



## Glimpse Making

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*There's rain and there's rain. Maybe there's a difference at the edge of a continent. Late afternoon when we entered the cabin. I didn't know the guy. A friend of a friend of a friend bent over the old phonograph—a record player we called them as kids, small and nearly square, with dull silver buckles, a plastic handle, worn leatherette skin. The kind you lower the arm and bring the needle down yourself. Like sparking a flame, that quick broken note before it takes and follows the groove of the record, into music.*

*We stood and listened to him listening. I have no idea: jazz or a slow ballad, some rock star burning out in a year or two. So many scratches, the wash of static, the rain outside. How the ear gets past all that, and surrenders. Or his hunger, so deeply tangled. Had I ever seen such pleasure? The moment just before, how it really sounded.*

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This passage begins my book, *The Glimpse Traveler*, and I worked it largely from the only thing that remains from whatever notes I took in the early 70s, traveling about the American West by thumb—as was the custom then—with almost nothing including money and sense, with just my being, at 20, unthinkably too young to do such a thing and of course, never telling my mother. Yet the young are older than we imagine, anywhere on the planet, in whatever country. And then, three decades later, it came in a flood, the whole rest of the book, how the trip truly happened, returning to stalk me. Or how I remembered it happening. Or how I dreamt it, haunted these years and years later.

So the *was* turns to *is*, in whatever one writes.

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The idea of *memoir* at all (vs. autobiography, which suggests a life one looks back to, to find *everything*) has a long history, my favorite strand of it being ancient, from Greece and Rome, connected to the notion of

“memo” as small things, a list of memorable bits, a drawerful in the head to trigger a larger witness. Seeds that keep growing, to blossom even in bad light. Still, they all concern and orbit the self, and the danger is the intrepid ego-machinery of this form going beserk, unbearable. More to this point, a friend, Jane Hamilton, most brilliant novelist, calls these things *me-woirs*, and so yes, it turns out I’ve written a me-woir, and how I love that word, love how it sometimes annoys serious writers of this genre. It *is* fun to say, *me-woir*, though a repeated criticism of my own effort in this genre is: not enough *me* in this me-woir! I consider that. I think about that thought.

Okay, so a *we-woir* then, because at least one of my aims wasn’t strictly personal but to *get* that peculiar time down on paper, the feel of that now-cast-into-cheap-myth spot of history as seen through the eyes of a speaker like so many others: young, inarticulate, awkward, so easily embarrassed. The *me* part of it seems almost an afterthought, a shiny *duh!* Because to be invisible howbeit so full of oneself one can hardly bear it: that has to be one definition of being young. Such an emotional state can both calm and panic in your 20s; it can open and close you.

Meanwhile, in my particular case, the country, the country running thousands of miles west from Illinois to the sea, the tangled rage and rush of that period in America, the late 60s, early 70s with it baby-boomers coming of age, seeming to know things or at least one thing so passionately, all unrolling and steamrolling beside us as we hitchhiked to California. I was lucky. Someone, a bare acquaintance, had asked me to tag along—Frances, her 21 years to my 20, who turned out to be on a tragic quest that would absorb us both. And Woody came too—at least on the way out—a friend of a friend, ex-medic from the Vietnam War, a conscientious objector to that war who nevertheless had to serve, now discharged to pick up his life again. In Europe, in the great beyond, endless other stories raged specific and poignant in the aftermath still caught in the context of a world questioned and rattled just three years before, the young striking out in Paris, in Belgrade and Zagreb, Rome, London, Berlin.... The take goes personal, thus believable; memory more powerful than history.

Time has a way of stopping, of simmering. Then later, you write with an eye to bring it back somehow: that’s memoir. It’s thrilling and it’s damning. It’s fully exhausting. You can’t wait to do it. But the wait takes 30 years.

And pretty much it's out of style what I did, I think, as the *The Glimpse Traveler* isn't a *misery* me-woir, isn't about truly hard times or genuine abuse, doesn't revisit clandestine disasters to show how-to-cope. Opera has faded in our time, its great swell of feeling and solace, guilt and violence and unspeakable resolve. The blood sport of the memoir is one thing that's replaced it. Bad times and how they touch and change people; in the memoir how it changes the speaker. To be smarter, more thoughtful and surely a more compassionate person now—that's me-woir for you—because of, and then in spite of the misery racked up to get there. There. Exactly where you are when you close the book. That's the drill, the expectation of memoir: there be monsters, but the human spirit triumphs. It's Dale Carnegie—*How to Win Friends and Influence People*—writ large and darkly hip again through some brave bit of DNA in the writer. And through the writer, the reader. We all can overcome.

My effort isn't that. My road trip, start to finish, was a sweet, sad accident, a gift. In that it resembles life, I think. This connection, not quite analogy, intrigued me, then fully pressed my doing, the translation to a book. About a third way in, this small meditation from the book—

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It wasn't a story story since it actually happened. In real life, as they say. But I started anyway in that vein because that's what memory does. So the brain can pick up what took place once and carry it other places. So the mouth can find words for it. So it gains weight and casts a shadow. It's an illusion that a thing has a beginning and an end, that something not utterly pointless runs through it. Some reason. Or maybe just one person breathing. You breathe—no big deal—as you're telling a story, bringing some bit of your life back so oxygen gets in. The red blood cells light up. But really it's dark there, not a speck of daylight or moonlight and what we think is bright red is actually worlds quieter and stranger, a blue we'll never know the color of, locked in the past of that body.

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I keep thinking *sad* and *sweet*. I keep saying “an accident.” And then “story” and then its lyric interior as far back as I could bear. What I need to add here is the joy, the relish of writing that memoir at all through a sort of precise, dreamy remembering. And I went further in reverse too, or forward to flash-back to bring in weird vignettes, unrelated except for their bright and secret kinship. I like to tell people that after years of mucking about with poems and honed to that inscrutable, lonely discipline, working on *The Glimpse Traveler* was like free beer, a relief, a spin into the wild

blue yonder. I loved retracing the motion of the journey itself, to re-map my brain to it, the classic *going west* that has a kind of mythic standing in the American imagination, the idea of California in the late 60s, early 70s—at least to those of us in our 20s then—a deranged sort of promised land. I suspect there are European equivalents to such longing among the young, this wish to get out, to seek a larger read, to dream of London or Edinburgh from a village in Cornwall or the Highlands, to ache toward Paris from the wilds of Sweden somewhere under the Northern Lights or from a tiny town in Croatia.

It's been said that all stories are one story; the difference is the point of view: a stranger comes to town or someone goes on a journey. And memoir can move both ways though the one I managed edges toward the latter. But there were strangers aplenty on that trip, a dizzying human array which included Emil White, the old Austrian transplanted years earlier to Big Sur, his brilliantly quirky “outsider art” paintings and his friendship with Henry Miller, or the earnest young men in Mill Valley hammering away to make a boat that would never sail their old guru to Peru, or the old beatniks-turned-hippies in Sacramento, whirling around from the front seat in their van to look at us, shockingly almost the same age as our parents. These and so many other spirits and their odd charm came back to me. The humor involved, my companions' and my own wry take on the whole mad 10 days of the trip made even the darker fallout from its villains, however recognizable, blessedly brief; everyone got comic in flashes. A glimpse, after all, and then thousands of glimpses. It's the way being young passes slowly, then to a series of blips, a whirl in hindsight once you're older and stare back. Often it's painful.

But sometimes I laughed out loud, writing that memoir. I'd forgotten how welcoming humor is, even as it forces a critical look. Its power results in both intimacy and distance; it made me fall half in love again, both amused and made wary by whatever wild-eyed characters we found along the way. Like these two guys, early on, who picked us up in Nebraska, in their wanna-be, self-proclaimed “hippie van.” I call them the “Lincoln boys” now though Frances and I named the home-colored t-shirt one “Tie-Dye” and his friend merely “the driver”–

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Now *where* in California? the tie-dye guy riding shotgun said to us once Woody and I wedged ourselves in the second seat, and Frances slipped further back, behind us. He had turned around and I could see he was a bit younger than we were, but not by much. He put on his wire-rims so he could check us out.

Wow, you in the army, man? he asked Woody, who had taken off his stocking cap. It's that hair. It gave him away.

Yep. Well, no—just out, in fact. That's it for me and Uncle Sam, forever and ever. I'm out of there.

He was a medic, I jumped in. He's really a CO.

A CO? the driver yelled out, over the racket of the van. Right on! But I thought that meant you didn't have to do nothing except maybe work in a nursing home or teach in the ghetto or something, stateside.

Not according to my draft board, Woody shouted back. I thought that too. No such luck.

Bummer, man. I mean, I hear you, Tie-Dye said. And yeah, I heard that, you know. About how every draft board is different. Then he looked intrigued. Hey, how was it over there, man? Lots of good dope, right? *Powpowpowpow!* He spun out his forefinger, firing his hand in a wide half-circle. I bet you saw plenty of blood and guts too.

Woody turned away, staring out the window. I could see he didn't want this conversation to go on. But I could also see those guys would be fine with that. They weren't going to call him a baby killer or ask him about our policy with Red China or what he thought the ethics were, our using Agent Orange. These guys weren't brainiacs, by a long shot. They just wanted to fill the air with noise and beyond that, have a good time. But Woody shut down.

Hey, well. Let's celebrate you getting your CO ass out of there, man, shouted the driver in a magnanimous sort of way. Let's break out the tow-truck reefer!

He means, said Tie-Dye, the really *good* stuff. Like: *call the tow truck, I am wrecked!*

The driver turned on the music, Crosby, Stills and Nash. Blaring. And then the strobe light they had somehow wired up to the overhead fixture.

Cool, huh? Got that on sale, at the only Head shop they got in the dumbshit place we come from. By the way, he shouted back, you guys been to Woodstock?

Nope, not me, I said, not these two either. I actually was guessing that but neither Frances nor Woody stirred up to contradict me.

Too bad, he said. Cuz we're collecting Woodstock stories so we can say we did that stuff, you know? Like we'd been there. Got all naked and muddy, saw Janis scream her guts out and Jimi do a fucking ab-so-loute *Star-Spangled Banner!*

Before either of 'em croaked last fall, my friend here means, said Tie-Dye, turning around to us. Hey, you guys think he set fire to his guitar at Woodstock too? Hendrix, I mean. That would have been ultra out-stand-ing. I bet he did. And he played with his teeth sometimes. I heard that before too. How many guitars you think he fried like that?

Woo-ee! the driver sang out. Wish we coulda went!

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At some point, writing this, I could feel where conflicting impulses crossed and gave way to something I hadn't quite seen before—a certain jubilation, a grace and generosity in these very questionable two who would drive us almost to the edge of a continent.

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My life has been in poetry, meaning nothing exultant, only that this is the form I'm most smitten by, the one I've been trying to write since I was a child walking home from St. Eugene's School at lunch each day, thinking those words running through my head were, in fact, a poem. Grown up, my method has always been equally will-less and relatively simple to start. Poem: I go blank, put out my begging bowl and work with whatever drops in, a method I've described elsewhere. Then to stare and write and rewrite. That's the pain and the pleasure, as any writer knows. That's the real work. But the lyric is tricky. It's a swift, silent sounding on the page, the lyric poem, which is mostly what I write. It has its own life, largely hidden. I like to say I sit with it and merely wait. It's like I'm visiting a close friend in the hospital, one who has slipped into a coma, and I watch her breathing, I watch her *on the verge* and wordless, both of us, for minutes until it's hours. I suppose I sit above my poem on the page willing the next thing somehow though I have no idea what that might be.

This metaphor, like all of them, breaks down. I am no doctor, no drug dispenser, just a side-kick to the process, a quiet cheering section for friend or poem: live, please. Over any draft, I go as empty as possible. It's never *self* expression but an attempt at discovery, to invite and prepare the occasion so that something might happen. At times, nothing does. But I doggedly wait for the draft of the poem itself to tell me what it will and can, for that one deep inside her coma to speak. Then whole phrases

might come flooding, ways to refigure the poem, the separate creature it is. I'm outside of time. There is no *I*. I'm nowhere, where poems live.

And the memoir? I had this amazing real journey given to me, and I was stupid enough to do it. In retrospect, to write it, I knew the specifics of the trip; I had a progression, movement over time, not what poets usually consider at all. I had—another shock for poets—characters, dialogue, plot. Plot! A build and an unraveling, complete because there was a clear and definite end, unlike poems which never end. But it wasn't complete. I still had to *make* it and that meant quietly, bit by lyric bit, because in remembering, there is stillness. And in that stillness I was back to my friend deep in coma, in some unreachable vast state of mind and heart. I had to empty again and again each time I sat down to work, to see the journey once more and brand-new. The scenes in the cars and vans we hitchhiked ourselves into, the places—Nebraska, San Francisco, Mill Valley, Big Sur, some ragged unimaginable spot in Colorado—where we landed, however briefly. But the book isn't merely a travelogue. A genuine question shapes it.

And my own curiosity then and now, continued: what *did* happen to the Ned I never knew, before he died? Because that became our mystery. I had no real dog in the fight. I was a hanger-on, a minor accomplice, not even a Watson to the Sherlock Holmes with whom I traveled, Frances, a woman calmly desperate to find out about her husband, what went on with him the weeks before his wreck in the mountains as he drove home to her. To repeat: we were young—me, 20, Frances a mere 21 and already a widow. This, from the book where it's March, it's the windswept Midwest, and no one is stopping to take us any place soon—

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What she said was: pause. What she said was: pause. What she said was: this is no ordinary trip. I think maybe, well, I think you maybe should know that.

Pause.

Because I have to find out.

I knew she meant Ned and the car crash. He was on his way home to her that day. That was the heartthrob part of the story.

No, not really the crash, she said. *Before* the crash. Those months in California, and then in Colorado. I have to go to those places, talk to people.

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How to write about such a thing? It plagued me for years. An act so *willed*, surely all the life would go out of it in the telling. But that sense of participating in something larger kept coming back, *history* in the mere “going west,” the presence of the frontier a century earlier, the march to the sea. In that I could close my eyes and sense an even wider expanse, back to the immigrations of Europeans to America over a 300 year spread, people on the move at whatever point in human history, back to the Ice Age, to the very formation of islands and continents, to any small band of wanderers through Europe, Asia, Africa. Is nothing original?

And perhaps that’s part of the pleasure in any making we writers do, this echoing. We feel it coming alive again in our very DNA. We *tap into* something vast and maybe not so strange. All those tangles to untangle and present—character, plot, the distance of the narrative voice (my then vs. my now), et cetera, et cetera. I fell into those et ceteras like a poet: my eyes rolled back and a fierce kind of wakeful dreaming seeped up. I kept my chapters short, each more like the small room a poem might take in a full collection, flashes of scene and realization amid all that white space. I kept thinking of something I read years ago, a thing Hemmingway is said to have said, how he stopped each chapter in a kind of suspension. Nothing ever conclusive so the page *must* be turned. A sort of breathlessness laid down on purpose, to entice, to lure from himself the next bit. I did this quite selfishly too, so I could go on, keep writing. After supper, after sleep, what *would* happen? I already knew what, in theory. But Robert Frost is right: on the page, on the page: “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.” I should put that on a bumper sticker, fly it on a flag, send it up via some unmarked satellite of no national origin to speak for every writer on Earth.

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Right before my starting *The Glimpse Traveler*, I had finished the manuscript for *The Book of Hours*, my 7th collection of poems, published recently by Copper Canyon Press. Writing that book was the most profound experience I’ve had in this genre. Those poems too were “glimpses” and I see now those “little hairshirts” as I call them, my free verse quatrains that scared the daylights out of me, were crucial to my later making the memoir at all, at least its inch by inch over time. Because those poems—all deeply begging-bowl arrivals—slowly took on a sense of progression, took on characters, sometimes in dialogue, their certainties layered over by stranger certainties; took on *whole* via *parts*.



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It includes the butterfly and the rat, the shit  
 drying to chalk, trees  
 falling at an angle, taking those moist  
 and buried root-balls with them

into deadly air. But someone will  
 tell you the butterfly's the happy ending  
 of every dirge-singing worm, the rat  
 a river rat come up from a shimmering depth.....

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Which is to say, however lyric the parts, there is narrative at work in that work. The poems were written in solitude, mainly in the woods where I'd been offered the chance to encamp at various writing retreats—at MacDowell, Hall Farm, the Anderson Center in Red Wing, MN, and at Isle Royale in the middle of Lake Superior, most isolated national park in the US where I was Artist-in-Residence for a magical three weeks. It was the natural world that unnerved me, the eternal, terrible present tense of it. In that book of hours, lyric poems, all. But how they link and quarrel and morph through time—I learned something about narrative's cause and effect, about time itself through them, in their company. As I said, I'm sure they made the later book, *The Glimpse Traveler*, possible, laying down the tracks for the tracks I followed across a world now lost, its moments and particulars quite vanished.

And for writers, that has to be one of the great hungers: to bring back. To catch and release in a boat you never imagined quite sea-worthy, cast adrift in whatever waters one is given.

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The quoted section of the poem "It includes the butterfly and the rat, the shit" from *The Book of Hours*, Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2011.

## THE AUTHOR

Marianne Boruch is the author of seven poetry collections, most recently *The Book of Hours* (Copper Canyon, 2011) and *Grace, Fallen from* (Wesleyan, 2008). Other work includes two books of essays, *Poetry's Old Air* (Michigan, 1993) and *In the Blue*

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*Pharmacy* (Trinity, 2005), and a memoir, *The Glimpse Traveler* (Indiana, 2011). Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry Review*, *The London Review of Books*, *Poetry*, *The Yale Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *Poetry London*, and elsewhere. Among her awards are Guggenheim and NEA fellowships as well as residencies from the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center and Isle Royale National Park in the US. In winter/spring 2012, she was a UK Fulbright/Visiting Professor at the University of Edinburgh. For many years she has taught in the MFA program at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.