

## “My body lies over the ocean”

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David Lazar. 2003. *The Body of Brooklyn*. Iowa Series in Literary Non-fiction. University of Iowa Press. 163 pp. + ii. Illus.

*The Body of Brooklyn*, David Lazar’s collection of linked autobiographical essays, takes as its subject his childhood and adolescence in 1960s Brooklyn, but certainly these essays are *about* much more than the trials of a fat Jewish boy coming of age. Readers of creative nonfiction will find many aspects of this collection of interest, including its ephemeral, if at times combative, connection between the body and the mind, its focus on the theoretical underpinnings of contemporary creative nonfiction writing, and its intense focus on language. Although in a great (if somewhat small) tradition of male writers writing about their bodies, Lazar both joins and departs from this tradition—which often refuses to discuss weight, clothing, and other topics normally associated with female body narratives—to write a text that is honest, ironic, humorous, and at times, self-effacing.

Although men have been writing autobiographical essays for centuries, memoirs that take the body as their focus have largely been the domain of women, which is certainly not unexpected given that the body half of the

Cartesian split has long been occupied by women, willingly or not. Even so, there are a small number of excellent male body narratives. Beginning with Seneca's Stoic letter/essay "On Asthma," the male body as seen by its owner has come into sharper focus since Roman times. Continuing in this ancient tradition, a few contemporary male essayists have explored this sacred and profane terrain. Phillip Lopate has crafted an intricate, intimate portrait of his body in *Portrait of My Body*. Leonard Kriegel's life lived in a body crippled by polio is the *topos* and *nomos* of decades of his nonfiction. Spalding Gray's frantic monologues explore his trials with macular degeneration. Charles Siebert's quest for the genealogy and future of his own heart dominates his recent work. And, Jean-Dominique Bauby, who suffered from locked-in syndrome after a stroke, used his body very unconventionally to inscribe his text about his body, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. As his only functioning body part, his left eye blinked each word of his memoir to an interpreter.

While Lazar's collection fits well within this array of texts, his essays in their particular experience of embodiment radically part company with the work of these stalwart figures. Like the writers mentioned above, Lazar discusses physical maturation, sexuality, and struggles with the body, but he also journeys into narratives rich with material often discussed, and stereotypically so, by women: clothes and dieting. As he reveals in the title essay, he is all too aware of his identity as "the feminized man: [...] overdeveloped body consciousness, willingness to talk about feelings, apparent vulnerability, and a love for shopping, especially for clothes" (44). He deftly uses this awareness of his own feminization to explore his own masculinity and the relationships that have defined him as "the feminized man," one who suddenly discovers he is "in vogue" (44).

In an era when critical, scholarly discussions of the male body and alternative masculinities have just begun, Lazar's approach to his subject is a refreshing and timely addition to the growing tradition of materializing the flesh upon the page. For example, at times his repeated assertion that once he became thin, he slept with "every attractive woman [he] met" is disconcerting, making readers at once question his sexual orientation and blanch at his newly skinny self's claim that he "was not at all interested in fat or unattractive girls" (53). Nonetheless, his willingness to expose his own fat phobia (which seems to involve not only fear of his own fat but also the fat of others) offers a unique look into the mind of someone who has lost weight and kept it off, a feat not well achieved by many. Further, his relationship with clothing, including that first moment when black was

introduced into his wardrobe (“it’s so slimming,” observed his mother’s friend), is rarely explored by straight men. His litany of clothing—ticking off the number and kind of clothes in his wardrobe—sharpens the reader’s image of a formerly fat, self-conscious man dressed in fashionable clothes, nearly all black. He expresses a deeply embodied kinship with his dark dress: “Flesh of my flesh. Black as an almost alternate flesh, black as my lungs are no doubt getting, smoke the ghostly extension of flesh” (42).

Perhaps, as Lazar remarks, quoting Charles Lamb, black is “the proper costume of an author” (42). If so, he wears his vocational attire well and has had years to adjust to it. A professor of English at Ohio University in Athens, he has been teaching the essay for the past fifteen years after receiving his Ph.D. in creative nonfiction in 1989, the first degree of its kind awarded in the United States. Along the way he has published numerous essays and prose poems, founded and edits the creative writing journal, *Hotel Amerika*, and was the associate editor of the now defunct *Ohio Review*. As well as its attention to Lazar’s body, *The Body of Brooklyn* offers a representation of those years of studying, teaching, and writing. In the Introduction, Lazar discusses the theory of lifewriting vis-à-vis autobiographical essays, which he says are “like vanity film projects, at least to this extent: produced by, directed by, written by, from an idea by, starring” (xii). Not surprisingly, he points out the crucial role that irony must play in any memoir, arguing that lifewriting without it “is like a swimmer without sunblock. Too much uninhibited exposure” (xii). His text is filled with teacherly but not preacherly moments in which he elucidates, in both theory and form, the qualities of good autobiographical essaying.

In that regard, his ways of remembering are particularly intriguing. In “White Car,” he argues that “perhaps only blurred memory approaches honesty” (2). He then attempts to blur his own memory in telling of the events of one afternoon when he believes he saw his father driving by him and his friends with a woman not his mother. As he tells the story, he disrupts his narrative with questions such as, “Am I putting a pink ribbon on the story?” (5); “How sure am I, was I, that it was my father?” (7). But, he does not raise these questions in a clichéd way, as many others do in their “re-memory reflections.” He is making a truly authentic attempt to understand the truthfulness of memory and how that truth, whatever one takes away from the events one witnesses, can shape one’s life for years to come.

Lazar is also concerned with the self-serving potential of the personal essay. “Writing autobiographically,” he writes, “is like looking through a

double mirror at a room in which you continue to live in the past, a perpetual past life you believe you can change and which will then change you” (35). He warns of the explicit dangers of such gazing: he reminds us that as writers, as human beings, we cannot change history to suit our needs, but must instead “fit our selves into history” (34). Trying to change one’s past is an easy trap for lifewriters to fall into, since they know that the effects of their representations will play out in the present and future for good or ill. Lazar acknowledges the power of this temptation: “The sin of self-serving interpretation looms like an automat over the entire process” (35).

At its core, this collection is about communication, both the failure to communicate and the complete joy in knowing that someone else, someone who matters most to you, understands your feelings and thoughts. In “Melon Man,” he writes, “I am drawn to the idea that we communicate in stages, sometimes decades apart [...], that something said today might light up in twenty years like the light reaching us from a distant star” (15). Throughout *The Body of Brooklyn*, Lazar’s body is at once the medium and the message, the text on which and through which he attempts to communicate. He gets to the book’s thesis in the last third of the book in “On Three Fraternal Aphorisms,” in which he metaphorically extends his body into language: “I walk as though I were about to say something pithy and amusing, as though I were about to commit, say, an aphorism” (98). Later, we are drawn into his intimate circle of near desperate communication as he addresses both us and his brother as readers of his lifewriting: “There is a relationship between the reader of this book and my brother; you’re both listening to me; I care what you think; I need your reactions, even if I need to imagine them as the reactions I need” (107).

Perhaps it is his need to communicate, to make others see what he sees and hear what he hears, that prompts his great attention to the word. Lucy Grealy once told me and a couple of others new to lifewriting that writers today do not attend to the sentence well enough; she felt, and I agree, that much more attention needs to be paid to the selection (and rejection) of individual words. Lazar is not in need of such advice since his considerations of the paragraph, the sentence, and the word are paramount in his writing process. Phoning him with news of his mother’s death, his father refers to her as “Mother,” a word no one—not his father, his brother, or himself—had ever used to refer to her. He explains that this linguistic shift summed up this tragic event for him: “she died and took the archetype, the icon, with her” (62). Earlier in the book, when describing his transformation

from a fat boy with a Brooklyn accent to a thin, Midwesternized man, he marks his awareness of the delicate nature of language and of writing about the self: “Weight had needed to be lost (passive constructions can be a blessing to those who feel oppressed), but so did accent and whatever else stood between me and the brave new world of attractiveness I may have imagined” (28).

Even so, there are times when Lazar’s word play becomes more of a distraction than a complement to his text, moments when the reader rolls his or her eyes in linguistic agony. For instance, in “Melon Man,” an essay about a fruit-bearing neighbor, he describes the man’s first generation Slavic pronunciations as “sensual enterprises, a fricative fricassee” (11). And in recalling the sound of his mother’s voice, he writes, “I can remember the timbre of her voice (if a voice falls in a forest and someone hears it [...]).” (96). Even so, it is hard to hold these lackadaisical leaps against him. After all, we would all press our readers’ sensibilities sometimes if we could, if we only had the nerve (the stomach) to push the language to where it is begging for us to go.

As these flights of verbal fancy show, humor is a constant thread woven throughout this book that allows Lazar’s voice to be fully embodied. He ultimately becomes a likable person on the page, one whom readers can trust to be honest and forthcoming. He rarely boasts and easily allows himself to be the butt of his own jokes. As he states, “It’s the role of the essayist to throw the banana peel down and then dutifully walk over it and pratfall” (xii). He is careful to rein in his own ego; he lets it wander a bit, before pulling it aside and critiquing it, not from a third-person omniscient point of view, but from the first person, with a knowingly limited perspective on memory, events, and life aided by irony and aphorism. Lazar implores, “I just want to make sure that you understand that my model as an essayist, a memoirist, is anything but heroic, unless one’s conception of heroism is leavened with, expanded by, a sense of the absurd” (42).

Many readers will be interested in exploring *The Body of Brooklyn*. Over the span of fourteen essays, two of which include family pictures of which he is the archivist, Lazar explores the Brooklyn of thirty years ago. His attention often turns to films and music that serve as mnemonic life markers as well as to photos of his family capturing moments once forgotten, now (partially) reclaimed. Above all else, he tells the story of a chubby little boy who misheard the lyrics to a famous folk song, “My body lies over the ocean / My body lies over the sea / My body lies over the ocean / Oh, bring back my body to me” (21). In doing so he manages to surprise,

anger, amuse, sadden, and embarrass his readers, emotions I would hope that the best creative nonfiction inspires.