

ENGL 120: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay
Professor Richard Deming

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Sarah K. Nutman

Choosing Terms

by Sarah K. Nutman

I watched Cecilia die. One moment in midair—eyes wide, teeth white, contrasting her deep, dark skin, the orange ball leaving her hands, spinning, arching, floating towards the swaying net. Next the landing—two feet hit the ground, knees quiver, then buckle; she lies down on the floor, she freezes. “She’s just playing,” one boy says walking away. Then the shaking—the seizing, eyes no longer wide but bulging, the silence but for the last breath, gurgling, agonal, containing no air. “Cecilia, if you’re joking,” my voice shaking as I tilt her head back, put my mouth on hers, a kiss almost, and breathe. Then touching her neck with two fingers just below the chin, pressing down, moving them slightly, then pounding on her chest. Her eyes now almost shut, the blackness of the pupils dominating the small space still uncovered by the lids.

But, perhaps, this was not how it happened. The adjectives come from a poem I wrote, the sequence of events from an essay for English class—the same essay in which I claimed that the night had been a blur. And her smile, the white teeth, had been talked about—“brilliant,” “infectious,” “shimmering.” It had a magic uncaptured by the photographs of her—the school portrait used in publications, the small one in my yearbook with our tongues sticking out, the one of her in a white dress from the funeral. The smile was not remembered solely because she died; the compliment was not a platitude used when people could not think of something more flattering. No, the smile was different—the way her whole face seemed to be overtaken by it,

cheeks puffing slightly, eyes widening but calm, content—it seeped into the obituaries and the speeches at memorial events. It was always described, but always described differently; perhaps, it was because there was no sentence, no allusion, certainly no word, that didn't feel inadequate.

When I think about her now, however, when I try to see her, her face comes to me from photographs. No image depicts the hours we spent lying on the floor of a classroom sending a basketball arching across it, ensuring that our wrists snapped at just the right moment to make the ball spin through the air. And yet, when I think of that day, her face seems real, true for a moment, and then, I realize, it's contrived. The grimace I remember seeing as she readied her shot was printed in the *Northwest Current*; the real one was different. The smile I think I see is from a picture with her boyfriend; it's not the one I saw either.

Words help. They are not absolute; they change; the speaker matters. *Radiant* has a different meaning when uttered by the athletic director, a stern woman who rarely smiles herself, to describe Cecilia because, as she says it, her voice, usually commanding, cracks, the word itself contrasting her usually direct and simple speech. *Radiant* would not be the same if said by the principal, a slight man with reading glasses and a former English teacher, since he often uses three synonyms then references a literary classic in his descriptions (“School, like heaven when you get there, or Emily Dickenson’s definition of pain, has ‘an element of blank; it cannot recollect when it began or if there was a time when it was not.’”). And so, when he speaks of her smile, he does it using the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald claiming it was, like Gatsby’s, more than just beautiful or genuine; it saw you how you wanted to be seen.

But words are also limiting. In my poem, she shook, she didn't shiver; her knees buckled, they didn't give way, they didn't bend, they didn't collapse. The facts from that night are always the same. *There was a girl, a close friend. Then she died. I was there. I tried to*

save her. It didn't work. And yet, when I retell the story, in a different essay, in an explanation to someone who does not know, the words change. It's the same story. *I had a friend and watched her die.* But now she stumbles as she falls to the ground. She lies still and then convulses. I see her later in the hospital, peaceful, eyes now fully shut, a small tube in her throat and think she's still alive. I look at the nametag of the woman talking to me: chaplain. I run out and sit on a bench. The facts never change. *I failed when I tried to save Cecilia.* I bumped into two people as I forced myself through the automatic door. I curled up on the bench outside Georgetown Hospital, rocking back and forth, tears dripping down my face. My face became sticky, as the salt mixed with the hot, dense, July air.

The facts should speak for themselves, I think; I should just recite them, tell the story how it was. The facts try to be objective. *There was a girl and she died.* But they are inherently colored, skewed, distorted. In my arms, the arms of a seventeen-year-old girl, strong for her size but still only 5' 3", Cecilia's body was limp, heavy, unmanageable. I struggled even to rotate her, pulling on her shoulders three times; her head for a moment remained in the wrong position, hips twisted until finally, minutes later, she was on her back. Her legs were still tangled. But the paramedics slid her onto an orange board, counted to three, and raised her into the air in one fluid motion. To them, large men, she was a lighter patient. The description, the choice of words, that which is supposed make the story more palpable, undoes it. It fails; it cannot ever really be impartial, be detached, or even true. Unless, of course, the narrative remains untold. The process of telling is exactly the process preventing it from being real, from being faithful to the facts.

But sometimes it's not simply about differing vantage points. It's not only that the perspective matters, that it defines. Sometimes, even when telling a true story, even when telling

only what I saw, separating what actually occurred from what seemed to occur is difficult. The picture becomes jumbled. For twenty seconds I thought she was joking and walked away. There wasn't a clock in the gym. What seemed to happen or what I remember happening often appears more real, more faithful than do the actual events. And so, the story transforms from what I actually saw, to what, when recalling the event, I thought happened. It's not an absolute truth. It may not be the truth at all. It's the truth as it seems, right here, right now, when I try to describe it.

Yet, in telling this seeming truth, the story becomes more vivid. It refuses to become abstract, to generalize; the facts in different repetitions begin almost to contradict each other. The picture is blurred, malleable, but more alive, more real than it was before. Like the adjectives for Cecilia's smile, this clash, this confrontation, this refusal to adhere to a single description makes the nose run, the stomach clench, the front teeth scrape the bottom lip.

And so, the figure sitting on the bench outside Georgetown Hospital from one version becomes the girl sweaty still from the night of basketball, knees clutched towards her chest beneath the canopy of a weeping willow. It's the same figure, the terms are simply more descriptive. And in this new draft, it is night so the tree provides no shade, no shelter; it just hangs suspended above her so when she looks up to see the stars or fifteen feet away at Cecilia's boyfriend her line of sight is obstructed.

It does not matter that the real tree was not a weeping willow, knotted, twisted, snarled, but instead an oak. It was high enough above me that it hid the stars, but left me a clear view of the pacing boyfriend. But the hulking tree contains a strength, a power that was never there. At least, I didn't see it. The willow, though, hung over me, the sagging tree above the bench on a small, circular patch of dead grass. And so, it's what I saw, what I remember seeing, when I

lifted my chin so it no longer tucked inside the damp collar of my t-shirt. It's what I saw so I didn't, for a moment, have to look at her boyfriend of four years and think that he didn't get to say goodbye.

Even when there is nothing with which to collide, no competing story, no set of facts claiming to be truer, the words of seeming truth remain important. The day after Cecilia died, I wrote an email to a friend describing what happened. He, like me, was an Emergency Medical Technician. The words in the email are direct, short, medical. She did not *die*, only went into cardiac arrest and was pronounced at the hospital. It seems like a form letter: there's no emotion, there's only a passing reference to fact that she was my friend. And yet, when I read this email, I'm again sitting at the computer at work, ten hours after she died, my eyes bloodshot and tearing, punching letters then deleting them until finally forty minutes later, the three sentence email ends with, "I'm planning to be at the station on Sunday, but if the funeral is then, I will have to come late." The pain must have been apparent in the callousness of my language because he responded fifteen minutes later, when he usually took two days. He gave me his cell phone number and spent two paragraphs telling me that I could call any time.

The words changed, yet again, for the essay I mailed to colleges. The story I tell is one of order and chaos, control and submission; it's about things bigger than just this one incident. On my computer, the final essay sits above eight pages of different drafts, each containing details missing from the final version. I had only eight hundred words to convince the admissions officers; I could not waste them so I didn't describe the day we met at basketball, she, the best player on the team chose to work with me, the middle-schooler who would later be called the worst shooter our coach had ever seen; me, the one who spoke only when spoken to and even then only in a hushed voice. The essay could not be solely about her death because many feel

sad when someone close dies. It could not be sentimental either. The details disappeared—I don't mention how the paramedics had to grab my shoulders and lift me away from Cecilia or how I screamed at them because they asked if she drank or took drugs. Her smile got deleted. That night, in my essay, she didn't die; it was merely a night of chaos. After, I claim, my life transforms but not because I'm trying to deal with loss. In my essay, my life transforms solely because I want to impose order upon it because that night, structure, rules, systems gave Cecilia the best chance of surviving. Her death is reduced, crammed, warped, until it conforms to the requirements of a college essay. And she then is reduced to one sentence. It is a run-on sentence.

But, perhaps, that sentence, the comma splices, the words appearing furiously, rushing the reader because there is no pause for a period, no breath for the semi-colon, tells a different story: the limit, the failure, even, of the description. The narrative, the sequence of events told by the words, therefore, is not what the words illustrate. They tell of how she perished, but they also tell of my choices, letting her sink to the floor or crash down upon it, heart stopping or letting her die.