

Jenny Bouilly

Forecast Essay

Everyone is dying. I must remember this always, but especially whenever I am on the phone with my mother and she is telling me that her mother has died. I must begin to treat everyone I meet and visit with as if they are, very soon, going to die. This will, I think, help me to be less detached, more attentive, less reserved. I too am dying. I need to begin believing this, especially whenever I have a goal of spending the day in my study concentrating on nothing else but my writing and do not spend the day in my study writing. I need to begin treating my thoughts, observations, and inclinations that find themselves manifested as rhythms that then converse through language, as if they too are dying and will not be remembered again, will never again present themselves with the opportunity to be written down. To be a better writer and better reader, I need to believe in my own death and in the death of others.

Last week, returning my library books, a gentleman passes quickly in front of me, pauses to say, "Excuse me, Miss," before moving on. Today, in the deli, the worker asks, "Can I help you, Miss?" It occurs to me that I am a *Miss*, and I wonder when I will no longer be a *Miss* and will begin to be a *Ma'am*. I am not even quite sure what *Ma'am* is; I think it must be an abbreviated version of *Madam*. In French, instead of *Miss*, there is *Mademoiselle*, which means little or young *Madame*; therefore, I am a little madam. I will grow into madamhood, just as I grew into a *Miss*. A *Miss* is *someone who is addressed*, and a girl child is never addressed. (I knew for certain when I ceased to be a girl child, because I was suddenly being addressed.) A *Madam*, on

the other hand, *addresses*. I see them in the deli, and they are not afraid to say what they want before they are addressed. One Ma'am in the drug store today even went so far as to address no one in particular, saying loudly, "Hello! We need a cashier here!" while I, a little madam ahead of her in line, waited patiently to pay for my goods. Perhaps Madams know that time is, for them, beginning to become compressed, or perhaps time has already gone from them. Perhaps they believe, as Misses do not, that they are dying. I will grow from *one who is addressed* into *one who addresses*. Perhaps I should not wait any longer to be addressed; in writing, I should always be the impatient and demanding Madam, however prematurely I think this might be, and address, even if the addressee is no one in particular.

I am wondering where the great libraries are, those libraries that, were they to catch fire, scholars and bibliophiles would be gravely sad, depressed over not so much the loss of the infinite number of pages or the vast amounts of knowledge and history, but rather the books themselves, the binding and stitching and engraving. It is the brittle nature of things, I think, that makes us love them and wish to preserve them forever. Only when your grandmother is old do you begin to wish that she would live forever. Only when a keepsake begins to show signs of decay or when a beloved sweater begins to show signs of wear do we want to treat these items more tenderly or perhaps handle them less than we should like. I am wondering where, in the future, the great libraries will be, as everything is moving towards a state of obliteration. All of our information will be erased due to our need to preserve it in the most compressed form achievable, a form that seems to work like Rolle's theorem—our information is being compressed and compressed more and more, but the results are never enough. In my short life, I have seen computers shrink into ultra thin laptops, televisions spread into flat-panel screens,

records spin into compact discs, DVDS take the place of VHS, and floppy disks replaced by tiny memory chips in the bodies of slim computers. Even people wish to get thinner and thinner. We will, it seems, only achieve the results we want when everything has become so compressed that it exists no longer. I know that someday our technology will have made possible a world that is no longer 3-D; everything will be flat and thin and unperceivable. To live in such a world, humans too will have to transform into beams of light measuring in micro-millimeters. Writers, it seems to me, have been ahead of this technology since the beginning of information storage, as it is they who have always, in efforts to live forever, transferred the whole of their beings onto paper, attempting to take the soul—that very spacious thing—and install it into the finite space of a book. In writing, as in preservation, the continuous question of how to preserve the soul, how to live forever.

The inhabitants of the earth can do nothing to alter the immediate weather, although they can forecast what the weather might be like. In situations where weather poses an immanent threat to life and shelter, residents, the news stations tell us, “brace themselves.” For a long time, I have known what systems of weather were heading towards me: an essay on the anatomy of lotus flowers; one concerning the ecology of ponds; treatises on capitalism, slavery, and language; the story of my mother being sold into slavery for bags of rice; the story of my father in cotton fields; a visual essay on celestial bodies; an essay on kelp seahorses. I want to blend the factual with feeling—not just the speed of wind, the amount of rainfall, the damage of floods, but the emotions of the woman who has just learned that, due to the weather, for which she did or did not “brace” herself, she has lost everything. To brace myself from the storm of the essay on lotus flowers, I imagine I will have to surround myself with dozens of botany illustrations, use

nothing but lotus-scented beauty products, visit botanical water gardens, try to remember the taste of ripe lotus seeds I ate over five summers ago. Perhaps, I should not, as residents facing a hurricane, brace myself, but rather unboard my windows and let the storm in. Perhaps, bracing is merely another way of saying, “waiting.” I should do better to face the storm unprepared and deal with whatever my aftermath—writing that is distraught, malformed, imperfect, ugly, unsuited, soiled, ruined, lost, and irrecoverable—after the storm passes, in those moments where I pretend to, but do not really revise anything. How writing then differs from violent weather: in storms you *have not* where once you *had*; in writing you *have* where once you *had not*.

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