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Lists: A List

by Leslie F. Miller

I collect:

1. hats and frogs and art and rocks and bones and books and bits of broken things, findings.

2. words and thoughts.

3. Lists.

I bring the outside in:

1. a honeycomb

2. a robin's nest

3. a turtle shell

4. a snakeskin

5. a mammoth's tusk and humerus

6. assorted bones and teeth of various deer

7. a paper wasp's nest

8. seashells.

They are in a bowl on my dining room table. What's left of a feast. They are the inside out.

Lists: they are the inside out. Groceries to Buy. Errands to Run. Holiday Gifts to Give. Guests to Invite. Reasons to Stay With That Son Of A Bitch. I have lined pads glued to magnets on the fridge. When I use the last of the milk, I scribble. When the first grade needs napkins for their next holiday

party, I jot. When there is yet another celebration or family to-do that demands my presence, I note. I glue the list of important numbers—pediatrician, poison control, veterinarian—to my telephone. My computer desktop has virtual stickies, where I list passwords and account numbers. I have files full of lists: ideas, first lines that didn't make the final cut of a poem, art projects, novel scenes. Last month, I was so busy with unrelated projects that I had to make a list each morning. Typing it allowed me to delete, rather than cross out, each completed task. Still seeing them, crossed out or, worse, erased, like a palimpsest, would have kept me stressed. Instead, my sense of accomplishment grew as my list shrank.

To do today: write.

Lists allow me to get a grip, to weigh my options, to put my grief into perspective. Couples in counseling are often instructed to list the things they still love about each other, their lists of loathsome qualities having already introduced the discourse of divorce. We are told to list the pros and cons of moving, of changing careers, of getting a new dog. Lists are instant therapy. When my grandparents died, I scavenged for memories, looking for shining bits of them to place in the crow's nest of my mind. I found a sparkle in the hall closet, in their coat pockets: tissues, gently rumpled; packets of Sweet 'n' Low; origami birds and matchbooks; a baggie for what's left on the restaurant table; a grocery list in both their hands—her cook's cursive, his draftsman's block; and the smell of Aramis and old lipstick, which burned through the must.

The magic of the list is well practiced by poets. Elizabeth Barrett Browning loves thee eight different ways, among them freely, purely, and passionately. Shakespeare's 130th sonnet lists the nine ugly qualities of his mistress, describing her hair as "black wires grow[ing] on her head." Wallace Stevens enumerates, Roman-ly, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"; we view them in motion, still, whistling, reflected, refracted. We now know there are far more ways to look at a blackbird. Before Stevens, we didn't know there were as many.

Frank O'Hara has 29 "Lines for the Fortune Cookies." Number 14 says, "You will eat cake." Number 25 asks, "Now that the election is over, what are you going to do with yourself?" O'Hara wrote his poem before I was born, yet after the recent election, I ask myself the same question. I eat too much cake.

Pablo Neruda's list poems surprise us like we are still surprised to find a live rabbit in a hat. "The Song of Despair" goes: "You swallowed everything, like distance, / Like the sea, like time. In you everything sank!" "*Como el mar, como el tiempo, Todo en ti fue naufragio!"* And then, "Pilot's dread, fury of a blind diver, / turbulent drunkenness of love, in you everything sank!" "*Ansiedad de piloto, furia de buzo ciego, / turbia embriaguez de amor, todo en ti fue naufragio!"* In his mother tongue, Pablo Neruda's "La Canción Desesperada" is a melancholy music.

"The Tragedy of Hats," Clarinda Harriss begins, "is that you can never see the one you're wearing, / that no one believes the lies they tell, / that they grow to be more famous than you, / that you could die in one but you won't be buried in it." She uses "that" nine times—nine-plus hat tragedies in this list, this poem that casts a spell.

I keep the beautiful ones in hat boxes stacked on one another in the hallway, the wool ones on the top shelf of the coat closet, the ones I wear regularly on wall hooks above the hatboxes. In the attic is a basket of old hats with exotic feathers and veils, finery from Hutzler's that my grandmother wore. I own:

1. *a suede patchwork hat from Utah;*

2. *a leather Harley hat that makes me look like Stevie Nicks;*

3. *a crocheted flower hat;*

4. *a stocking hat I knitted;*

5. *three flamboyant artist-made hats that make people gawk and point and feel they need to know me;*

6. *two crushed velvet department-store hats;*

7. *two wool ski caps;*

8. *a beaded beret;*

9. *and a hot pink cowboy hat with multi-colored felt polka dots glued to the top, which I tell people was made during arts & crafts hour at the Betty Ford Clinic.*

I have so many hats because only my head stays the same size. My favorite hat, brown felt and unadorned, cost me $4 at the Gap about a dozen years ago. My mother says it looks like it used to belong to an old Indian. The other day, I wore it to Home Depot with a Mexican Poncho and dark sunglasses, and a man asked if I was Clint Eastwood. No one's husband, that guy. Last spring, while we were pumping gas, a toothless redneck with a raggedy pickup truck admired my brown hat. He said, "'At's a nice hat." I said, "Thanks." He said, "Yup, 'at sure is a nice hat. Yes, indeed." "Thanks," I said. "I really like 'at hat," he said. I smiled. He smiled back and said, "I got a nicer truck at home; 'is is just my work truck."

But take away the list, or merely imply it, and the poem might lose its charm. "The Red Wheelbarrow," by William Carlos Williams, is vexed—and vexing. "So much depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow," he says. But he doesn't say the farm, the white chickens, the rain. He doesn't say the corn depends on it, the dirt road, the old dog who often pulls up lame, the snapshot, the future of poetry. Had he offered it up as a list—using several sheets of prescription pad paper—it might have worked for me. Perhaps no one else would have paid it any mind, as there'd have been no need to invent the things upon which the red wheel barrow depends, no high-school poetry lesson in it.

If there are lists in poetry, there is poetry in the list. *The New Yorker*'s Susan Orlean writes, in *The Orchid Thief*, as complete a book as could have

been written on the orchid underworld and its unlikely hero:

> One species looks just like a German shepherd dog with its tongue sticking out. One species looks like an onion. One looks like an octopus. One looks like a human nose. One looks like the kind of fancy shoes that a king might wear. One looks like Mickey Mouse. One looks like a monkey. One looks dead.

My college composition class reads this book in preparation for a research paper. In addition to using secondary sources, they are to interview a collector about his collection—of salt and pepper shakers, of war paraphernalia, of fountain pens, of shoes, of codpieces, of antique dolls. I want to know everything there is to know about collecting Beanie Babies, model planes, baseball cards, autographs, license plates. I want to know how much they fetch on Ebay, where collectors find one another, who has the biggest collection, how and where they are stored. I read them passages from *The Orchid Thief* each week, underlining, italicizing, capitalizing, and boldfacing all the lists.

"They had fabulous, fantastic names," Orlean says. "Golden Grail and Mama Cass and Markie Pooh and Golden Buddha Raspberry Delight and Dee Dee's Fat Lip."

Lists have power. They can rescue the most mundane works, if only for a paragraph.

> *Favorite Beer Names:*
>
> 1. *(How'sabouta Wouldyalikea Cold Beer,) Chief*
> 2. *Prickly Stout*
> 3. *Raspberry Jessica*
> 4. *Uncle Monday's Real Alligator Beer*
> 5. *Old Puckstopper*
> 6. *Alexander's Ragtime Tan*
> 7. *Segue Porter*
> 8. *Leisureman Amber*
> 9. *Bock in the Saddle Again*
> 10. *Toad Spit Stout*
> 11. *Bad Frog*
> 12. *Sister Brau*
> 13. *Miss English's Alphabet Ale.*

Students in my creative nonfiction course take advantage of my weakness

for lists, including in their essays the ten most awful ways to die, seven different types of scars, and descriptions of how eight different types of dirt look under a microscope. In an irresistible tale of chores men can't do once they leave their childhood homes, Brian Uapinyoying describes a sink piled high with "pans encrusted with bits of egg, dishes caked with rice (or maybe last week's carrot cake), a pot of half-eaten macaroni, cups of coffee three-fourths empty, a can of Mountain Dew, and some solidified spaghetti sauce with dried noodles—all lying in a cesspool of red grease." I am addicted to those bits of egg, these crumbs, the whole cesspool.

So is Michael Pollan, author of *The Botany of Desire*:

> There were the names that set out to describe, often with the help of a well-picked metaphor: the green-as-a-bottle Bottle Greening, the Sheepnose, the Oxeheart, the Yellow Bellflower, the Black Gilliflower, the Twenty-Ounce Pippin. There were the names that puffed with hometown pride, like the Westfield Seek-No-Further, the Hubbardston Nonesuch, the Rhode Island Greening, the Albemarle Pippin (though the very same pippin was known as the Newtown nearer to Newtown, New York)....

This list, as they say, goes on. And delightfully on.

Does the writer know? Does she say to herself, "Yes! It's time to write 'the list'"? Orlean calls the names fabulous, fantastic. And before Pollan rattles off two pages of print-worthy apple monikers, he says, "And the names these apples had! Names that reek of the American nineteenth century, its suspender-popping local boosterism, its shameless Barnum-and-Bailey hype, its quirky, un-focus-grouped individuality." And it is not so much apple names as it is his enthusiasm for them, the sheer joy at having these names at his disposal. It's the description of the list. It's the exclamation after "And the names these apples had!"

Favored words:

1. *bones*
2. *fracture*
3. *synchronicity*
4. *chartreuse*
5. *cornucopia*
6. *redolent*
7. *ooze*
8. *coconut*
9. *flesh*
10. *avocado*

Disdained words:

1. synecdoche

2. refrigerator

3. water

4. lawyer

5.ambulance

6. and anything that ends in a long o sound, except avocado.

I imagine most writers compose, as I do, with composure—until it is time for a list. And then we morph into Beethoven, sitting at our keyboards, plunking and then pounding out the notes, orchestrating them, arranging them, reading them back, finishing with a coda, and then, like Beethoven, another coda, and another, topping off all the multi-syllabic, voluminous false endings with a final one, leveling a three-note boom: "One looks dead."

If John D'Agata's collection, *The Next American Essay*, indicates the direction of creative nonfiction (emphasis here on *creative*), then modern essay will continue the tradition of list. The best of these are lilting, rife with litanies. Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" is a one-and-a-half-page, one-paragraph list of instructions to a daughter. The crescendo builds, picking up speed with each chore for the girl, coming to a screeching halt with each mention of "the slut you are bent on becoming." This monologue is a rich drama made tense and anxious by the list.

Alexander Theroux, who knows more words than are in the dictionary, lists adjectives for black: "jet, inky, ebony, coal, swart, pitch, smudge, livid, sloe, raven, sombre, charcoal, sooty, sable, and crow," among others. Things get "smutched, darkened, scorched, besmirched in a thousand ways." And here is the list of words I have to look up while reading his essay, "Black": saccade, indexicality, atrabiliously, totipalmate, praealtic, holophrastic, surreption, atraluminous, portcullis, and prelapsarian. Of these, seven are underlined as misspellings by my word processing program, and one, praealtic, doesn't yield any hits on a Google search. I check the spelling several times to make sure I've got it right.

D'Agata's own introductions are lists of what happened in the year during which each essay was written. Because he is younger than I, each event is a vivid visitation from the past.

1. I was one when Kennedy was assassinated.

2. I was six during the Baltimore race riots, and my babysitter took me and my younger sister to them.

3. When Apollo 11 landed on the moon, I was 6 and at a block party in Indianapolis; we had a small, black and white TV outside to watch the landing. All I cared about was that it was well past my bedtime.

4. When I learned Elvis died, I was riding to Security Square

Mall with Wendy Baer; her mom was driving, and she cried.

5. When I learned Led Zeppelin drummer John Bonham had died by suffocating in his own puke, I was smoking one of my first cigarettes on one of my first days of college at Towson State.

6. When John Lennon was shot, I was studying for finals that same semester.

7. When the Shuttle Challenger exploded, I was watching it on television.

8. When the World Trade Centers came down, I had just come from dropping my daughter at preschool. My neighbor, who had old plumbing fixtures on her lawn, yelled to ask if I'd seen "the mess." I thought she was talking about her house until I turned on the television. After a few minutes, I went back to school to pick up my daughter.

I picture Brian Doyle, writer and editor of *Portland Magazine*, as a crazed composer of words. In his essay, "Being Brians," first published in *Creative Nonfiction*, he says:

> There are 215 Brian Doyles in the United States.... One of us is paralyzed from the chest down; One of us is eighteen and "likes to party"; one of us played second base very well indeed for the New York Yankees in the 1978 World Series; several of us have had problems with alcohol and drugs; one of us is nearly finished with his doctorate in theology; one of us is a nine-year-old girl; one of us works for Promise Keepers; one was married while we were working on this article; one welcomed a new baby; one died.

Doyle lists everything, from the streets on which the Brians live to the jobs they held to the ways in which their names have been misspelled. It is laugh-out-loud funny. It is sob-silently sad. Such a gem, this is, that you would want to fold it up and put it in your breast pocket; if it were a song, you would play it again and again, wear a groove in it, know it like you know your own pillow. Doyle tells me, "O, I love lists, which are so much more than lists when you play with them, and arrange them in funky ways—they can rise to be litanies and chants, poems and songs, parades and narratives." They do rise, like incense and smoke and spirits.

But contemporary writers take their cues from the literary nonfiction and fiction of the past. Look at Lillian Ross's controversial portrait of Hemingway, "How Do You Like It Now, Gentleman?" in which she paints the author as list maker, beginning with such things to do as "buy coat" and "get glasses fixed." Some argue this odd sort of Indian speak, this spoken shorthand, is what makes Hemingway seem so loopy. Perhaps the written list of things he must accomplish—which includes, "Eat good and digest good," call Marlene Dietrich, and order caviar and champagne—has leapt off the page, from list to lips. And then the writer emerges: "I'd like to see all the new fighters, horses, ballets, bike riders, dames, bullfighters, painters, airplanes, sons of bitches, café characters, big international

whores, restaurants, years of wine, newsreels, and never have to write a line about any of it," he tells Ross.

No modern concoction, the list is one of the oldest literary devices. Yet from the lists of literary devices in writing books—simile, metaphor, idiom, allegory, alliteration, consonance, personification, foreshadowing, flashback, symbolism, irony, satire, onomatopoeia—list is missing. Oh, the irony!

Michael Pollan says his love of the literary list "goes back to Homer, I'm sure, with those lists of ships and fallen heroes." Homer, in "The Iliad," says, "...I will tell / the captains of the ships and all the fleet together." And he does —for some 260 verses—in what has come to be known as the "famous catalogue of ships."

BH (Before Homer), cave men carved into walls and bones with sticks and stones and crushed pigment. They carved into wet clay with reeds. Before words and numbers, cuneiform and hieroglyphics were used to list things like historical events and accounting. Picture a pictorial shopping list dug in the dirt floor. To hunt: buffalo, buffalo, bear; to gather: berry, berry, root.

Had the Book of Genesis been written in first person (first deity?), it might have said, "First I created light, and then I divided it from darkness, and then I called them day and night, and then I separated water from sky, and then.... Boy, am I tired. Tomorrow, I'll rest."

Sei Shonagon's *Pillowbook*, written in 994 A.D. may be the first book of lists: "Hateful Things," "Adorable Things," "Elegant Things," "Things That Make One's Heart Beat Faster." We needn't be Japanese or women or aides to the Empress or born a thousand-plus years ago to identify with Shonagon's complaints. Women still hate it when "[a] man who has nothing in particular to recommend him discusses all sorts of subjects at random as though he knew everything." We still hate it when a man hops into his pants in the middle of the night and leaves. We still hate it when he stays.

What I like about you: You are still reading.

What the Romantics like about you is that you keep them warm at night, hold them tight, know how to dance. The Police list the times they'll be watching you in "Every Breath You Take." Sting called it a paranoid and obsessive song, written because his marriage and band and life were all breaking up. And Paul Simon lists the "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover." Each of these list songs was wildly successful.

Nick Hornby, music fanatic, fiction writer, and essayist, can't escape their power. Characters in his novel, *High Fidelity*, are keen on making lists of favorite songs, of best artists, of "Top five American films, and therefore the best films ever made." The book opens with the following words: "My desert-island, all-time, top five most memorable split-ups, in chronological order...." Though they are not always poetic or rhythmic, lists are telling, revealing, with each character's pretensions and biases and eccentricities, our own. Those traits are the highlight of the film version. They lend instant humanity to each character, help us understand why one drives a bewildered schmuck out of the record store because he had the nerve to ask for Stevie Wonder's single, "I Just Called To Say I Love You."

A fan asks the author whether *High Fidelity* is autobiographical. Hornby

says it isn't, that all the narratives were made up. Yet his page at Penguin's website lists his "Top Fives...And An All-Time Eleven." Like his music store characters, he loves the list. Like Rob, the store's owner, his top five includes "Thunder Road."

Hornby has good taste. I imagine he and I would probably get on well. And don't we choose our friends and lovers this way, by examining their eyes and then their lists? Don't we develop these litmus-test lists: if she doesn't like *Spinal Tap* or *Groundhog Day*, she's history; if he loves "Thunder Road," he and I were meant to be?

> *On my husband's nightstand, you will find:*
>
> > *1. at least four books against George W. Bush, one for him, a biography he has yet to read (for a year now,* Theodore *Rex), and two selected works of Neitzsche, sandwiched between silver elephant bookends that he didn't want and, if it were up to him, wouldn't have;*
> >
> > *2. a pair of dollar-store reading glasses;*
> >
> > *3. a lamp;*
> >
> > *4. the telephone;*
> >
> > *5. two alarm clocks set to beep and to chime at five and five ten a.m.*
>
> *Twice a week, for about ten or fifteen minutes, there is also a foil condom wrapper.*

Beginning writers are told that the best way to break into print writing nonfiction is with a list. Look at the cover of any magazine on the newsstand. Every summer, we see the same titles: Best and Worst Bikini Bodies, Ten Ways to Stop Snacking, Fifteen Low-Calorie Snacks, Five Best Ab (or Arm or Thigh) Exercises, and Eight Miracle Fat Burners. My own first nationally published feature, "Twelve Terrific Things to Do When You're Bored, Broke, and Trying Not to Nibble," appeared in *Weight Watchers* magazine because I followed that advice.

Lists provide meaty tips and fast facts: *Harper's* Index, David Letterman's Top Ten, *Newsweek's* Conventional Wisdom, Amazon's Listmania, Google, the phone book, the dictionary. Booksellers display list books because they are successful. Under constant spotlight are self-help books—*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective* People, 101 *Secrets of Highly Effective Speakers*; controversial books—*The Ten Things You Can't Say in America* and *The Disinformation Book of Lists;* Reference Books; and, perhaps the most fun you can have reading, *The Book of Lists*, which *Book News* describes as "irresistible (even to those who are list-aversive)." List aversive? Are they kidding?

Surely you remember this tear-jerking urban legend about a list: A high-school math teacher asked her students to write their classmates' names on a sheet of paper. Then she asked them to record the nicest thing they could

about each student next to his or her name. The teacher took the lists home and put all the nice comments about each student on his own page. When she passed them out the next day, the students smiled and whispered delighted comments as they read their lists, but no one discussed them again. Years later, when one of the students was killed in Vietnam, the teacher and several classmates attended the funeral. While they were standing together, the fallen soldier's father approached the teacher. He took something out of his billfold. "They found this in Mark's pocket," he said. The teacher knew, upon seeing the ragged notebook paper, folded and refolded and taped, that is was the list. The teacher cried. The former students saw and gathered around. "I kept my list," said one. "Me, too," said another. The lists, they said, were in diaries and wedding albums and wallets and pockets and purses; two pulled out their lists.

My daughter's first piece of writing was a list. On white, unlined paper, she wrote, in pencil, on both sides, in every direction, with pictures, the things she wanted her grandfather to buy for her. When it was full, when no other need or want or wish or desire could fit on the page, she folded it up and put it in an envelope, which she addressed and mailed herself. My father treated it like a challenge, a scavenger hunt. For no reason other than his six-year-old granddaughter had sent that list, he roamed the ends of the earth for a Spiderman costume, pajamas, and beach towel, and a pair of Matrix sunglasses.

My daughter is becoming a competent reader. The first book she completed on her own was *Green Eggs and Ham*, the longest children's book in the world, every clause of it a different way to eat this unusual dish. Another favorite is *Grossology*, sort of a dictionary of gross bodily functions and fluids, like farting and snot.

> *In a box of polished agate with a hinged lid, a gift from someone who visited Zion National Park, Utah, I keep body parts:*
>
> > *1. my daughter's umbilical cord, which now resembles a pinched, blue rock;*
> >
> > *2. my grandmother's upper bridge;*
> >
> > *3. four wisdom teeth, extracted from tissue, rather than bone, in 1982;*
> >
> > *4. a cracked crown, replaced last month;*
> >
> > *5. the piece of thumbnail left on the basement floor when I sliced off the top third of my thumb with an x-acto knife in August of '96;*
> >
> > *6. and one each of a whisker, toe pad, and claw, fallen from one or more of my dogs. I add to this collection when I can, taking no delight in the events themselves, but hoarding the beauty of the disembodied parts.*

Even the less lyrical lists uncover gems, assist the detectives. A character in a novel I would like to finish writing buys tofu, yogurt, apples, and Entennmann's chocolate-covered donuts. My own grocery list is heavy on

meat and vegetables, light on snack foods and carbohydrates. Once, a checker at the Safeway scanned my list-come-to-life and remarked, as an Atkins snack bar stopped on the belt, that low-carb diets were unhealthy. The person behind me had four bagels, a box of Frosted Flakes, and a frozen pizza. The guy ahead of me was buying the makings for hot fudge sundaes. Sei Shonagon would have found hateful the supermarket checker who comments on your groceries. "Ah, tampons *and* Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey. Wonder what *that's* about. Wink, wink."

> *Things I won't buy at Safeway, one block from my house, because my husband is the social studies teacher at the Catholic school two blocks from my house, and everyone knows us:*
>
> *1. condoms*
>
> *2. suppositories*
>
> *3. pregnancy test kits (especially if I'm also buying condoms)*
>
> *4. hemorrhoid and yeast infection creams*
>
> *5. nudie magazines*
>
> *6. K-Y jelly.*

This year, I, like millions of others, billions of others around the world, will resolve to eat less, want less, consume less, waste less. I will resolve to see more, feel more, give more, love more, and write more—more words, more lists.

To some extent, we enumerate, numerate, tick off, itemize, inventory, particularize, specialize, specify, catalog, index, note, post, schedule, tabulate, record, and register with everything we write. Every essay, speech, story, report, book, song, poem, and thought is, at its bare bones, a list—of paragraphs, sentences, phrases, and words. Letters.

> Boom! Blast, burst, clap, crack, crash.
>
> Boom! Boom! Boom.
>
> Abracadabra!

Leslie F. Miller likes to break things and put them back together in a random, yet tasteful, order. A writer, designer, and mosaicist, Leslie's poetry, essays, and fiction have appeared in numerous publications, including *Weight Watchers Magazine*, *Kit Cat Review*, Yowl, *Main Street Rag*, *Gargoyle*, *Sojourn*, and *Maryland Poetry Review*. She won first place in *City Paper's* 2003 fiction contest. She has been an adjunct English instructor at University of Baltimore and Towson University for sixteen years. Leslie holds an MA in Publications Design and is currently working on her MFA in Creative Nonfiction from Goucher College. She is writing a book about cake.