MEMOS ON NONFICTION*

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I. PLACE

Is it possible to imagine a piece of nonfiction that isn't about a place? Or one in which no allusion is made to a locale or setting—whether it is a room, a city, even a mind full of its own furnishings? Hence, straightaway, it is important for me to define what I mean when I consider "place" as an organizing notion for thinking about what nonfiction is or ought to be. I am certain that I am not thinking of setting—that is, the background against which an experience is narrated. Every piece of writing ought to have its own setting, and a widely acknowledged struggle of writing literature is conveying the physical properties of a scene with vivid detail.

The first serious piece of nonfiction I remember writing was sometime during my third year in university. It was a short memoir of visiting Lagos from Ile-Ife titled "A Creative Experience of Lagos." I wrote with the aim of conveying, I believe, the possibility of writing in response to a place, conjuring a story or a poem out of a visit. I see how, in retrospect, I had begun to sketch out a theme that would become a singular preoccupation several years later—to bridge the gap between the experience of traveling elsewhere and returning home to consider the import of the journey. As such—and since I have gone on to write a travel book, and to begin work on another—my primary sentiment is in relation to place as reflected upon by journeying. I consider "journey" a better suited word than "travel," as I

am not thinking, strictly speaking, of mere movement from place to place. I am interested in journeys that become the seed for narrative, and in places that come to life because the writer is undertaking an interior exploration.

Perhaps turning to Teju Cole's recent essay on Caravaggio—"In Dark Times, I Sought Out the Turmoil of Caravaggio's Paintings"—might clarify or illustrate these thoughts. It was published in late September of last year, which suggests that not only is it meant to be read within the context of the ways in which the pandemic is intensifying turmoil and misery, but equally that the essay is offered with the promise of transporting the reader to a place once visited.

In the first sentence, Cole states Caravaggio's full name, the year of his birth, and then distils his temperament into two phrases: he is "…the quintessential uncontrollable artist" and "the genius to whom normal rules do not apply." We know from these concise descriptors that the essay concerns, writ large or small, the life of Caravaggio. We are not introduced to the narrator until the fourth paragraph, and the trajectory of the journey is not broached until the ninth. What does this suggest? *To write about place can be to consider the setting against which individual labours unfold.* We see this in how the details of Caravaggio's life—his infamy, imprudence, restlessness, imbroglios—establish the necessity for Cole's journey. To consider this is to understand a fundamental truth: we are all impacted by the specific gravities of our environment. We see how

Caravaggio's work is transformed by his migratory pattern, by his pleas for asylum, by his patrons and where they were based. Most importantly, by the journey undertaken by Cole to discover, for himself and his readers, the effect the paintings have, and the meanings they acquire in misery.

Yet Caravaggio's life story is not enough to elevate the essay into an instructive meditation on how to live in uncertain times. What is needed is Cole's life *entering into* the life of Caravaggio; what is essential is that he finds "the font of specifics" for his journey, to quote a line from another essay of his. The question we imagine he is asking behind the text is, *what is my life in relation to Caravaggio*? *How am I with Caravaggio?* I do not think he is just interested in how art functions as reprieve, but in how, by joining artistic conceit with opportunity, he could place the mystery of the artist's life next to the mystery of his own life—a man who seeks something other than "a luxurious summer sojourn," as he travels to places that "had all become significant flash points in the immigration crisis." As Anne Michaels wrote, in relation to the life of Eva Hesse: "When we consider the details of an artist's life in relation to her art, it must not be with the presumption of solving a mystery, but in order to place one mystery next to another. Comparison is a blunt instrument, connection is not. Biography is an iceberg; a life is mostly submerged beyond our knowing."

If "a life is mostly submerged beyond our knowing," then we ought to seek out how knowledge can be gained alongside the unknown and unknowable.

Caravaggio's impulses are admittedly blunted by the expanse of centuries between him and us, but his paintings remain, occasionally situated in of the places where he painted them. What are the possibilities inherent in the artefacts of his life? Cole gives "two strong reasons for deciding to undertake the journey." The first is of individual import, and the second communal. He sets up a conversation between what is felt, and what is seen: "the turmoil I knew I would feel," and "to see something of what was happening…beyond the walls." Cole understands that to write only of what he feels in front of Caravaggio's piece is to, at best, restrict his sphere of consideration to art criticism. And if he were to write only of what happened beyond the walls, his essay might have the impact of starchy commentary. In this instance, feeling (the subjectivity of the writer) is not enough, and neither is observation (a glimpse of the subjectivity of others). *It is the interweaving of feeling and observation that counts.*

With this goal in mind, the two phenomena began to merge in Cole's essay. *What he has felt is accentuated by what he observes.* As he writes: "Later that evening, on Via Medina, half a block from my hotel, I passed by a woman sleeping on the ground. Most of her body was covered by a small blanket, but her feet stuck out, and I was reminded of the bare and dirty feet of the Virgin Mary that had so offended the first critics of Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin*." And again: "When I came out of the church into Via dei Tribunali, *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, with its surging movement and sharp divisions of light and dark, seemed to continue on the

busy street." But the key is found in what preceded his observation, the sense (which resonates throughout the essay) of his long familiarity with Caravaggio's oeuvre. I do not suggest that all essays ought to take a scholarly bent, even if I am biased to nonfiction based on serious scholarship. *What I wish to emphasize is assiduity, diving deep into a subject before writing about it.* So that if, for instance, drawn to Demas Nwoko's *Children on Cycles*, I dare not complete an essay about the 1961 painting until I have given considered attention to several other works of his, completed during his short-lived painting career. The idea is to see how, by long familiarity with the subject of the essay, the experience of being in a place is shown to be resonant, brimming with analogy.

When he discusses Caravaggio's *The Adoration of the Shepherds,* Teju Cole makes an important assertion: *Trust in realism. Show what things look like, and the feelings will come.* This is what distinguishes Caravaggio from many other artists, who, he writes, "cannot rise above the story's fairy-tale baggage." The stratagem can be simplified as such because of the writer's faith in the reader's capacity for a range of emotions. To overindulge in analysis—or to miss opportunities to generate action on the page—is to make the text something other than narrative. A fairy-tale is baggage when contrasted to realistic depictions of an experience because the individual at the centre of the action is remote and enervated. The questions asked of realism are the same that are asked of precise verbs—for a sentence to be written in an active instead of a passive voice; for adverbs

to be used with an abundance of hesitation. In a recent Instagram story post, Cole describes his recent regimen: "I've gone back to the fundamentals. I ask myself about openings, adverbs, commas, vocabulary, line lengths, sentence fragments, rhythm, voice. I take one element at a time and examine it until I know what I'm doing with it. Like analyzing a golf stroke or baseline jumper."

Other lessons can be learned from Teju Cole's Caravaggio essay—we have to adopt a conscientious practice like writing daily in a notebook, for instance—but let me end by pointing to what I highlighted at the outset. *How do we bridge the gap between the experience of traveling elsewhere and returning home to consider the import of the journey?* Near the beginning of the essay, we learn not just the conceit of his journey, but the fact that he is writing in retrospect. It is a journey remembered. The choice for most travel writers, who wish to convey the vividness of action, is often to write in present continuous tense. But here the choice of tense indicates a reflective stance: "In the summer of 2016, I had plans to be in Rome and Milan for work... What I remember of that summer is the feeling that doom wasn't merely on its way; it had already arrived. (It had arrived, but then it evolved, and this present evil, four years later, is something else again.)" *How does the choice of tense impact the way the story is told, and therefore a reader?* It depends, in every likelihood, on the handling, how the story is shaped. Cole's essay works under the sign of retrospection because it's secret impulse, perhaps, is to account for parallel political

moments—between Caravaggio's and his, between 2016 and now. We think of tense in terms of voice, structure, or pacing. That's correct. But we can also think of tense in terms of conjuncture: What exists between a time of experience and a time of telling? With what voice might we dart across temporal or historical thresholds?

II. LANGUAGE

The introductory paragraph of *Omenuko,* Pita Nwana's 1933 novel, the first to be written in Igbo, reads as follows:

> N'akụkụ obodo anyị n'ime Africa, okwu a dị ka iwu e nyere enye; a na-asị na ọ buru na onye ọ bula agaa n'obodo ọzọ biri n'ebe ahụ dị ka ọbịa, ma ọ dị mma, ma ọ bụ onye ebere, ma ọ bụ onye amara, ma ọ bụ onye na-ekpe ikpe n'ụzọ ziri ezi, mbge dum ihe ụfọdụ ga na-echetara ya na ya onwe ya bụ ọbịa, n'ala ahụ, ọ ga na-ejikere onwe ya na ọ ghaghi ịla obodo ebe a mụrụ ya. Mgbe ọ bụla a tụrụ ya n'ilu, ma a gwawara ya agwawa na ọ bụ obịa, ọ ghaghi ịla.

This is how I translated it:

> In the part of our land inside Africa, this saying is like a law: if anybody goes to another place to live there as a visitor, whether such a person is good, or the person is a person of mercy, whether such a person is graceful, whether such a person does what is just on a broad road, on several occasions circumstances will remind such person that he or she is a visitor in that land. Such a person will begin to prepare to return soon to the land where he or she was born. Whenever this saying is expressed, if they do not tell such a person he or she is a visitor, he or she will not leave.

This is how it was translated by Frances W. Pritchett:

> Around our town in Africa, this belief is accepted as law: if anyone goes to another town and lives there as a guest, even if things are good, or he is a merciful person, or a gracious one, or a fair judge, he will always be reminded that he is a guest in that land and he will be preparing himself for his inevitable return to the town of his birth. At any time he may be told, proverbially or directly, that he is a guest and must not fail to return home.

The distinctions between both translations are less substantive than they are technical and syntactical, even if mine suffers from a lack of concision. We express the same sentiment: a person remains a stranger, regardless of how good or important they become in a place away from home. But in translating some sentences by Nwana, particularly the last, there is an obvious contrast in our grasp and mastery of the language.

Once I consulted with Pritchett's translation, I realized that because I hadn't understood that "a tụrụ ya n'ilu" referred to the subject of the sentence, as did "gwawara ya agwawa," I ended up with a conditional statement instead of a declarative one.

I am under no illusion as to my skill as an Igbo-English translator. That paragraph, in fact, was the first time I'd attempted any translation. I

undertook the exercise to test my comprehension of the language—and, perhaps, the degree of my alienation from it.

Why was it necessary to test my comprehension of the language? I was thinking about something the Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant said. Many years ago, Glissant was in conversation with Philippe Artières, a French historian and writer. Artières referred to how Glissant defined poetics, "as a means of self-conception, of being able to conceive a relation to oneself and to the other and, in turn, expressing this." In response, Glissant proposed "three dimensions of poetics"—landscape, time, and language. The dimension of language, he argued, is important when we consider political and poetic processes within the world inherited from the histories of colonialism. He went on to say:

> Because, either the languages of colonized peoples have been repressed through derisive use—not by knowledgeable use—or else, there have arisen new languages called creoles. It took some time for us to understand that these languages had fundamental significance because they were 'languages of languages' and not original languages, and that these languages anticipated what is happening now where the world's languages are mutually creolizing each other.

With this in mind, I turn to Yvonne Owuor's "Kin la Belle: In the Clear Light of Song and Silence." Visiting Kinshasa, Owuor feels Lingala "in my heart, my hands, my stomach." When the voice of a tall, thin man calls to

her, she discovers "in the melody of the tongue…chords that have been made for her." The short essay makes the experience of listening its focal point, and—with taut, lyrical language—examines Owuor's initiation into the geopolitics of Kinshasa. As I reread it, I considered the following: *What sensitivities are noteworthy when we write in English, especially in the context of our colonial histories?* I came up with three responses.

"I run into a language," she writes, "that was born out of music and spoken in microtones, so that the entire gamut of human emotion is given a voice and words to speak." I think of a simple illustration: while in a Lagos church, the worship is sure to intensify when the choir switches from a song in English to one in Yoruba. It took some time for me to notice that more congregants seemed awe-filled, but once I did it became a foolproof method to test the distinction between a mother tongue and an official one; emotions were buoyed by Yoruba that seemed stilted by English. We must keep this in mind while we write. The unheard-of things we might do with the English language, to paraphrase Achebe, is undergirded by our mastery or affinity for other languages, especially those in which our forebears expressed their uncontainable emotions.

Language is "made for music." "Eyes have ears of their own," Owuor is told. Words form a cadence, a rhythm, when we read them with our eyes. How do we improve on the "deep, deep song" of our prose? Music is made by composition. I can think of no better way to emphasize this than an

exercise Alexander Chee attributed to Annie Dillard in an essay describing her teaching methods and impact on his writing: "One afternoon, at her direction, we brought in our pages, scissors and tape, and told to bring several drafts of an essay, one that we struggled with over many versions. Now cut out only the best sentences, she said. And tape them on a blank page. And then when you have that, write in around them, she said. Fill in what's missing and make it reach for the best of what you've written thus far."

For us, who come to English as progenies of languages that are likely older, the exercise of keeping only the best sentences—the practice of concision—might be best understood in the practice of translation. In my attempt to translate the first paragraph of *Omenuko*, I realized how little I understood of the music of the Igbo language. I could tell, for the most part, what a word meant in Igbo. But only by attempting to carry over the word into English did I appreciate the rhythms I couldn't replicate. Is this what Glissant meant when he spoke of languages "mutually creolizing each other"? Could he have been speaking of amateur and private translators, who wish to write English better by learning the music of languages they don't publish in?

The third and final lesson from Owuor is that language "carries many wounds." She is referring to the "microtone" in Lingala: "It was the official language of the hated and mostly diabolic *Force Publique*…the colonial

army that served the whims of the greatest *genocidaire* of the modern world, Leopald II." No language is without these microtones, and we are tasked as writers with unburying the histories of words. The "pain-filled past" of English, for instance, stretches to the eleventh century. It was first used as the lingo used between the Norman-French conquerors and their Anglo-Saxon serfs, "a vernacular of vernaculars," in Robert Graves's phrasing. And when we imagine the pain-filled past of the English written and spoken in West Africa, we see the half-century of active colonialism, when indigenous languages were declared barbarous—even by missionaries who were translating the Bible into the languages of their converts—and relegated, at best, as secondary national languages.

Although our relationship with English began through a violent encounter, its history of mutability should seem promising to us (supposing we are still unsure of whether or not to write in a European language). As Robert Graves writes in *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*:

> English has never been jealously watched over by a learned Academy, as French has been since the seventeenth century; nor protected against innovations either by literary professionalism, as with Italian, or, as with Spanish, by the natural decorum of the greater part of those who use it. It is, indeed, an immense, formless aggregate not merely of foreign assimilations and local dialects but of occupational and household dialects and personal eccentricities.

What do we do with these microtones? The intimations matter; the scenes we imagine and analogies we make when we trace the etymologies of words and phrases are crucial. At the very least, in our curiosity, we show that writing in any language is not just learned but discovered, even earned.

III. GRIEF

Amitava Kumar's recent book *Every Day I Write the Book: Notes on Style* is available on Kindle for international buyers and is a masterclass for learning how to be unpretentious, goal-oriented, and exacting about a writing life. As I recommend the book without reservation, and in order to encourage you to read it, I will focus this section less on extracting rules from his essay and instead reflect on the following question: *How can grieving teach us how to write nonfiction?*

In his essay "Pyre," Kumar wonders if he was interested in his father's display of sadness, over his mother's death, so that he "could write down fragments of sentences in a little notebook?" This, I think, is the quagmire writers face when dealing with grief. Is language an overindulgent source of comfort? Is language, even, comfort? Why do we reach for language when faced with the incomprehensible fact of death or dying? And if it is true that we can find reprieve in writing as we grieve, how do we distil our emotional states without manufactured sentimentality?

I take these questions to Kumar's essay. "I took notes," he writes in the first paragraph. "During the long fourteen-hour flight to India I dealt with my sorrow by writing in my notebook a brief obituary for a Hindi newspaper that Ma read each morning. I was paying tribute…I was taking notes so that I could remember who I was in those days following my mother's

death." He gives the impression that he was a writer before grief encroached, that his grief is recognizable in the fragments of sentences he writes—perhaps his first impulse, when he learned of the death, was to write this line in his notebook, "My mother died today."

To the non-writer, maintaining a "mourning diary" like Roland Barthes did—beginning from the day after his mother's death in October until the following June—might seem indulgent. But to the writer who has developed a daily practice of notetaking, ritual is a foothold with which we may stand to understand what is left of life. What is written is not nearly as important as the possibility that something—anything—can be written. And how the notes are taken, or the structure given to them, are even less important than the daily memorial of recording what is stark and observable. After he went up to his mother's room, alone for the first time, Kumar describes what he sees of her things. Then he writes: "My first notes in Patna were about these items, which appeared to me like memorials that I knew would soon disappear."

In my own grief I wrote:

> Words homeless in time.
>
> No etymology can say for certain all that a word testifies to. To write a sentence in which this truth is revealed, a sentence that allows each part of the whole to do its individual, fragmented work. The words then stumble

> into each other with something of a conflict to resolve, a hunch to test. Whether they agree or disagree is inconsequential. Imagine words fumbling for keys: they enter into the home of the sentence only to escape soon after, triggered by nostalgia or grief.
>
> They stay with me, words brash and insolent, sentences reposed or disquieted. I long for language not as comfort, not even as discomfort. A kind of home.

Perhaps then, to write about grief is to make words into memorials, as if erecting a plinth above a site of loss. To push the metaphor further, imagine an unvarnished concrete beam built to symbolize the inestimable loss of several hundred thousand during a civil war. Such is the nature of "Pyre." The narrative is austere, spare not in detail but in explanation. We cannot visualize Kumar's outbursts of emotion, since he does not describe himself weeping or howling, but every sentence is a subtle witness to the fact that he has been "pierced with loss." "I was taking notes so that I could remember who I was…" he writes. Yet it is not how he is changed by grief that will elicit the most pathos from his readers. It is the basic outline of his journey to fulfil his "filial duty"—the sketch of one ceremony leading to the next—that most convinces us that he has been touched by tragedy.

In my own grief I wrote:

> Half an hour later, I realized I had walked in a circle. Nothing in the last three weeks has seemed less than frivolous. My mind pays no mind except to its onrush of emotions, as if skittering. And as I became aware that I completed a circle—coming again to the place from which I saw the arched, towering entrance to the Louis Armstrong Park, and a hint of the red plaque of Congo Square—I recognized a couple, dressed in flowing black. They weren't new to me, even if foreign, and certainly not random. They were there at the beginning of my walk. I am tempted to give in to cliché, as I think of having made the same small journey with them, and speak of moments in this world when lives intersect, or when strangers take intimate notice of each other. Given my state of mind I find that a trifling assumption, inadequate. Let me consider a small, confined world. Small in size and proceeding in a delineated orbit. I look up and see that the couple does not notice me. Not now, not earlier.

Grief is a window through which we can observe and write about others. On the day of his mother's cremation, Kumar listens to his father speak to a barber about the changes in Patna's economy, and to his sister as she speculates on what difference it made that it wasn't their father who died. At first, he finds his father's words annoying, but begins to see differently. In the time between both conversations, he is less impatient about the kind of statement appropriate for a day of mourning. Each person in his family is saying what is necessary to secure solace, and it is best that he listens to, not evaluate, the content of their consolatory segues. This is a useful lesson in writing about grief. If the pedantic might offer some comfort, it will be

because we are careful to observe how we differ from others in displays of grief. Since every death is communal, since each life connects to more than one person, could we write about our grief with an ear for the stories told by others? "As soon as we die, we enter into fiction," wrote Hilary Mantel in the first of her Reith Lectures.

"Grief makes you a stranger to yourself and I was struck by this person that I saw pierced with loss," Kumar writes. This sentence, in the first paragraph of "Pyre," rings of ambition, but also of curiosity. I imagine that as he returned to New York, he set out to transmute his notes into a recognizable description of how he had been changed by his mother's cremation, still stunned by his ungraspable range of feelings. (We might turn to a recent essay by Ila Kumar, his daughter, for clues about his physical state. "He came back smelling of unfamiliar fragrances," she writes. "His head was shaved. He wore bracelets made of red and orange threads. He seemed thinner, but obviously weight wasn't his primary loss. He was pierced by something more severe. My dad had left and an old man returned in his place.") He might have been curious, in an initial sense, about the disjuncture between who he was before the news of his mother's death, and who he had returned as. The best way to develop this understanding is, as he does in "Pyre," to remark on the slow but inevitable estrangements that culminates in death: "I left India nearly three decades ago, and would see my mother only for a few days each year during my visits to Patna." To write about grief means to address the fact of how death affects our

recollection of the past. All the memories we gather lead to a moment of cessation, the day of death. We ought not to flinch from being stark in assessing how, as we grieve, we find a complex mix of emotions. "In my notebook that night I noted that my contribution to the funeral had been limited to lighting my mother's funeral pyre. In more ways than one, the rituals of death had reminded me that I was an outsider," Kumar writes.

The essay ends with a momentary return "to a sense of the ordinary." Kumar, as I have said, does not steamroll the reader with excess emotion. We learn here that describing ordinary events—life lived as if no death has occurred—holds the key to conveying normalcy, and therefore hope. We can write to defy despair.

For almost a year, between 2017 and 2018, I wrote notes on language, no more than 250 words apiece. Many of those notes have now been incorporated into essays, stories, and a book-in-progress. My interest at the time was to sketch portraits of lives lived within language, words, and grammar. It was also a subtle attempt to articulate what I had learnt so far as a writer, the virtues dear to my heart. In the spirit of these memos, I am inclined to share five of them that are yet to find a home.

KEYBOARD

I am looking at a computer keyboard, at the space bar in particular. It is the longest key of all, and can be touched from both ends at once. Its function is of similar specificity: the only key that creates spaces—creates rhythm or cadence or pauses.

When Laszlo Krasznahorkai was a young man, he moved from one little village to another in Hungary, living a secluded life. He had friends, but one at a time. With each friend, he maintained a relationship in which they spoke in lengthy monologues—one day or one night he spoke, and the next day or night the other would speak. He was asked recently about his grand, vast sentences, and he referred to those dialogues. “The dialogue was different each time because we wanted to say something very important to the other person, and if you want to say something very important, and if

you want to convince your partner that this is very important, you don't need full stops or periods but breaths and rhythm—rhythm and tempo and melody."

…the image of a listener who sits in silence, awaiting his turn to speak, who equates knowledge with devoted attention. I must learn patience.

UNKNOWING

Sometime between 1346 and 1395, a devotional circulated in the English Church. Its author has remained unknown, despite several scholarly attempts to confirm an identity. It was titled *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and subsequently translated into modern English. A caveat is presented in the prologue:

"I charge and beg you, with all the strength and power that love can bring to bear, that whoever you may be who possess this book (perhaps you own it, or are keeping it, carrying it, or borrowing it) you should, quite freely and of set purpose, neither read, write, or mention it to anyone, nor allow it to be read, written, or mentioned by anyone unless that person is in your judgement really and wholly determined to follow Christ perfectly. And to follow him not only in the active life, but to the utmost height of the contemplative life that is possible for a perfect soul in a mortal body to attain by the grace of God... Otherwise this book will mean nothing to him."

The seed is scattered. Some fall on rocky soil, some amongst thorns, and some on good soil. Not all who hear the Word will make any use of it.

Why is it necessary to exclude, from the outset, a category of potential readers? Two assumptions: some readers are incapable of understanding, and some, even if they are capable, are not "wholly determined" to understand.

I do not know what to make of this.

CHARACTERS

On the train, I notice a middle-aged couple. The man has placed a lemon-green Max Air backpack between his legs, and he's wearing blue jeans. It's a near match with the woman's blue trousers. They chat; the kind between people who have known themselves for a little while, but have established a connection, to see where things might lead. The man pulls out cookies from his bag, passes it on to the woman, who examines it with a small smile.

I realize they are Corinthians and Porter, from Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon.* "Pleasant as their conversations were, they were also curious. Each took care not to ask the other certain questions—for fear he or she

would have to volunteer the same information. What part of town do you live in? Do you know Mr. So-and-so?"

The notion of characters with long afterlives: Fiction joins nonfiction, experience intervenes in imagination. Laboring on a story matters precisely because of this potential. This small space between phantom and substance. The incarnate.

When I read I begin to live.

ALPHABET

It comes to my mind like this. A crane, a migrating water bird. Palamedes, it is said, invented the alphabet after watching the patterns made by flocks of cranes while in flight. That would suggest that each letter depicted corresponds to the spectacular swerve of a bird.

Some days everything depended on how well the crane could be observed. Their flight marked the turn of seasons, or remnant sources of water in the desert, where birds came to rest between Africa and Asia.

The metaphor gets multilayered: Ancient augurists believed that if you found a knowledgeable bird, who had flown high enough to have seen the whole world, it could tell you where Utopia was.

I can think of no other example to illustrate the fusion of nature with writing, the freedom of the migrant with the vastness of the world.

PRONOUN

Every year for six years, she chose a word to omit from her vocabulary. Once it was "my." All year she stayed free of this personal pronoun. She'd avoid saying "my house," "my book," "my child," "my mother," "my self…"

The audacity of this exercise lies in her incredible restraint. But also in the courage to accept the frightening possibility that each word in use stands in place for another held back.
The same potential of a ritual informed by deep belief, small and intense gestures that enlarge to take on grave significance.

Months of holding back the personal pronoun—like a word left so long on the tip of your tongue it tastes stale.

How much longer must I stay with precious words I can do without?