

When you think of second person, perhaps you can call to mind examples of its most common use—the temporary switch from first to second in those moments when the writer directly addresses the reader such as in the final pages of Dave Eggers’s *Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. Or more casually, the way Bill Bryson slides into second person for brief spells in *A Walk in the Woods*. Perhaps, just as easily, you can recall a piece that spoke to you in the second person for too long, or the antecedent wasn’t clear. Second person is, after all, a slippery construction, and if used poorly, comes across as gimmicky. “Second person can sometimes be like the drunk at the party,” as one of my mentors, former Poet Laureate of Maine and author of the recently released novel, *Teach Us That Peace*, Baron Wormser, has said. “When he starts yelling he gets everyone’s attention, but after a while people just ignore him.”

However, second person can have multiple beneficial effects for the writer and reader. Allow me to suggest a certain taxonomy (albeit an incomplete one) in the work of memoirists and essayists whose work I keep thinking about. As with all point of view decisions, the writer needs to know why they have chosen second person, and the close reader can discern this intention as well. In the case of direct and self-address, the “you’s” antecedent must be precise. A vague other doesn’t work. We need to see and feel who and why the author speaks to that

person. Lastly, the “you’s” propensity to conflate (especially when the pronoun is implied and not present in a particular sentence) reels in the audience. The antecedent can switch, and the proficient writer of personal narrative can push this conflation to startle the reader into attention. Let’s begin with the most frequently employed construction.

The second-person point of view allows one to stand at a remove from painful events, in the same way that a diary or notebook creates a sanctuary for one’s most private thoughts.

**Changeable (I-you): This switch from first person to second person is usually a direct address to the reader.**

The ease with which a first-person narrator can transition temporarily into second in the “dear reader I’m talking to you” kind of way is so subtle, usually, we hardly

notice. Toward the beginning of Bryson’s memoir about hiking the Appalachian Trail, he breaks from first to second while delivering a comparison: “You know what it’s like when you’re at the zoo or an amusement park with a small child who won’t walk another step? You hoist him lightly onto your shoulders... But then it starts to get uncomfortable... and you announce to little Jimmy that you’re going to have to put him down for a while. Of course, Jimmy bawls... But, hey, it hurts. Hurts a lot. Believe me, I understand. Ok, now imagine *two* little Jimmies in a pack...”<sup>1</sup> After a few paragraphs, the point of view returns to first-person. The direct-address draws us in a bit more, unobtrusively, without disrupting the narrative flow of Bryson’s prose.

Similarly, in the opening paragraph of “The Waiting Room,” Joan Connor writes, “A man gave me a story to write, but, first, you have to wait. I am very impatient. But I am expert at waiting. I wait in order not to deal with impatience. Plots are about withholding, making impatient people wait. If you are no longer waiting, you do not love a plot.”<sup>2</sup> By addressing the reader directly, Connor challenges her audience to stay with her narrative so she can fulfill her promise. Since this is a personal essay, as opposed to a short work of fiction, we can presuppose that the tension propelling the prose forward will involve the narrator’s reflections on a universal experience. “There is a certain unity to human experience,” Phillip Lopate writes in the



James Chesbro

introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*. "As Michel de Montaigne, the great innovator and patron saint of personal essayists, put it, 'Every man has within himself the entire human condition.' This meant that when he was telling about himself, he was talking, to some degree, about all of us"<sup>3</sup> In Connor's essay, the narrator's invitation to the reader to go on a reflective journey becomes more explicit through direct address.

Series editor for *The Best American Essays*, Robert Atwan, posits another seminal element of the essay, "I asked if, in the absence of any critical or biographical context, one could decide whether a piece of prose should be considered an essay or short story. Is there anything inside the text to indicate its genre? I'd like to suggest one characteristic of first-person narratives that indicates we are reading an essay as opposed to fiction. The essay usually contains some distinct statement of its literary intention or its occasion."<sup>4</sup> Ironically enough, within what we might consider Connor's literary intention, in "The Waiting Room," we can also read her reasoning for employing second-person point of view:

There is nothing funny about love thwarted. Nothing. You write in the second person to abstract yourself from the pain of waiting, waiting for love to happen. Waiting

for a phone to ring. Your name inked in his hand on a creamy envelope in your mailbox. Waiting for a ring for that empty finger. But second person does not abstract you from pain. It's a convention, a literary device. There is always a second person.<sup>5</sup>

While this point of view may seem to draw the reader closer to the narrator, these lines by Connor seem to suggest that second person is also a way for the author to distance herself from painful subject matter. "The second person offers detachment, intimacy, or some combination," writes Kim Dana Kupperman in her introduction to *You: An Anthology of Essays Devoted to the Second Person*. "Distance is requisite for confessional and trauma narratives, which dominate memoir and shorter autobiographical nonfiction. The second-person point of view allows one to stand at a remove from painful events, in the same way that a diary or notebook creates a sanctuary for one's most private thoughts."<sup>6</sup>

Consider how much more intimate the voice of Joan Didion's "In the Islands" is made through direct-address. It has that "I have something to tell you" quality about it that creates intrigue. "1969: I had better tell you where I am, and why. I am sitting in a high-ceilinged room in the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu watching the long translucent curtains billow in the trade wind and trying to put my life back together... We are here on the island in the middle of the Pacific in lieu of filing for divorce."<sup>7</sup> Consider too, the immediate intimacy the reader might feel toward the narrator. This voice declares to us the isolation she feels which is further amplified through the setting. This also leads Didion to declare and describe her persona: "I tell you this not as aimless revelation but because I want you to know, as you read me, precisely who I am and where I am and what is on

If we are after candor in creative nonfiction, then what's wrong with questioning the self and the decision for point of view?

my mind. I want you to understand exactly what you are getting: you are getting a woman who for some time now has felt radically separated from most of the ideas that seem to interest other people."<sup>8</sup>

Skilled essayists are hyper aware of their reader. Well crafted expositions express or infer that an insight into the human experience is coming. To my mind, Connor and Didion exemplify how an author can exploit the intimacy of the genre by implicating the reader. When readers see the "you" on the page our mind jumps to various schemas to find its antecedent, and the reader shouldn't have to work too hard to answer that question.

Like Didion's essay, Joe Wenderoth's "Where God is Glad," switches point of view. However, in Wenderoth's reflection about a strip club, named Tony's, the majority of the piece is in first person, until he moves into a meditation on what he calls "the I-you chasm."<sup>9</sup> He states, "I think of it [Tony's] as akin to life itself. Or rather, it is akin to what we, from our decidedly limited perspective, call life itself."<sup>10</sup> In what seems to me another way of thinking about the "changeable I-you,"



Wenderoth writes, “The dance, relieved of the I-you chasm, becomes the dance of this more mature kind of breathlessness. Such a dance is yours as much as it is the dancer’s; she dances not *for* you—she dances *of* you, or your potential, your grotesque and beautiful energy.”<sup>11</sup> The “I-you chasm” becomes one of Wenderoth’s primary points and thus the switch in point of view not only seems appropriate, but entirely effective. He even declares that our “perspective” is limited, and perhaps the direct address is the essayist’s attempt to help the audience perceive reality, or what Wenderoth writes as “life itself” within the “chasm” between our self and other people.

Wenderoth’s essay and the “you” construction seduced me into a thought I have never had before: what do I have in common with a stripper and the way she dances? Wenderoth

exploits Lopate’s “supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience,” and narrows the divide between the “I-you chasm” of writer and reader through second person. The italicized prepositions “*for*” and “*of*” emphasize the intended effect of the direct address. Wenderoth’s insight becomes animated in the dancers. Our “potential” and “grotesque and beautiful energy” become the movements of the dancers. After their dance, they walk off the stage and among the patrons to collect tips:

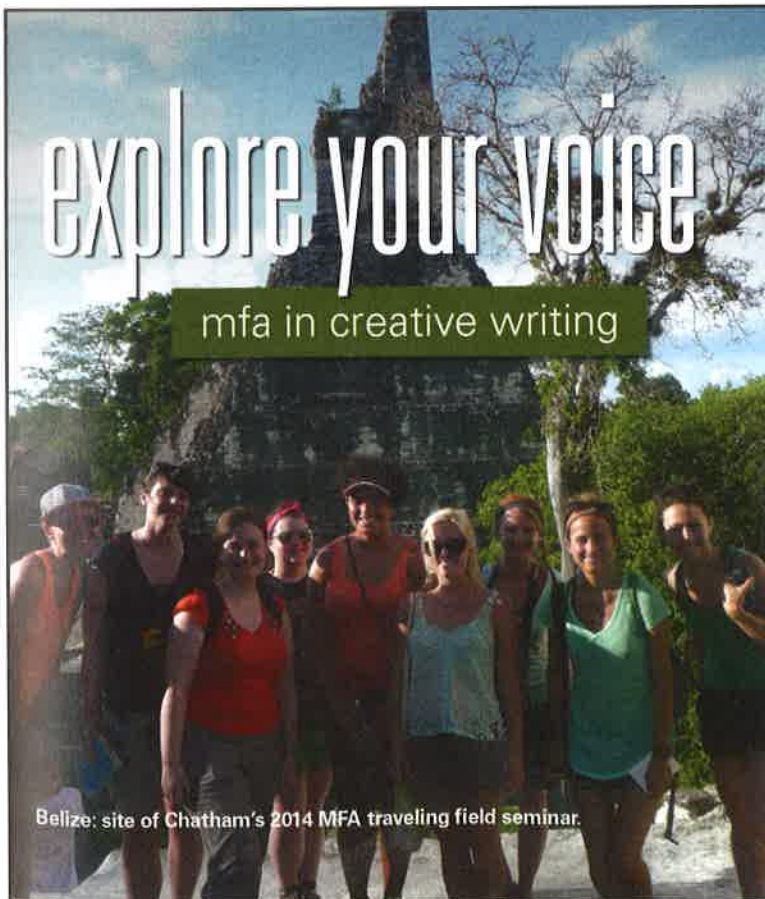
Wanting to make conversation, my friend says: ‘Hey, what’s up with the patch on your arm—quitting smoking?’ ‘Oh, no,’ she says, ‘it’s painkiller.’ ‘Oh, man,’ what do you need that for?’ ‘Bone cancer,’ she says, and moves along to the next guy down the bar. Just when you think the pathos cannot be amped up, just when you think you

have truly met the bottom of the barrel, there comes a deeper blow, a deeper affirmation of mortality. That is Tony’s.<sup>12</sup>

The encounter between the dancer and the narrator’s friend becomes our encounter. The dialogue and actions of moving “to the next guy down the bar” gives the abstract conception of “mortality” a life form and a voice.

**Didactic: While most literature attempts to illuminate an aspect of what it means to be human and in some cases teach a lesson or a moral, this construction is more explicit in its objective to instruct and pass on knowledge.**

In Marsha McGregor’s 565-word essay, “If You Should Want Flowers for Your Table (Advice to a Daughter),” she moves seamlessly through descriptions of flowers and how to



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care for them. We learn immediately, through the title, the second person construction serves as a direct address to the narrator's daughter. She opens with, "First, you must gather, gather. A small garden patch to call your own is lovely, but even a sad, weed-choked spot near the highway will yield plenty. Look carefully."<sup>13</sup> There is an urgency in the short phrases, an air of authority and experience in the two-word declaration, "Look carefully."

This mother demonstrates a proficiency to make her relationship to her daughter feel physically present considering we are given no descriptions of the daughter. She is not placed in any of McGregor's scenes. But, rather astonishingly, the essayist's instructions are so detailed and clear that we must create the figure of a female who is carrying out a mother's directions: "In a pinch you can march a line of old bottles down your table and place a single flower in each—tulips if you can afford them, Queen Anne's Lace if you can't. Or dress a jelly jar in a bandanna, and plop in a fistful of dog daisies you have plucked from a ditch. Float flower heads in garage sale fishbowls."<sup>14</sup> Perhaps it's not even a body that we see in our mind's eye, but two hands holding a "jelly jar" or fingers dropping "flower heads" into "fishbowls."

The daughter is kind of a phantom. Often in an apostrophe, or in an

address to another living person who is not present in the prose, a writer risks crafting an unconvincing piece that dwells in the indefinite and intangible. Readers need to be grounded in a place and the insights that a writer hopes to convey must be attached to the concrete movements in the setting where the drama takes place. In this piece, however, the absence of the daughter's body creates more space for the mother's voice to linger among the imagery of the flowers.

McGregor captivates from the start, but if the daughter is un-named, and her body is so absent and undefined, then how is McGregor able to craft such a fine piece? The voice is part of it, because the mother is so eager to give away what she believes are truths. However, the larger point is the actions of the "you" in relationship to caring for flowers. For instance, when cutting lilacs, she instructs, "If you cannot resist them, peel the lower two inches of bark from their stems, then snip a vertical X in the exposed flesh; they will behave beautifully for a day."<sup>15</sup>

This mother is advising her daughter on how to care for flowers, but I think we can see the metaphors on conduct, morality, and how to live. "A small garden patch to call your own is lovely, but even a sad, weed-choked spot near the highway will yield plenty"<sup>16</sup> are not just places

to find flowers, or even beauty, but a larger cultivation of life, a dwelling place where owning and caring for a residence can become a home.

McGregor also adds the dimension of time. She writes, "Last week I veered off the road near that custard stand you loved, parked the car on the shoulder and waded into a riotous patch of wild sweet peas, all tangled tendrils and wiry stems, reminding me of the way you looked as a child when you slept."<sup>17</sup> The mother remembers her daughter's more innocent days, and now, she returns to the "wild" beauty and employs the memory in the form of advice, "If you pursue the wild things, love, look out for bad drivers and poison ivy. Be careful."<sup>18</sup> Perhaps what makes McGregor's extended metaphor work is that the act of caring for the flowers supplants the physical presence of the daughter. The way the mother enacts her care and affection for the flowers *is* attending to her daughter.

**Self-Implicating: This self-address is first person disguised as second.**

In Paul Lisicky's essay, "The Poodles of My Childhood," the "you" addresses himself. In fact, the entire piece revolves around the narrator encountering himself. The drama of this essay is confronting a painful memory, confronting himself, and the other characters engaged in the episode of the pooping poodle. The construction creates tension especially since the narrator's boyhood actions attempt to avoid all confrontation.

"The Hussman" girl's poodle defecates on the Lisicky's lawn. But the boy protagonist does not want to address the girl because he feels bad that her sister had recently died. He avoids "The Hussman girl" who seems to find pleasure in leaving poop, "Fresh and glistening, nestled in its bed of grass."<sup>19</sup> The father



questions the narrator's courage in standing up to the girl. So the implicit literary intention here of seeking an understanding of what happened to the narrator makes for a compelling construction.

Earlier, I asked if the close reader cannot identify a reasonable supposition for why the essayist chose to write in second person, then perhaps that might be grounds for deeming the device a ploy. And maybe, I could take the question one step further and suggest that the relevance of the construction can be tied into its ability to enhance the literary intention. The self-address can indeed press the writer's thoughts more immediately on the page because they have a context for the voice. The question of *who is speaking and why* can be more apparent. For example, in McGregor's essay, we learn the answers to these questions

in the title. What makes a self-address most effective is when it addresses a specific part of a person. It could address a specific moment, event, or age. So the self-address seems explicitly in play as an attractive device like Connor's impatience with waiting for love and Wenderoth's revelations of the "I-you chasm" that exists at "Tony's."

To get back to Lisicky's self-address; we can learn more about his implementation of second person and its multiple effects for writer and reader, especially toward the end of the essay. In the resolution, Lisicky writes, "What's the matter?" your father said. 'Are you a fraidy-boy?' *Annmmnh*, you shrieked, with a sound like a crow. And what of the *you* here? Did you actually believe the second-person would make you stronger, would help you save them? Think again."<sup>20</sup> By including this

dialogue about the father's accusatory question, the patriarch's implication of the colloquial identity of being a wuss, of lacking the machismo and the moxie to stand up for the land he lives on and confront a girl his age is successful in stinging the heart of the compassionate reader.

Lisicky wonders aloud if his essay has succeeded. Perhaps the father, the girl, and the narrator leave this episode hurting, and the essay's quest to "make [himself] you stronger" didn't "save them"<sup>21</sup> from being relieved of feeling pain and the narrator of being shamed. Maybe that's what makes the resolution so striking. In the device of the self-address, Lisicky engages the reader even more directly by questioning his own choice of second person, "And what of the *you* here? Did you actually believe..."<sup>22</sup> If essays are attempts, then what's wrong with

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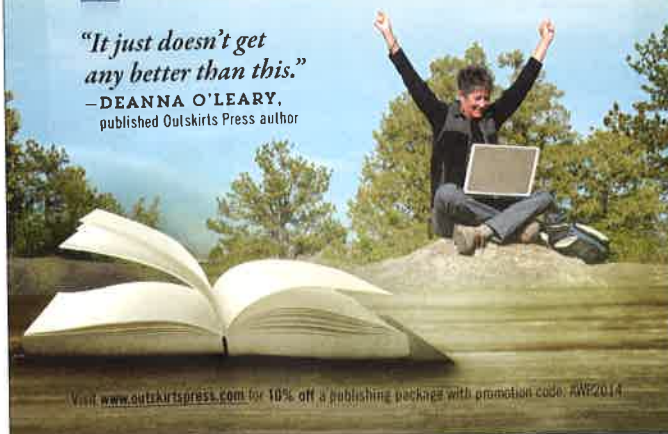
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The second person that presumes the "I" in the exposition is after more than simply jostling the reader into a greater attention for the experience.

questioning the success of that attempt? And, the ever-tricky "you" has the dual feeling of addressing both writer and reader at the same time. "Think again," is addressed to the writer, but the stark absence of a pronoun has the conflating effect of sounding like a question for the audience as well. If we are after candor in creative nonfiction, then what's wrong with questioning the self and the decision for point of view? The veil between writer and reader is so thin in the personal essay genre anyway, why not minimize the boundary even more?

**Apostrophe: An address to someone or something that is not present.**

One immediate attribute of Mary Karr's direct address in her, "Prologue: Open Letter to My Son. Side A: Now," from *Lit: A Memoir*, is a clarity and keenness of voice. As with McGregor's essay, "If You Should Want Flowers for Your Table (Advice to a Daughter)," the title makes the literary intention very apparent. To my mind, this ramps up the tension and gets the drama going more quickly because it suggests an emotional encounter if

not a physical one. The intentionality of the title implies a revealing of something intimate; something worthy of such a formal disclosure as a letter. The "open letter" is a bit of a conceit too. It has the communicative veil of corresponding to another person, but meant for the stage of a reading audience.

Obviously, the reader does not have to figure out who the antecedent is, because the title makes the "you" evident. Karr begins by questioning her reliability as a narrator, "Anyway I tell this story is a lie, so I ask you to disconnect the device in your head that repeats at intervals how ancient and addled I am."<sup>23</sup>

She begins with three paragraphs of flashbacks, but settles on her objective in the fourth: "Through that fishbowl lens, you've been looking for the truth most of your life. Recently, that wide eye has come to settle on me."<sup>24</sup> Listen to the way the next sentence sounds with the "you" absent, "Still I want to show that single eye the whole tale as I know it, scary as that strikes me from this juncture."<sup>25</sup> I'd like to consider an effect of this second-person construction: implied conflation. We know Karr is speaking to her son, but when we pick up the book and read her words, the direct address to him does more to our minds than make us feel as though we are overhearing a conversation. That's the conceit of an open letter. It's meant to appear like a direct note to another, but it's also intended for the reader. The construction conflates when the "you" is implied rather than written.

On the second page, the son comes over to Karr's apartment and the figure becomes a moving person clothed in "saggy jeans—the orange boxers spattered with cartoon fish from Dr. Seuss's *One Fish, Two Fish...*"<sup>26</sup> Karr goes on to narrate how her son reviewed an old family video, and how, "the old video stirred something in you. It was kind of crazy, you said.

You were wrapping up wires for one of your cameras."<sup>27</sup> The subject of old family clips and making sense of them also serves the larger metaphor for Karr's prologue.

Karr makes a promise to the reader towards the end of "Side A: Now," when the "you" is absent, and again, implied, "That's the story I want to tell: how I started getting drunk. How being drunk got increasingly hard, and being not drunk felt impossible. In Odyssean terms, I'd wanted to be a hero, but wound up—as Mother did—a monster."<sup>28</sup> While the following lines do include the "you," they still conflate; they still feel like an address to me, the reader, "Maybe I can show you how I came to peace, how she and Daddy wound up as blameless in my story as you are."<sup>29</sup> What she wants to show of course, is again, for the audience too. "How I came to peace," is another promise.

"Side A: Now" takes place in her apartment, and she is talking to her son. The abstract desires of telling her story and coming to peace are grounded in a specific place, and said to a particular person; which is what enables Karr to craft the metaphor: "Your girlfriend was with you, and you were so loaded down with bags and equipment...You're disembarking now, I can see it. Maybe by telling you my story, you can better tell yours, which is the only way to get home, by which I mean to get free of us."<sup>30</sup> Karr propels the action and movement of the son's physical body, the idea of descending stairs, with the concepts of telling a story and experiencing freedom. I don't think we can mistake the last phrase as a form of conflation "by which I mean to get free of us."<sup>31</sup> That unexpected and powerful line seems exclusively for her son. But what of the first two phrases, albeit, extracted from the full sentence, "Maybe by telling you my story, you can better tell yours."<sup>32</sup> Isn't this the art of storytelling and literature?

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**Conflation: The elusive quality of the slippery that adds dimensionality and depth. This aspect of second person switches antecedents in the same paragraph.**

Much like Wenderoth's "Where God is Glad," the construction in John McPhee's essay, "Swimming with Canoes," switches back and forth from presuming the position of an "I" to addressing the reader. He writes,

The canoe rocks, slaps the lake, moves forward. Sooner or later, you lose your balance and fall into the water, because the gunwales are slender rails and the stern deck is somewhat smaller than a pennant. From waters deeper than you were tall, you climbed back into your canoe. If you think that's easy, try it.<sup>33</sup>

Like the canoe, the second person construction seems to "move," and

the "you" is as unsteady as the canoe. One reason why McPhee might substitute the "I" here for "you" is for the persona to engage the boy within himself. The "you" that stands in for an "I" can be specified as an address to a younger self, which is part of the metaphor. McPhee writes, "From waters deeper than you were tall, you climbed back into your canoe." We can see him drawing on the deep waters of his youth, calling upon a boyhood memory to inform the wise persona.

The final line of the passage is the undoing of any steadiness, the slippery switch from self-address to direct address. The "you" has ubiquitous qualities that can trick the mind of the reader into placing himself on the gunwales of the canoe and slip just as the boy character slips into these complex and elusive aspects of "you." We can deduce that the conflation of direct and

self address is a purposeful affect of McPhee's multi-faceted utilization of second person construction.

The physicality of the "you" enhances the pronoun as well. When McPhee writes, "you lose your balance and fall into the water" we can see the boy waver and plunge into the lake. In this case the construction of the "you" is more effective because it is not obscure and abstract, but rather, concrete and definite. The body falls off the object of the canoe to dip into the mass of water.

In this case, McPhee accentuates the "you's" elusiveness. The form goes beyond invitation to be more of a challenge to the reader. When McPhee writes, "try it," he is not only referring to swimming with canoes, but the larger metaphor of reacting calmly in a frightening situation

If we were to distinguish the "I" as the knowing persona and the "you" as the boy within McPhee, then


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we can interpret the resolution as a conflation of both perspectives. The second person serves as a layering quality to an essayist's voice. The physicality of the "you" earlier in the essay institutes such a strong visceral experience for the reader that it can be re-instigated through the action of drawing on the pocket of air under the canoe. Or put another way, the effect of the physical self-address permeates throughout the essay to make for a more intimate resolution in first person.

In the resolution, McPhee recalls being twelve years-old, trapped under a canoe in a raging gorge and upon remembering his earlier days in the lake, breathed the small pocket of air under the canoe, and floated to the safety of calmer waters where he "gave the canoe half a spiral and returned to the open sunlight."<sup>34</sup>

McPhee abandons the second person point of view in the last two paragraphs save for one direct address to the audience. Perhaps the return to the first person "I" is intended to restore the sense of normalcy, the calm that returns to the narrator's voice when he remembers emerging from under the canoe. The second person that presumes the "I" in the exposition is after more than simply jostling the reader into a greater attention for the experience.

The return to "I" in the resolution reflects the calm waters the boy character has found. Since the "you" can jar the reader and make us do a little work in naming the antecedent, a further unraveling of tension takes place with the return of first person. The reader's mind relaxes a bit just as the boy does in the safety of calm water.

Second person certainly can be like the drunk at the party, yelling for the singular purpose of acquiring attention. Not everyone will love "you," so it's understandable why some readers and editors have an aversion. However, beyond the

entry point of the temporary and conversational direct address to the reader, let us regard more fully the narrator who attempts to "abstract herself from pain" by switching from first to second person, the intimacy of the voice confiding to the reader "precisely who" she is "and what is on" her "mind," the "grotesque and beautiful energy" of the "I-you chasm," the mother bestowing advice, the mother asking forgiveness in an open letter, and the self-implicating man addressing his boyhood self. Second person is a slippery point of view and difficult to sustain. And yet, a growing number of writers are talented enough to find pockets of air in the tipped canoes of their stories, breathing life into the potential of you. AWP

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*James M. Chesbro's essays have been listed as notable selections for The Best American Essays 2012, 2014, and The Best American Sports Writing 2014. His work appears in several reviews and journals. He is the co-editor of You: An Anthology of Essays Devoted to the Second Person. James is an adjunct professor of English at Fairfield University and a full-time teacher at Fairfield College Preparatory School.*

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### Notes

1. Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), p. 37.
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