer readers than Adele has Twitter followers. Is the essay becoming an endangered species? Or is it a species that has so fully invaded the larger culture that it no longer needs its original niche?

A personal and subjective micronarrative: the few lessons I’ve learned about writing essays were given by my editor at *The New Yorker*, Henry Finder. I first came to Henry, in 1994, as a would-be journalist in pressing need of money. Largely through dumb luck, I produced a publishable story about the U.S. Postal Service, and then, through native incompetence, I wrote an unpublishable piece about the Sierra Club. This was the point at which Henry suggested that I might have some aptitude as an essayist. I heard him to be saying, “since you’re obviously a crap journalist,” and denied that I had any such aptitude. I’d been raised with a midwestern horror of yakking too much about myself, and I had an additional prejudice, derived from certain wrongheaded ideas about novel-writing, against the *stating* of things that could more rewardingly be *depicted*. But I still needed money, and so I kept calling Henry for book review assignments. On one of these calls, he asked me if I had any interest in the tobacco industry—the subject of a major new history by Richard Kluger. I quickly said, “Cigarettes are the last thing in the world I want to write about.” To this, Henry even more quickly replied, “Therefore you must write about them.”

This was my first lesson from Henry, and it remains the most important one. After smoking throughout my twenties, I’d succeeded in quitting for two years in my early thirties. But when I was assigned the post-office piece and became terrified of picking up the phone and introducing myself as a *New Yorker* journalist, I’d taken up the habit again. In the years since then, I’d managed to think of myself as a nonsmoker, or at least as a person so firmly resolved to quit again that I might well already have been a nonsmoker, even as I continued to smoke. My state of mind was like a quantum wave function in which I could be totally a smoker but also totally not a smoker, so long as I never took measure of myself.

And it was instantly clear to me that writing about cigarettes would force me to take my measure. This is what essays do.

There was also the problem of my mother, whose father had died of lung cancer and who was militantly anti-tobacco. I’d concealed my habit from her for more than fifteen years. One reason I needed to preserve my indeterminacy as a smoker/nonsmoker was that I didn’t enjoy lying to her. As soon as I could succeed in quitting again, permanently, the wave function would collapse and I would be, 100 percent, the nonsmoker I’d always represented myself to be—but only if I didn’t first come out, in print, as a smoker.

Henry had been a twentysomething wunderkind when Tina Brown hired him at *The New Yorker*. He had a distinctive tight-chested manner of speaking, a kind of hyper-articulate mumble, like prose acutely well edited but barely legible. I was awed by his intelligence and erudition and had quickly come to live in fear of disappointing him. His passionate emphasis in “Therefore you must write about them”— he was the only speaker I knew who could get away with the stressed initial “Therefore” and the imperative “must”—allowed me to hope that I’d registered in his consciousness in some small way, and that he cared about my development as a writer.

And so I went to work on the essay, every day combusting half a dozen Merit Ultra Lights in front of a box fan in my living room window, and handed in the only thing I ever wrote for Henry that didn’t need his editing. I don’t remember how my mother got her hands on the essay or how she conveyed to me her deep sense of betrayal, whether by letter or in a phone call, but I do remember that she then didn’t communicate with me for six weeks—by a wide margin the longest she ever went silent on me. It was exactly as I’d feared. But when she got over it and began sending me letters again, I felt seen by her, seen for what I was, in a way I’d never felt before. It wasn’t just that my “real” self had been concealed from her; it was as if there hadn’t really been a self to see.

Kierkegaard, in *Either/Or*, makes fun of the “busy man” for whom busyness is a way of avoiding an honest self-reckoning. You might wake up in the night and realize that you’re lonely in your marriage, or that you need to think about what your carbon footprint is doing to the planet, but the next day you have a million little things to do, and the day after that you have another million things. As long as there’s no end of little things, you never have
to stop and confront the bigger questions. Writing or reading an essay isn’t the only way to stop and ask yourself who you really are and what your life might mean, but it is one good way. And if you consider how laughably unbusy Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen was compared to our own age, those subjectivist tweets and blog posts don’t seem so essayistic. They seem more like a means of avoiding what a real essay might force on us. We spend our days reading, on screens, stuff we’d never bother reading in a printed book, and bitch about how busy we are.

I quit cigarettes for the second time in 1997. And then, in 2002, for the final time. And then, in 2009, for the last and final time—unless you count the smokeless nicotine that’s coursing through my bloodstream as I write this. Attempting to write an honest essay doesn’t alter the multiplicity of my selves; I’m still simultaneously a reptile-brained addict, a worrier about my health, an eternal teenager, a self-medicating depressive. What changes, if I take the time to stop and measure, is that my multisided identity acquires substance.

One of the mysteries of literature is that personal substance, as perceived by both the writer and the reader, is situated outside the body of either of them, on some kind of page. How can I feel nearer to myself in a thing I’m writing than I do inside my body? How can I feel closer to another person when I’m reading her words than I do when I’m sitting next to her? The answer, in part, is that both writing and reading demand full attentiveness. But it surely also has to do with the kind of ordering that is possible only on the page.

Here I might mention two other lessons I learned from Henry Finder. One was “Every essay, even a think piece, tells a story.” The other was “There are only two ways to organize material: ‘Like goes with like’ and ‘This followed that.’” These precepts may seem self-evident, but any grader of high school or college essays can tell you that they aren’t. To me it was especially not evident that a think piece should follow the rules of drama. And yet: Doesn’t a good argument begin by postulating some difficult problem? And doesn’t it then propose an escape from the problem through some bold proposition, and set up obstacles in the form of objections and counterarguments, and finally, through a series of reversals, take us to an unforeseen but satisfying conclusion?

If you accept Henry’s premise that a successful prose piece consists of material arranged in the form of a story, and if you share my own conviction that our identities consist of the stories we tell about ourselves (“I am the person who was born in the Midwest and defected to the Northeast; I am the person who married young and later defected from the marriage”), it makes sense that we should get a strong hit of personal substance from the labor of writing and the pleasure of reading. When I’m alone in the woods or having dinner with a friend, I’m overwhelmed by the quantity and specificity of sensory data coming at me from random stimuli. The act of writing subtracts almost everything, leaving only the alphabet and punctuation marks, and progresses toward nonrandomness. Sometimes the work consists of distilling a familiar story and discovering, in the process, which seemingly essential elements can be omitted and which new elements unexpectedly need to be added. Sometimes—especially in the case of an argument—a completely new story is called for. The discipline of fashioning a compelling narrative can crystallize thoughts and feelings that you only dimly knew you had in you. The default organizing principle for the essayist, therefore, is “This followed that.” Every essay in this volume, with the exception of Ela Harrison’s love letter to the art of translation, tells a chronologically ordered story, advances a sequential argument (“This follows from that”), or both.

Henry’s other organizing principle, “Like goes with like,” comes in both basic and expert versions. The basic version holds that when you’re looking at a mass of material that doesn’t lend itself to storytelling, you should sort it into categories, grouping similar elements together; again, this may sound self-evident, but the selecting of categories often leads to fruitful insights, as in Richard M. Lange’s investigation of why merely witnessing a violent death is traumatic. In the expert version of the principle, the grouping of like with like becomes the very engine of the essay’s meaning. Two beautiful examples are Jill Sisson Quinn’s “Big Night,” which turns on the aliveness of studying salamanders and entering an adoption lottery, and Justin Phillip Reed’s “Killing Like They Do in the Movies,” which reads the history of American lynchings through the eerie lens of Hollywood horror flicks.

My main criterion in selecting this year’s essays was whether an author had taken a risk. There exist other modes of essay, lyri-
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Cal modes, free-associative modes, political modes, and I admit to excluding some fine instances of them simply because they didn't satisfy my taste for intensity. In the essays I did choose, risk itself comes in different forms. There's the perennial risk of upsetting family and friends by writing about them or revealing secrets to them. There's the professional risk that Laura Kipnis took in publishing "Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe." There's the risk of advancing a potentially controversial theory of anti-Semitism or post-combat stress; the risk of being called a bad person for sleeping with married men or for severing contact with a parent; the risk of looking beyond racial identity at a moment when #BlackLives Matter is focusing national attention on it. There is, finally, the risk I feel most grateful to a writer for taking: shame. As Arthur Miller once said, "The best work that anybody ever writes is on the verge of embarrassing him, always." The writer has to be like the firefighter, whose job, while everyone else is fleeing the flames, is to run straight into them. Your material feels too hot, too shameful, to even think about? Therefore you must write about it.

Shame, in digital media, occurs most frequently as a transitive verb, an action you inflict on someone else. As a noun—a thing you might fear experiencing yourself—it tends to remain carefully hidden. Social media, in particular, are celebrated by their advocates for enabling the construction of personas through which the user can "safely" experiment with different aspects of his or her personality. But most of these personas are self-flattering in one way or another, cooler or cockier or handsomer than the real person behind them, and the Internet is structured to create communities of the intensely like-minded. Although the virtual world may look from a distance like a free-for-all of essayistic self-exposure, it actually functions more like a system of avoiding the potentially shameful self.

What distinguishes the essay from most of the writing that occurs within this system isn't the presumption that your private story is of interest to strangers. The difference is that the essayist's experiments aren't safe. Risk is implicit from the minute you decide to write "an essay" rather than something casual, fragmentary, impromptu. The sheer act of carefully crafting a story raises the stakes. And the rigors of craft—the demands of form, the solitary sustained engagement with twenty-six letters and some punctuation marks—have the terrible power to reveal where you've been lying to yourself and what you haven't properly thought through. The rigors of craft give you substance. And then, instead of sharing with a closed circle of friends or with a community safely known to be like-minded, you submit the finished written thing to an audience of readers who may or may not be sympathetic. To publish an honest essay is, always, to risk shame. But the reward, if you're lucky enough to get it, is connection with a grateful stranger. The essay as a species may be verging on endangered, but a mediated world of buried shames has greater need of it than ever.

Jonathan Franzen