

2020

Life Writing Prize

NICKY WATKINSON



LIFE WRITING PRIZE LONGLIST 2020

This is a story about friendship

Nicky Watkinson

This is a story about friendship

Nicky Watkinson

This is a story about friendship.

Which is to say, this is a story about how we destroy one another.

Clarification: this is not so much a story as an *attempt* to tell a story.

Before you can tell a story, you must know the story.

This is an attempt to uncover the story, and then tell it.

Story (n.1)

Connected account or narration of some happening, c. 1200, originally *narrative of important events or celebrated persons of the past*, from Old French *estorie*, *estoire story, chronicle, history*, from Late Latin *storia*, shortened from Latin *historia history, account, tale, story* (see *history*).

History (n.)

Late 14c., *relation of incidents* (true or false), from Old French *estoire*, *estorie story; chronicle, history* (12c., Modern French *histoire*), from Latin *historia narrative of past events, account, tale, story*, from Greek *historia a learning or knowing by inquiry; an account of one's inquiries, history, record, narrative*, from *historein inquire*, from *histōr wise man, judge*, from PIE **wid-tor-*, from root **weid-* *to see*.

Story, from *history*. Trace it back – see how *history*, too, is a *story*. An *account*, a *narrative*. Not *definitive*.

See how *history* is an *enquiry*. This book, too, is an *enquiry*: into *friendship*,

into the past, into form.

This book is an account of the enquiries I make of myself, trying to discover the story.

The story is pressing down on my insides, curled under my ribcage, trying to work its way even deeper. I try to feel its contours. I try to find something to grasp, to hold onto so I can pull it out. It wraps itself around bone and sinew, parts of me I didn't know existed.

I write to try and see it.

Sometimes I worry that there is nothing to see, only empty space, only a gap: between then and now, between you and I.

A story is a *connected account*. It should not have gaps.

Stories can be episodic; they can have gaps in order to heighten dramatic tension, or for other narrative effect. But the gaps must be fillable. I worry that our story's gaps are not fillable.

But then, history is full of gaps. The archive is full of gaps. Storytelling is an attempt to cross over those gaps. Only fiction has no gaps, and this is not fiction. This is a true story, a true history.

The story is full of gaps. I write not to fill the gaps, but to explore them – to feel their depth, their walls. I write to get a sense of the story's outline, to trace the contours of the gaps.

I tell a version of the story, an approximation, something which fits the mould – what if this is all there is? Only echo, never sound.

I am interested in echoes, especially as metaphor: the expression *to ring true* is to do with echoes, right, it's about something which makes the *right* echo when it is sounded, at least I think so. The sound is pure, uncorrupted, authentic. It makes me think of throwing something into a well – the something strikes the bottom, clear as a bell.

The story of Echo, of course, is a metaphor. Myths are metaphors – they are a way of talking *around* the subject. The story of Echo is simple: she was an Oread, a mountain nymph, who consorted with Zeus, and when Hera found out she cursed Echo to only be able to speak by repeating the last words spoken to her. The mingling of this myth with the myth of Narcissus, the beautiful boy who rejected the love of others and became consumed by self-desire, seems to be Ovid's own invention, but the stories go well together: Echo cannot communicate her love for Narcissus because she can only speak his words back to him; she wastes away, losing corporeal form and becoming only sound. Meanwhile, Narcissus falls in love with his own image and he, too, wastes away, becoming only image: the gold and white flower which bears his name.

(And in this way, two separate stories become one story – the story of Echo, the story of Narcissus, become the story of Echo and Narcissus. What was once a story with a beginning, middle, and end, is now another story with a different beginning, middle, and end. In this way, stories change, they absorb other stories, they never end. They carry the echoes of all the other stories with them through time.)

But when we tell the story, we are not talking about Echo and Narcissus, real people, we are not talking about real events that happened. We are talking in metaphors – we are talking about jealousy and vanity and love as destructive force and gender dynamics, probably, because this is Ovid, after all.

When I tell our story, I am less interested in talking about what literally happened than I am in talking about what it *means*. It happened years ago, it is over, in the sense that we no longer speak and our relationship, in the most fundamental sense, is over. And yet, it echoes. It reverberates. It remains inside me, in my nerves, in the way my fingers shake for no reason sometimes.

The reason is you.

It is the echo of a movement long since completed.

My story and your story have become part of the same story, and for as long as I carry the echoes of that story with me in my story, our story will not end.

I write to preserve the echo.

I write an account of these things that happened to me. I write to clarify, not to obscure, although I worry about my success in the matter.

I worry that instead of excavating the gaps I am writing over them, erasing what is underneath like overwriting a computer disc or a saved game.

I do not want to erase the story – I do not want to forget, although the only thing I want is to forget. I do not like forgetting things which have happened, although I wish none of this had happened.

I worry that writing will obscure what happened. I worry that it will not exorcise the story but ossify it – trap it inside my lungs for the rest of time, bound there by layers of words. I worry that writing over the story will make remembering harder, not easier. I try to treat writing as an act of memory, of memorialising.

Memoir (n.)

Early 15c., *written record*, from Anglo-French *memorie note, memorandum, something written to be kept in mind* (early 15c., Old French *memoire*), from Latin *memoria* (from PIE root **(s)mer-* (1) *to remember*). The more specific sense of *a notice or essay relating to something within the writer's own memory or knowledge* is from 17c. Meaning *person's written account of his or her life* is from 1670s. Related: *Memoirist*.

I write to try to unfasten the story's grip on my ribs. I write to remember. I write to set the record straight.

The record is nonexistent, at least in the public sphere. The record consists of a digital archive, of texts and WhatsApps and Facebook messages and photos, very few of which are actual printed, tangible things. And a few other material objects – cards, a cushion, a mix CD.

I write to bring the intangible things into being, to define what is, at the moment, undefined. I write to make legible what is at present without language.

Our story, my story, is beyond and outside language. Are all stories? Perhaps.

This is a story about friendship, which is to say, this is a story about grief and longing and betrayal and failure. It is not the story *of* a friendship.

This is a work of nonfiction. This is a work of theory. This is a work of autobiography. This is a work of cultural criticism. This is a work of memory. This is a work of therapy. This is a work of collage.

This, which you hold in your hands, or which you read from a screen, or hear spoken aloud, this is an attempt to theorise friendship, in general, and our

friendship, in particular. It is an experiment. It is a work in progress, a draft.

It is true, in the sense that everything I write here literally happened, or in the sense that it rings true. It is a work of history, in the most elemental sense of *historia*: it is a list of questions.

But first, here is a story.

We meet at university. We like the same music and books. We are the same age, give or take six months. We are both blonde; one of us feels insecure about her fringe, but the other of us also has a fringe, which is reassuring. We learn about *Paradise Lost* and *The Waste Land* and *Disgrace* together. (All of this is true.) One of us dyes their hair blue one day, then cuts it short. The other one cuts hers shortly after (she will dye it, eventually, too).

Time passes. We make other friends. We are a crew. We have a group chat and favourite coffee shops and a spot in the common room. We – the two of us, the original we – become even closer. We plan our future tattoos together. We move in together. We read each other's essays and hold hands in public and watch movies in bed together.

(One of us has a boyfriend, by the way. This is not that kind of love story.) But, throughout this, hairline fractures. Beneath and behind the façade, we are struggling. Things begin to fall down the cracks, are lost, cannot be recovered. We make plans despite this, road trips and Taylor Swift concerts and more tattoos, perhaps in the hope that the more stuff we add to the relationship, the more we can lose and still keep each other. We have big fights and small tearful conversations, but the cracks continue to appear faster than we can fix them.

Roughly four years after we met, the fracture between us is now over two

hundred miles wide. We are no longer in conversation – we are talking, but not listening, to one another. We decide, in the end, that we are no longer a *we* at all.

I stop talking to you.

I block you / you block me.

I avoid you.

I go to the Taylor Swift concert.

I move on with my life.

I stop talking to you.

You block me / I block you.

You ignore me.

I go to the Taylor Swift concert.

I move on with my life.

The end.

End (n.)

Old English *ende* *end, conclusion, boundary, district, species, class*, from Proto-Germanic *andiaz (source also of Old Frisian *enda*, Old Dutch *ende*, Dutch *einde*, Old Norse *endir end*; Old High German *enti top, forehead, end*, German *Ende*, Gothic *andeis end*), originally *the opposite side*, from PIE *antjo *end, boundary*, from root *ant- *front, forehead*, with derivatives meaning: *in front of, before*.

End (v.)

Old English *endian* *to end, finish, abolish, destroy; come to an end, die*, from the source of end (n.). Related: Ended; ending.

What does it mean for a story to end?

Does this story end when their friendship ends? (When is that?)

When they stop talking? (When is that?)

When they agree to no longer be *best friends*? When the last message is sent, when there are no more replies? When will that be?

(For as long as both of them are alive, the story does not end. They both carry its echoes.)

Does it end before then, when the friendship – unbeknownst to either of them – passed into irrecoverability? (When was that?)

We have not spoken for over a year, but it does not feel like the story has ended.

I write to try to make it end, to give it a conclusion. To capture the echo and fix it in place, like a pinned butterfly, like a taxidermy animal, like something tender and weak which has been captured and stunted because the only way to preserve the ephemeral is to destroy what is ephemeral about it.

Before I start writing, I read. I read fiction and memoir and poetry, I read about scammers and abusers and friends who steal from one another and I read about self-harm and disordered eating and suicide and substance abuse, and I read about queer family-making and recovery and friends who save your life.

In these books, I find echoes of our story, but I cannot find our story.

When you google “famous books about friends”, what comes up are not books about the difficulties of friendship, its intricacies and obstacles. What comes up are: *my 8 favourite books about female friendship*, and *9 novels that celebrate the joy of friendship*, and *12 books you should read with your best friend*.

Although there are many books which feature friends and friendship, there are fewer books about friendship in the way I want to read about it. I want to read about friendships which are damaging and devastating, friendships which haunt you forever – not friends who are psychopaths or undercover spies or sleeping with your spouse, but friends who are trying

their best to love you, and failing; friends whom you fail to love.

5 books about friendship I wish someone would write:

1. Miss Codependent: A Survival Guide To Queer Platonic Relationships
2. Texts from My Suicidal Friend (an illustrated coffee table book)
3. The 7 Habits of Highly Manipulative People
4. Jealousy: A Mindfulness Colouring Book
5. The Power of Boundaries (with activity sheets)

I have read a lot about friendship, relationships, personality disorders, attachment styles, but nothing has been right – they are all either too critical or too generous, too definitive or too vague. Much like us, I suppose – both critical and generous, kind and cruel at once. Never one or other, always both, always escaping definition.

What I want is to understand how and why we do bad things to one another. I want someone to tell me how to deal with a friend in need without vilifying them as inherently evil (*a wolf in sheep's clothing*) or elevating them to martyrdom, like their pain is more important or real than they pain they cause (*emotionally sensitive people*). I want someone to tell me which messages I need to answer and which I can ignore without being a bad person. I want someone to tell me what to say *after* “I’m listening”. I want someone to tell me what to do. I want someone to tell me what I should have done, what we should have done.

But no one can. So I stop asking questions of other people, and I turn inwards, ask questions of myself.

I ask myself a lot of questions, in order to discover the story. Before I can begin to tell a story about our friendship, I must first answer the questions: what is friendship? what could it be? what was our friendship? what could it have been?

Only once these are dealt with can we address the main question, which is: **how to tell the story?**

Language is full of gaps.

I know it's silly, but I suspect that there is a right way to tell the story. That if I speak the right words in the right order, like an incantation, like a rite, then the story will be free and so will I.

But language is slippery, it is full of gaps. How, then, to tell the story?

Genre (n.)

1770, *particular style of art*, a French word in English (nativized from c. 1840), from French genre *kind, sort, style* (see gender (n.)). Used especially in French for *independent style*. In painting, as an adjective, *depicting scenes of ordinary life* (a domestic interior or village scene, as compared to landscape, historical, etc.) from 1849.

I write the same story over and over in different ways. I read the same story over and over, except it's never the same story, except all stories are the same story.

I wonder what your story is. I wonder whether I will ever know your story. I wonder whether you will ever know mine – will you read this?

I grapple with form, with the way this story resists legibility. It does not want to be read, it does not want to be written. It makes me sick. It makes me cry in the middle of the night on the broken paving stones outside my home.

It makes me want to run away from myself, from the ways in which I am cowardly and selfish and bad. It chases me, it eats me up from the inside

out. It hovers in the corners of my vision.

After years of running, of trying to look away, I finally stop and look it in the eyes.

I try starting the story in so many places.

From the beginning, from the middle, from the end. From two thirds of the way through.

I write in so many places, on the train and on the bus and on the tube and at work and in bed and while walking down the street, sometimes.

I grapple with the shape of it, with not *knowing* how the story looks except in the vaguest terms – I don't know where it starts or ends, I don't know what's important, all I know is a rough mass which changes when you get close to it. I know how it *feels*, lodged in my chest, but I do not know how to convey that feeling to anyone other than you, probably, who probably feel it too and don't need me to explain it.

I experiment with fragmentation, with stream of consciousness, with nontraditional structure. I go back to my roots, our roots, back to the very first year we knew each other when we learned about narrative together. I think about the heroic, the epic, the comic, the burlesque, about Milton's Grand Style, about tropes and motifs.

I try starting in *medias res*, like an epic. I try introducing a messenger from the heavens a third of the way through, our very own Raphael or Hermes, come to warn us. I try sending us on a visit to the underworld, although to be honest, we went to hell and back several times, didn't we.

Relationships are not art. They are not metaphors. There is no narrative arc. And yet.

Coincidences occur – more than occur, they proliferate. At one point, we are both in love (or claim to be) with the same man. He claims he cannot love anyone; two years ago, a woman broke his heart for good. She has the same name as you.

Incapable of loving one another, we both try to love this man, as though he is a plot device, a stand-in, a metaphor for our misdirected love for one another. We both fail. We all stop talking to each other, sooner or later.

If this story were a story, instead of true, it would be considered too heavy-handed. As it is, it is still too heavy-handed. Looking back, I struggle to believe any of it. It seems ridiculous, too perfectly terrible to be true. That is the only way I know it is true.

The story is just too big to tell, it is infinite, it is not over and never will be. This attempt to tell an impossible and unknowable story, is a wild goose chase – a cock and bull story. I cannot control it, any more than I could control our relationship, which was the whole problem, wasn't it.

The problem with our story is that it is both general and specific, universal and personal. I do not know how to capture this dual quality without leaning too far towards one side. It is too vague for me to pin down, but also too precise, a contradiction in terms. Again, maybe this is true of all stories.

But I do think, you know, that there is something uniquely modern about our story. Maybe other people who live like us have gone through something similar, maybe this is more general than I thought, but I am struck by the precision with which I *could* tell the story, if I chose to. When

a relationship is primarily conducted, or at least mediated, via the digital, the question of time becomes more exact, more exacting.

Every conversation that we had via Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, text, and WhatsApp is timestamped, to the minute. The length of every phone call is recorded, to the second. Every in-person conversation we had that I told someone *else* about via Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, text, or WhatsApp is also recorded, in a way, and every conversation *you* told someone else about is, too, assuming you did tell people about our conversations, which I know you did.

Created: 2 Nov 2018 Updated: 13 Jan 2020

Untitled

one night as i was writing on the train i realised that the programme i was using had stored my location and was displaying it at the top of the screen, along with the other metadata about that note. my longitude and latitude, precise location on the earth, was stored

This kind of minute tracking could not have been possible, back in the day. Although I don't think any of our emotions are new, I would argue that we experience them differently now – the past is repeatedly brought into the present, the present is precisely recorded, ready to be excavated at a moment's notice. I remember when people first started posting memories on Facebook, which you could only do by using a second party app; now the practice is so ubiquitous that it's built into not only Facebook, but also Snapchat and even Google Photos – the latter is not even a sharing platform (provided Google+ never takes off): it is a personal archive, for the user only, but the assumption that we want to revisit our past leads developers to code this into updates alongside the ability to record location data and recognise faces. The Snapchat [and Facebook] archive[s is / are both] called simply *Memories*; the idea that one can literally dig out

memories, whole, and re-experience them is pervasive throughout social media, which is of course a collection of many archives on the internet, that ultimate archive.

“Proper” historians, and other pedants, may scoff at the idea that Snapchat or Google Photos is an “archive”, but what else do you call a themed collection of data? Instagram stories – by design, ephemeral updates which self-delete after 24 hours – do not delete after all, but are perpetually accessible to the poster through the Story Archive, from which you can not only download your stories, but re-post them to a Highlight tab on your profile, where any visitor can watch them with no time limit. Although hashtags like #latergram have somewhat died out, it is still generally accepted practice to identify anachronistic posts as “throwbacks” or similar. When posting a picture taken on a previous date to your story, Instagram will recognise the temporal dissonance and superimpose a datestamp. I’m not a historian of social media, so I leave this line of enquiry to the experts, but I do wonder why we assume *ipso facto* that posts are from the front lines, as it were, of an experience unless we are told otherwise.

Anyway, the point from which I have wandered is this: our lives are now so precisely mapped out, in multiple dimensions (spatially; temporally; photos and videos store visual and aural information, too), that any loss or major upheaval will be felt in the digital sphere as deeply as in that of “reality”. More, perhaps – I have friends with whom I interact more online than I do in real life, due to unfortunate realities of geography and circumstance. The loss of a friend online – the absence of their icon in the sidebar or of their username on a timeline – is as noticeable and real as their removal from your daily life.

What is by far worse, though, is when someone is lost to you emotionally, in that your relationship is over, but not digitally, not yet. When you stop

meeting someone in real life, it is that simple, you stop meeting them. When a relationship with any level of digital interaction ends, you must go through a whole removal process which is far more pervasive than boxing up their stuff.

When we stopped talking, I started by archiving our WhatsApp conversation. (I tried to un-archive it for this book, but I can't find it, so I must have deleted it in a fit of pique. It is odd that I don't remember that. I also do not really believe that it's gone forever; I remain convinced that it persists, in the ether, some combination of 0s and 1s that could be located and revived one day if I tried hard enough.) I already had you muted on both Twitter accounts, so nothing to be done there. I rarely used Facebook or Snapchat at this time, and we didn't tend to DM on Instagram.

What was more insidious by far were the other traces of your presence, the ones that hid for weeks, months, years after. One day, I sat down at my mother's dining table and googled "remove autocomplete", or something to that effect, and spent several hours systematically scrubbing my online world of your presence: removing your parents' address from my Amazon account, removing your card details from Google Pay, removing your details so that your name – alphabetically before mine – would not supersede mine on my own computer.

There are many other reminders of you – music we both listened to, playlists you made for me or I made for you, clothes of mine you used to borrow. The music is especially hard: the music I want to listen to is music we shared, for the most part. The day we stop talking for good, I spend my 30-minute lunch break walking around York listening to "No Children" by The Mountain Goats, a band you introduced me to. I have long associated this song with our friendship – *I hope the fences we mended / Fall down beneath their own weight*, which indeed they did – and I want to reinforce this, I want this moment to be soundtracked by this song, I want

to preserve this feeling so that whenever I listen to these lyrics I think of you and vice versa. *I hope when you think of me years down the line, you can't find one good thing to say*, I think, and I mean it.

The Mountain Goats are a band that I have no choice but to associate with you, so I make a point of establishing my own relationship with them once we have stopped talking. I force myself to look up lyrics and find my own meanings in them beyond you. The last night I was in London, we went to a Mountain Goats gig, as I am sure you remember. The rest of you went and fought your way to the front but I couldn't stand to be near you so I sat on the floor at the back and played games on my phone until one of our friends arrived with her brother and the three of us bopped along happily on the fringes. I wasn't very familiar with *Goths* because I just hadn't got round to listening to much new music in the last couple of months, but one song in the setlist stood out to me, and the next day I got a Virgin Trains East Coast train from Kings Cross to Leeds and I listened to it on repeat for the whole two-and-a-bit-hour journey, *Andrew Eldritch / Is moving back to Leeds*.

After five or six months in Yorkshire, we stop talking. I delete (or "archive") all of my Instagram posts and start again. The first picture is of the Leeds market, and the caption is a lyric from *Andrew Eldritch Is Moving Back To Leeds*, about goodbyes. I start rebuilding my online life without you: I don't want to merely delete pictures of you, that's not enough. I want to consign our relationship to the past, to the archive; to remove evidence of the me that was your friend, too. Maybe this seems harsh – but then, you're the one who blocked me on Facebook and lied to everyone about it. I think it's fair to assume we both needed the two hundred odd miles I put between us.

BIOGRAPHY

NICKY WATKINSON is a cultural critic who writes and speaks about art in all its forms. A freelance writer for five years, she's also a speaker and workshop leader. She has a BA in English and an MA in contemporary literature and culture, both from UCL: her academic research focuses on theories of identity, grief, the fragment, and narrative form. She is particularly interested in inter-disciplinarity and tackling questions of form in her work. She writes fiction, creative nonfiction, and drama.