**Abstract**  For the past seven years, I’ve worked on completing an illustrated novel based on my experiences as a child growing up in a sometimes violent and unpredictable home. At first, I planned only to use the details of my life as a way of grounding the story, but the more I wrote and drew, the more I remembered new events and sensations of my childhood. This paper explores the process of writing and drawing as a way of revisiting, reexamining, and making new meanings of childhood experiences. Through fiction writing, I rearrange and reinterpret the past, constructing knowledge through causality and reasoning. Through drawing, I externalize and render visible sensations of childhood that had been previously inaccessible. Ultimately, I consider the ways writing and drawing function as a form of active remembering that reconstructs and reclaims the past.

**Keywords:** writing, drawing, arts-based research, childhood, memory

What is a story before it becomes words?

—Lynda Barry, *What It Is*

**One: A Memory**

We sit on the front porch—my sister, my brother, and I—and we wait. We don’t know exactly what we’re waiting for. It’s Christmas Eve. No, it’s Christmas Day. What time is it? It’s early. The sun is still out. It’s 11 o’clock in the morning. It’s warm outside. We live in Miami, and it doesn’t start getting cool until late January. What year is this? It has to be the early ’90s. My sister was born in 1990, and she is at least 3 or 4 in this memory. That makes me 10 or 11, despite the fact that I see myself as very small, very young, maybe only 5 years old. But that’s not right.

*We sit in the front porch watching the street. Inside, my parents are arguing. An argument like the ones we’ve heard before, but worse. We hear screaming. We hear...*
things breaking. I reach out and take my sister’s hand. Do I take her hand? I don’t know. But it feels like something I would do. Or else, we all sit silently beside one another, not looking at each other, trying to pretend that everything is okay. That everything will be okay. Because we know that at any moment the screaming can find us, even on the porch, even holding hands, and that maybe if we are perfectly still, it will not know we are here.

Those were the days when we worried we would be hurt. And it was why we never told on each other, why we never confessed. It was how we learned to be quiet, not to speak, because any time we spoke, we got hurt.

A car pulls up in front of our house. It doesn’t park, only idles in the street. My aunt—is it my aunt? In this memory, I can’t see the face of the person coming to get us. It is a woman, but her face is obscured, blurred out, foggy, as though my vision does not extend that high. Maybe I only looked at the ground. Maybe I watched my feet as I stood up, walked down the steps of the porch, across the grass, and into the waiting car.

But what do I remember? A voice that says, “Come on,” and then she picks up my sister and then she holds her tightly and then she grabs my hand with her other free hand and my brother is already down the steps, already halfway to the car, and then I pull my hand free from hers. Do I? Do I do this? Do I run back to the front door of my house and open the door, and if I do this, what does my aunt say? Does she tell me to stop, tell me not to? And if I did open the door, did I look inside, did I pop my face around the corner, and if I did, what did I see? Did I see my mother, walking toward the front door from the kitchen? What was she doing? Was she coming to say goodbye, to wish us a merry Christmas? Did I see what I think I saw? My father pull her back into the kitchen by her hair? If she had made it to us, what would she have done? Would she have kissed me on the cheek? Would she have hugged me? Would she have told me not to worry?

And then, I was in the car, and the car was driving, and that’s the last thing I remember.

Two: On Writing

It’s June 2009. I am staying in an old barn that once belonged to the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay and that now houses the Millay Colony, an artist residency program. This is my second week here. This morning, I wake just before 7 a.m., make coffee, then walk up the narrow staircase to my designated studio space, a mostly empty room with a small desk pushed up against the only window. Outside my window is
a tangle of branches and leaves. For a kid born and raised in Miami, Florida, I feel a lot like I am living in an alternate universe, or a fantasy world, a fictive space—wooded and dense, mountainous, full of creeks and ticks and the sounds of animals I have only ever read about.

This morning, I sit down with my coffee at my desk, in front of my computer, and then I write:

Jonah looks out from the back seat as his father pulls the car up to a house he’s never seen before. He reaches blindly for his sister’s hand beside him, but cannot find it and doesn’t want to avert his gaze from the house. He thinks this house does not look like a place where people live—cracked tiles, the windows covered with wood, the gray paint peeling, the grass dead.

I do not have an outline or notes. I have no sense of the plot or narrative. But I do know Jonah. Jonah has appeared in stories I’ve written before. He is quiet, reserved, anxious about the dangers of the world. He’s also imaginative and thoughtful. He believes in a world larger than the one that can be observed, and he has ways of finding that world, of conjuring it and bringing it into our own. I know this novel will be about Jonah and his family moving into a new house, and I know this move will be frightening, but I have no idea what kind of frightening it will be.

Maybe it’s being in upstate New York, a place so unfamiliar, so far removed from my life, which makes writing about this feel safe, but for the first time in my life, I find myself writing about a house I used to live in, about people who are much like myself, an urge I almost never have, or when I do, one I’m sure to discourage myself from.

It was a Spanish Colonial house in rough shape. My parents bought it with the hopes of fixing it up. But it never happened. We lived in a home unfit for living in—holes in the wooden floors, the drywall cracking and disintegrating, broken window frames, doors that didn’t shut, and no central air conditioning. It was a home falling apart, only the thinnest of barriers between the inside and the outside. A home that no one should have been living in. I keep writing: “Jonah stares at the structure from inside the car. Is he scared? He doesn’t think he’s scared. Not scared or intimidated, but unprepared.”

I haven’t thought about this house in a long time. Maybe not since my family moved out. It was the site of violence and danger, and the space from which my parents eventually divorced. No one in my family liked to talk about this house or what happened within its walls, and a decade later, it was as though those years had been erased from our collective memories. But I remembered it. I remembered some
of it, because in addition to all those things, I also truly believed that house was haunted. And not a metaphorical haunting, but a real haunting by a real ghost.

I know that if I am going to write about this house, then I need to remember it and what happened in it. I need to know what my family was like when we lived there. I need to remember what happened in that place. And the only way I know how to get any of those memories is to write. This is what writing does. It turns the ambiguity of image into the precision of language. It solidifies the abstract into a series of shapes and symbols. It makes concrete what might otherwise be a fleeting, ethereal sensation. Like this, writing becomes an act of remembering, and language becomes the memory.
This novel may be about a boy and a haunted house, but for me, writing it becomes a process of remembering, of crafting experience and sensation into language, translating the mess of memories—often competing and contradictory—into a linear, discursive experience, moving from chaos to chronology to causality. This is the process of making a plot, what the novelist John Dufresne (2003) defines as the “architecture of action” (p. 133), of moving past the “what” and onto the “how” and the “why” of a story.

Fiction writing gives form to experience and sensations and desires. It is designed, as Jerome Bruner (1991) writes, “to contain uncanniness rather than to resolve it” (p. 16). It’s the containing that makes life livable. Bruner writes that “the ‘consoling plot’ is not the comfort of a happy ending but the comprehension of plight that, by being made interpretable, becomes bearable” (p. 16). Writing about my childhood, about my parents and my family, is a way of containing it, a way of presenting it to myself that is not so scary. Writing this novel is not just about returning to my childhood home, it’s about going inside and finding out what happened to it.

**Three: An Imagining**

I sit on the porch with my siblings. We are dressed nicely. What was I wearing? A suit? No. A button-up shirt with a collar, tucked into my pants. My good shoes and my good socks. It’s Christmas Day. Behind us, inside the house, our Christmas tree is still lit, the presents under the tree unopened. Have we eaten breakfast? We have not. And what are we waiting for out on this porch? For my aunt to come pick us up. Inside, my parents argue, an argument they’ve had before, or like the ones they’ve had before, but worse. I hear screaming. I hear things breaking. I do not look at my brother. I hold my sister’s hand. We sit silently, because we know if we make a sound, then the danger that is now contained inside our house might find us on the porch.

And then a shadow moves across the wall, and it catches my eye. I turn my head in its direction and see a bit of it sneak under the front door to our house. I know this shadow. I have seen it before. I’ve seen it crawl across the ceiling just as I close my eyes to sleep at night. I’ve seen it stretch across the floor, gesturing for me to follow it. I think I have even heard it whispering my name in the middle of the day, always when I am alone.

So I stand and walk toward the door. My brother says, “Wait,” but I don’t listen. Outside, a car pulls up in front of our house, idles in the street. My aunt gets out and walks toward us on the porch. Before she can reach us, I open the door to my house.
and peer inside. I hear the shadow walking across the floor, making the boards creak as it moves from the living room into the kitchen. Do I follow it? I do. I walk inside and follow the shadow from the living room into the kitchen, and then the shadow disappears, dissolved in the sunlight coming through the kitchen window. Instead, I see my father, one hand holding my mother’s arms. They both look at me, and he lets go. My mother is crying. My father’s face is red. I hear my aunt call my name, and my mother says, “You should go.”

Four: On Drawing

I wait in an airport coffee shop for my flight. I have at least an hour, so I take out my sketchbook and work on illustrating this book, which means asking myself to visually confront my childhood. For years, I’ve dealt with this narrative and these characters only in text, abstracted into language, rendered in sentences, contained and safe. But now, I have to draw it. My process has been to read over the book carefully—and sketch while reading. I am on Page 25, a short scene—a memory really—in which Jonah recalls his mother waking him and the rest of his family in the middle of the night to see the moon. His mother says, “I don’t know what it is about this moon tonight, but it just made me miss you guys, and I really wanted you all to see it with me.” Jonah’s mother is drawn to the theatrical, the melodramatic. Sometimes, this propensity manifests itself in kindness, other times in cruelty. Jonah “was tired, but he remembers loving being out there. Everyone together . . . that night. He goes back to that night so many times.”

I draw the accompanying image, sketching out in my notebook what it might look like. Like Jonah, this is also one of my favorite memories; it’s one of the few instances where the family is kind, where Jonah is happy and safe and cared for. I start by sketching the characters, just basic shapes for where their heads will be. The four of them together, the children encased within the bodies of their parents, all of them looking up at the moon. The night sky shrouds them in a darkness that bleeds into the tall grass around them, their tired faces illuminated by the light of the moon.

For a few minutes, I stop noticing the crowds of people around me walking to their flights. I don’t hear the hissing of the espresso machine only a few feet away. I am aware only of my body. I feel my shoulders hunching, pulling my stomach in, as though my body is folding in on itself. My limbs feel loose, my mouth is tight. A wave of sensation moving up from my legs through my stomach and into my face. I know this feeling. It is one I associate with grief or mourning, one that I think of as accompanying tragedy. But nothing tragic is happening to me now. I am sitting in
a coffee shop, large windows open out to the runway in front of me. I am sketching in my notebook at a small circular table, making marks on a page that are barely legible. And I find myself trying not to cry.

Drawing is more than marks on a page. When we draw, we use our entire bodies, our limbs and organs, but also all those things that make us feel: memories, experiences, desires, fears. A line made in a sketchbook is both symbol and not-symbol, representative and conceptual. When I draw Jonah with his family, I can’t help but embody Jonah a little bit, feel like what is happening to him is also happening to me. And I remember my family and how unlikely a moment like this would have been
when I was a child. I think of my children—who didn’t even exist when I first wrote this scene—and I think of myself not as a child, but a parent.

What was I mourning, what was I grieving for? Judith Butler (2015) writes that “mourning has to do with yielding to an unwanted transformation, where neither the full shape nor the import of that alteration can be known in advance” (p. 17). Can we mourn, then, for something that happened a long time ago? Something whose “imports” and “shapes” have already made themselves known? Maybe I was mourning for Jonah and the inevitability of the loss that was to come, maybe I was mourning for my 10-year-old self who still didn’t know the totality of what lay ahead in the coming years. Maybe the risk of loss feels a lot like loss itself.

This is what drawing does: It asks questions. The ambiguity of a line opens a space for new meanings, new understandings, for a plurality of experiences and sensations. Drawing doesn’t answer anything, it doesn’t come down definitively one way or the other, it doesn’t make sense of the mess of a life, but it does give you a means to navigate the mess, an escape route, a new path to take. And that path can feel a lot like an answer, and feeling like you have an answer can make you feel a whole lot better. As artist and educator Lynda Barry (2008) writes, “We don’t create a fantasy world to escape reality, we create it to be able to stay” (p. 40).

**Five: A Haunting**

Jonah waits on the front porch with his sister. What are they waiting for? It is Christmas Day and their aunt is coming to get them. Inside, his parents are arguing, louder and more violently than he can ever remember. He hears the sounds of screaming and things breaking, muffled by the walls of his home. He takes his sister’s hand. He can feel her body next to his. They do not speak; they try not to move. He knows that the danger in the house can find them on the front porch and that if they are very quiet, they might be able to escape without it finding them.

And then he hears his name, whispered, in a voice he doesn’t recognize. He looks up toward the front door, where he thinks he heard the voice come from. His sister looks up, too. He says, “You heard that?” and his sister nods her head. They both watch the front door as it unlatches and opens gently. He says, “That could have been the wind,” and his sister says, “I didn’t feel any wind.” He knows what she knows, that the wind did not open the door, did not call his name, but instead it was the ghost. She says, “You should go,” and he says, “I don’t want to,” and she says, “But it called you.” He stands up and walks over to the door. He can hear his parents in the kitchen,
can see their shadows stretching out into the living room. He pushes the door open and walks inside.

He sees nothing, but he hears the sounds of the ghost moving across the floor, the floorboards creaking as they bend under the weight of each step. He follows, trying to walk exactly where it walks. When he does this, he feels invisible, and feeling invisible makes him feel safe. The footsteps take him toward the kitchen and he follows, though he doesn’t know what he will do, what will happen. Before he gets to the kitchen, he hears his mother say, “That was always the problem. And you never knew.” He doesn’t know what they’re talking about. But the way she says it, the way her voice shakes, makes him sad. And then he hears his father say, “Sometimes I think I never knew anything at all.” He has always known his parents to be angry, frustrated, on the verge of exploding. But now, hearing their voices, he thinks of them as fragile, containers made of glass that are melting from the inside, ready to
disintegrate altogether. And this is when he falls to the floor. This is when he covers
his face and cries.

And he hears his mother and father come into the living room, he hears their
footsteps get closer to him, and he doesn’t look up, but he feels their arms around
him, their bodies closing the space between them, his father’s heavy hand on his head,
and then his mother’s gentle voice: “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

References

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About the Author

Jarod Rosello is a Cuban-American cartoonist, writer, and educational researcher from Miami,
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