The Best AMERICAN ESSAYS 1989

Edited and with an Introduction
by GEOFFREY WOLFF

ROBERT ATWAN,
Series Editor

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Foreword

THIS YEAR'S VOLUME — the fourth in the annual series — is made up largely of personal writing. These essays are intimate, candid, revealing, close to the pulse of human experience.

But "personal" has another, shiftier, side. Its roots reach back to the Latin *"persona,"* the literal term for "mask" and, by metonymic extension, a theatrical character *(dramatis persona)*. Thus, oddly enough, the term we automatically use to convey intimacy and sincerity has hidden overtones of disguise and performance. Readers may overlook this double sense, but personal essayists rarely do. They know that the first-person singular is not a simple unmediated extension of a self, that the "I" of the sentence is not always the same as the "I" who writes the sentence.

It's this polarization at the heart of the word that makes the personal essay such a complex literary item. Who is the "I" of the essay — a real person or a literary *persona?* Is what the essayist tells us fact or fiction? Did George Orwell actually shoot an elephant one miserably overcast day in Burma? Did E. B. White really preside over the death of a sick pig? And did Virginia Woolf truly watch a moth expire on a window ledge? Or did they make these moments up? Who knows for sure? Some enterprising scholar might track down an official Burmese report citing the dead elephant; another might even find a Maine veterinarian's note about the dead pig; but that dead moth will never be the subject of anyone's fact check. We'll always have to take Virginia Woolf's word for it.

Yet isn't that finally the issue, taking the writer's word? Ad-

mittedly, it's easier for us to do this when the essay proceeds along the lines of reflection or opinion (though Jonathan Swift's first-person singular is a savagely duplicitous affair). But once the essayist steps into the flow of personal narrative and anecdote, the writer's word begins to sound dangerously like fiction, especially when episodes are developed with dialogue, dénouement, the whole bag of tricks. Here is where the personal essayist confronts the toughest challenge of the form: telling stories that are at once artful, true, and *believable.*

This is ultimately a matter of craft and credibility, a delicate balance of literary *persona* and literal person. Observing how it's done — how the essayist successfully merges these often contradictory roles — is one of the pleasures of the genre. Self-effacement is, of course, one crafty way to establish narrative credibility. Montaigne pioneered this technique; he knew readers would be skeptical of self-serving anecdotes but would instinctively trust anyone who admitted to faults and foolishness, confusions and embarrassments. Since Montaigne, personal essayists have not had an easy time assuming heroic poses. From its first sentence to its last, Orwell's great essay shrugs off self-importance. Why *did* he shoot the elephant? "I had done it," he confesses, "solely to avoid looking a fool." A nobler motive and we might have raised our eyebrows.

Essayists understand, too, that a true story doesn't usually come packaged in a compellingly dramatic shape but rather tends to disperse itself into observation or anticlimax. Which is fine, since essayists love to pause. They frequently feel the need to pull in the reins of narrative, take a careful look around, note the intellectual terrain, and offer some unabashed exposition and commentary. (Readers who see such essayistic moments as unnecessary "digressions" are probably the same people who think the funny lines in *Hamlet* are examples of "comic relief.") Personal essayists can even take some compositional delight in the shape of something not happening. "The writer in me," says Frank Conroy parenthetically in "Think About It," "is tempted to create a scene here — to invent one for dramatic purposes — but of course I can't do that." What better illustration of an essay knowing itself.

The personal essay has long existed in a literary twilight zone.

Because it presumes to tell a true story yet often uses fictional techniques, it stands awkwardly with one foot in and one foot out of so-called imaginative literature. Unlike fiction, drama, and poetry, the essay doesn't come equipped with an impressive critical vocabulary and thus hasn't acquired the proper credentials demanded by university English departments for literary certification. But the climate has recently begun to change as writers and even critics are growing increasingly enchanted with the form. "Don't spread it around," Joseph Epstein said a few years ago, "but it's a sweet time to be an essayist." Geoffrey Wolff's collection proves how sweet a time it truly is.

The Best American Essays features a selection of the year's outstanding essays, essays of literary achievement that show an awareness of craft and a forcefulness of thought. Roughly 300 essays are gathered from a wide variety of regional and national publications. These essays are then screened and turned over to a distinguished guest editor, who may add a few personal favorites to the list and who makes the final selections.

To qualify for selection, the essays must be works of respectable literary quality intended as fully developed, independent essays (not excerpts or reviews) on subjects of general interest (not specialized scholarship), originally written in English (or translated by the author) for first appearance in an American periodical during the calendar year. Publications that want to make sure their contributions will be considered each year should include the series on their subscription list (Robert Atwan, *The Best American Essays*, P.O. Box 1074, Maplewood, New Jersey 07040).

For this volume I'd like to thank Donald McQuade for all the encouragement he has given this series since its inception; in his courses at Berkeley he is helping to change the ways in which essays are read and taught. Without the editorial assistance of Laurie Parsons at Ticknor & Fields these volumes would most likely come out every *two* years. A number of people made sure Geoffrey Wolff and I saw some of the year's outstanding essays; we thank especially Daniel Kelly (under whose editorship *Minnesota Monthly* published many remarkable essays), Alexander Butrym, and Eric Ashworth for having first called our attention

to three of the selections that appear in this book. In his own writing, Geoffrey Wolff has consistently explored the moral and literary complexities of the first-person singular. These deeply important concerns are at the center of this year's collection.

R.A.

Introduction: An Apprentice

THERE RECENTLY ARRIVED in my mailbox a *billet-doux* from my little brother. More specifically this was a five-page letter to him, from me, with his Post-it self-stick memo stuck to page 1. The letter was dated "13/xi/63" — à la European mode — and postmarked Cambridge, England, mailed to an eleventh grader. Single-spaced elite, without margins, it was typed with such manifest urgency that words fly truncated off the right edge of the tissue-thin foolscap; the keys must have been righteously rapped — *o*'s are little holes.

The tone of this document owes much to austere dogma, a religion of literary Art. It answers a letter in which Toby seems obscurely to have offended me by an expression of enthusiasm for his country, and some of its contemporary and popular prose writers. At that time he was too young to drive a car, and I wasn't, so I took it upon myself to tell the stripling a thing or two:

"We live in an age when contraception and the Bomb and rejected opportunities usurp each other [*sic*] as negative functions . . . the cliché governs by executive function . . . in the ruined warrens are pockets of beautiful life . . ." The bulk of my letter consists of a suggestion that before Toby read another word of William Styron or Norman Mailer (for whom he had confessed such provocative admiration) he turn at once to Donne, Eliot on Donne, Sophocles, Aristotle, John Jones on Aristotle, Racine, Hegel (on tragedy), and I don't know who all else. In short: "Begin at the beginning and familiarize yourself

with literature." To this end he was to write weekly essays for me, who had been old enough to drive almost seven years now, and I would lead him across the ages, "working through language and time until you learn how to read, and may discover whether you wish to write."

Jeepers! Or, as Toby noted on the yellow Post-it: "I *still* don't know any of the stuff in here, and I'm a Full Professor, Mr. Smarty Pants!! (I thought you might want this back.)" (Well, better that the document be revealed by me — don't you think? — than by Tobias's biographer.)

For a letter so passionately typed, mine has an oddly distanced air, save for its *ad hominem, ad extremum,* and *ad absurdum* assertion that "every backward glance at our family tree reveals a body hanging from the withered limbs." I think I understand the abstracted character of these declarations: whatever the provenance of my athletically typed (and no doubt plagiarized) maxims, all I can now say with confidence is these were thoughts never thunk by me, or never in just these words, or so I think.

Let's say Toby has me by the shorts on this one; it's in his archive still — he sent a photocopy, damn him! Alas, there's more: I tell my young brother "I've finally [!] quite decided to become Bunny [Wilson] rather than Scott." (That would be F. Scott Fitzgerald.) Oh boy. Boy oh boy.

But there's more on Toby's Post-it annotation: "It's a sweet letter. I was touched by it." In the spirit of confession may I disclose that I too am touched by my jejune gospel of a literary calling? My correspondence with my brother launched gaudy little vessels of language; my sentences didn't go forth carrying cargo, but in a hope of netting something out there on the vasty deeps. At the end of my *magnum opus* to my baby brother, my *dogma summa,* my whatever-the-hell-I-should-call-it, I signed off: "I'm sorry I have no news; I have little to talk of other than my work. That is everything."

It's simple enough to poke fun at the patchwork boy I was, the ill-matched concoction of attitudes and characteristics I aspired to be. At twenty-three I dressed in motley: three-piece blue pinstripe with gravy stains on the vest (a touch of Edmund Wilson in the waistcoat?), suspenders, wire-rimmed glasses to

add even more years to my solemn face, already pallid from bad diet and irregular habits. (My God, I'd already had my first gout attack!) My Cambridge college tie beneath my Cambridge gown offset bohemian footwear, army surplus boots. The Greeks, Jacobeans, and Metaphysicals shared my bookshelves with modern poets, William Burroughs, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet, and *Europe on Five Dollars a Day*. Parked in front of my digs stood a cherry-red 750 cc Royal Enfield Constellation with full racing fairing, hell of a bike. George Steiner, my Churchill College tutor, my reason for being at Cambridge, was satisfied with the (literary) books but sore about the motorcycle. Let's call the ragout of my conflicting circumstances a mess.

But for all the hotchpotch of my circumstances and styles, for all the egregious posturing and borrowed sentiment and faked-up lingo of my lugubrious letter to my brother, there was also something there I will not now disavow. In those overwrought homilies about the long littleness of life and eternal uplift of Art was a felt passion, a longing for something that mattered, might stay, be firm. I was forever pressing books on friends ("Have you read this? You *must* read that!"); I pitched woo saying poems — nice conceit — by heart. (For their periodic drive and lonely outcasts caught in implied sensual contact I favored the closing lines of *Paradise Lost:*

> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
> They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow
> Through Eden took their solitary way.)

I knew then — had known since before *I* was licensed to drive — that a life lived reading and writing could be a life well lived, in good company. That may have been all I knew, but I would not unknow it now.

I was an eager little student back then, avid to please, twenty-three going on sixty. The teachers whose good reports I cherished were cultural and literary critics — R. P. Blackmur, George Steiner, F. R. Leavis — for whom it seemed to me (if not them) that literature of imagination was a secondary artifact, the rough ore from which the precious alloy of criticism might

be fabricated. To me, then, the self-consciously impenetrable essays in *Scrutiny, Encounter, Partisan Review,* and *Kenyon Review* were primary texts, and to read them was to belong to an exclusive guild whose members shared a dense jargon, a chastening insistence on commitment to text, a call to arms in some arcane combat in which a solemn band of initiates guarded the True Faith's gates against a vulgar gang of middlebrow, midcult vandals. (Leavis was an especially ferocious and unyielding enemy of popularizers of Culture, those Sunday Supplementarians among whom he numbered his Cambridge colleague George Steiner.)

I wished to stand stringent sentry among the few initiates. Why? I was a sucker for pulpit oratory (as long as it came delivered from a secular pulpit, say a lectern), and I was a sucker for whatever was inside the place I was outside. Also: I was skeptical of all faiths save bookishness; I was bone idle except around books. Around books I worked like a Turk, reading with a pencil in my hand, reading three or four things at a clip, a Dickinson poem between chapters of *Bleak House,* which I'd been led to by a Leavis essay, which I'd taken up to balance a study of I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism.* I'd read headlong and helter-skelter since I'd plowed as a kid through Albert Payson Terhune simultaneously with the Hardy Boys. To read compulsively and to write about reading were my only appetites (of too many appetites) sanctioned as virtues rather than condemned as vices.

The poet Stanley Kunitz has remarked, reviewing his life's work for a collection of his poems, that evolution is a delusion. We change, but always at a cost: to win this you lose that. I feel sharp-witted these days, like to believe I know the score, would as soon laugh at myself as laugh at another, value lowlife idiom at least as preciously as high sentiment, have a quick way with the vocabulary of deflation. When my brother recently forwarded to me that old letter, I paraphrased (shame would not countenance full quotation) its rhetoric and presumptions to a friend of many, many years who had herself been on the receiving end of my bygone puffed-up gravitas. I said to my friend with what I took to be irony, "Jesus, I sure was learned then."

"Yes," she said. "You were."

I paused quite a good pause there, and let this soak in, and realized that I was lingering in the dangerous domain of a truth,

and I wanted to laugh my way to a comfier neighborhood. "What do you think happened?" I asked. "Wisdom, or just too much television?"

"Nah," she said. "You could say car payments. You could blame kids, or the appeal of a good night's sleep after a sensible day's work. Basically you eased up is all. Got to like horseplay and being happy better than thinking till your head hurt."

She was part right, I'm afraid. To be the Man of Letters I aspired to be, avuncular at twenty-three, a virtuoso of the well-timed *harrumph*, able to contextualize, perspectivize, plumb the subtexts, incite chums and bully a younger brother to do the same — this was, in the age just before the age of the Beatles, dark and lonely work, sober work, hard work. My friend was also part wrong, for a plunge into language was not joyless work, which is why — I guess — I still spend my hours reading and writing sentences.

A final note about that letter to my brother: it was mailed a little more than a week before President Kennedy was murdered. I know it's recollection's merest commonplace to suggest that what happened to him and to America had something to do with me, but it did have something to do with me, or with how at bedrock I wanted to regard myself. Think how many of our countrymen gave up this to take up that, left law school to paint or quit painting to study law. It was as though the narrator of Frank O'Connor's "Guests of the Nation," in the immediate aftermath of a political assassination, was speaking for Americans: "And anything that happened me afterwards, I never felt the same about again."

Fact is, on the stroke of Dallas I no longer wanted to be a knockoff of Edmund Wilson, or F. Scott Fitzgerald, or R. P. Blackmur, or John Milton, or even of George Steiner. I inexplicably and all at once aspired to experience acts I might verify as being important; I meant to find a voice, apart from the remnants of conflicted idioms in my schoolboy collection, that I might convince myself was truly mine, and to give up proselytizing writing to a captive audience of correspondents in favor of learning how to write. In brief, an old story: I was an unhappy graduate student, woe was me. So I quit. Graduated. *Commenced*, as they nicely say.

*

I had what seemed to me a dandy cee-vee: Choate, a postgraduate year at an English public school, Princeton *(summa cum laude)*, a couple of years teaching literature in Turkey at Istanbul University and Robert College, Fulbright at Cambridge . . . Moreover, after having decided at Princeton that I was too exquisite to waste on that suburban New World my roughneck country, I was coming home! With arms outstretched! Willing to shake and make up! Put my shoulder to the wheel of American culture where my conspicuous gifts could count, as a journalist in the nation's capital. How was it then that *The Washington Post* personnel office imposed on me a typing test, which I failed? Never mind. I taught myself to type fast enough to get an interview "upstairs" and was tentatively hired by a managing editor who had a soft spot for Turkey (he was building a vacation house there), and soon (despite my failure of a psychological test in which I declared — what *could* I have been thinking? — I would rather be a florist than a baseball manager, which I wouldn't rather be, but I had blackened the wrong rectangle on the answer sheet, and try explaining that to an alarmed personnel director while you're wearing an English shirt of peach broadcloth with a white detachable collar) I was at useful work, making a difference, writing about a dozen obituaries a day.

"I don't suppose you're secretly writing a novel during your time off?"

How could Bill Brady, night city editor, have guessed, my first afternoon on the death shift? Was it written on my face? Had he unriddled my furrowed brow, translated my sad eyes, explicated my gnawed fingernails? The man was a seer. He saw more than I could possibly show because, yes, while I *meant* to dream up a novel when I wasn't retailing the deaths of civil servants and merchants, and who had survived them, and what kinds of Masons they were . . . while I had every intention — when I wasn't tracking down pix to accompany my little essays ("Wolff! Have we got art with the Makepeace obit?") — of doing art, I hadn't yet done art.

I was not, that is, after all, a Writer. Now that's been said, and I feel better. I was a would-be writer. Today such a distinction cannot exist. To want to be a writer is to be one, done and done.

If I ask a dozen undergraduate students in a fiction workshop how many think of themselves as writers, they are confused by the question. I read what they write, don't I? What else is writing? What's the question, again? (Not that these young writers take everything for granted: quite a few ask, midway through their second semester as artists, whether they will someday be "first rate." More than a couple have requested my warranty: will I certify, if they work hard, read the books I have suggested they read, mend the errors of usage I have located, that they will — soon — become "great"? Because if labor were to make them merely "good," what's labor's point?)

In my day we defined ourselves as Writers by no more logical a measure: when you were published by a disinterested, consequential (read *grown-up*) publication, then you were a Writer. By this measure, a couple of stories in the Choate literary magazine, a couple of excerpts from a novel in the *Nassau Literary Magazine,* and some polemic from the left in *Cambridge Forward* did not a Writer make. Lest I seem to claim for Kids Back Then proportion and humility superior to the feral ambition of Kids Today, let me confide that I wanted to be a Writer long before I had the dimmest notion what story I wished to write. Let's call the phenomenon, then as now, careerism.

For someone not a Writer, however, I had sure done a gang of writing. In addition to all those school papers and independent projects and critical essays and book-length college theses I had taken a year off from Princeton to complete a novel, *Certain Half-Deserted Streets;* I have dined out a time too often on the sad story of that prolonged bit of make-believe, so *requiescat in pace, Certain Half-Deserted Streets;* I'll trouble your quiet no more.

But until I hit the glory hole of material that is any obituary essayist's estate, the principal vessel into which I poured my art was the letter. Love letters were best, but any letters would do. Letters were my apprenticeship. I used them as my commonplace book, as tryouts for characters, to get a purchase on what mattered to me and how I might articulate what mattered. I wrote weather reports and geography lessons, how snow touched the black waters of the Bosporus, how the sun bore down on Lindos, what a ninth consecutive day of rain did to

Paris. Hundreds of these letters, most unanswered. What was the recipient to say? This was not correspondence (as my amused brother now realizes); these were finger exercises, and just about as welcome to the addressee at the other end as a sixth, ninth, fifteenth run-through of "Heartaches" by a first-year student of the tenor sax.

Letters at least gave the illusion of a reader. Journals never panned out for me, and the reason touches character rather than genre. Hidden by the privacy of a journal, I was too free to display my worst self. I look back over journal entries from years back — entries that I taught myself to write as though they were public, in which I obliged myself to develop characters as though I were meeting them every time for the first time, in which no information was short-handed or privileged — and I discover a whiner. Awful. My characteristic voice is aggrieved or furious, condescending or monstrously generous. To the degree that journals have showed this bellyacher plain, have urged me to repair at the root of my temperament what was revealed by the ill symptom of my most private voice, I thank them.

My voice was of no interest to *The Washington Post*. To stamp a Geoffrey A. Wolff imprimatur (I hadn't yet the good sense to drop the middle initial that distinguished me from all those other Geoffrey Wolffs writing death notices for Washington's morning newspaper) on an obituary begged too much novelty even from a would-be writer raring to make a mark. How many ways can one say this late person was born, was educated, worked for a living, had kids, joined associations, lived in a house or apartment, grew infirm, moved to a rest home, and died? Not that I didn't labor to make even the oldest of stories new: "The world yesterday lost a good man: 'There was never a better dad,' said Trixie A. of the gentle-fingered chiropractor lying this morning in Hulbert's Funeral Parlor."

"Come off it, Wolff! You've got the embalmer spelled wrong! *Hubert!* Get the stuff right, give me a new lead, hold it to eight inches, where's the art?"

This was good for me. The demented urgency of deadline taught me never again to fear blank paper (although sometimes, later, I should have feared it more, should have simply shut up); the knowledge that every obituary is read with a jeweler's