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LIST AS FORM

Literary, Ethnographic, Long,
Short, Heavy, Light
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Lists can be tyrannical. They tell us what we are supposed to do and what we have failed to do. They purport to keep us on task. They lead us to derive pleasure from crossing things out. Done! Eliminated! Lists enlist us to worry about rank and order, to aspire to the top ten, top twenty, top one hundred. Lists compel us to click and consume. If you like that, you might also like this. Click through to learn about “13 Animals Who Are Way More Gangster Than You.”¹

These characterizations and their assumption of shared experience speak to cultural patterns of a particular time and place. Lists reveal systems of thought and organization, as Foucault notes in the preface to *The Order of Things*, which opens with his reading of Borges quoting a “certain Chinese encyclopedia.” The specious tome’s categorical division of animals into an alphabetical series—“(i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) others”—strikes the French philosopher as hilariously distant.² As he writes, “In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.”³

Lists, recorded by the ethnographer, related to the ethnographer, can serve as a form of cultural communication, with the order, logic, and habitus of

one way of being weighed against another. Lists demonstrate shared sensibilities. Lists also divulge idiosyncrasies, of personal association, of deviation from the norm, of heterogeneous juxtaposition. They can distill a life in a few short lines. Here is an abbreviated list, one of many, I found amid my father's jumbled papers after his death:

Read Fuster and write regarding hypotheses
Call Sasha
Clean tripod
Get milk

Thinking about lists as a form of ethnographic rumination—list as cultural artifact or writing prompt—led me to think about lists as literary form, about the relation between form and content, and about what formal restriction gives rise to. Vietnam vet Tim O'Brien's short story "The Things They Carried," required reading for the generation of U.S. youth that followed his, rose to the top of my mental list. His evocation of the vulnerability, brutality, fear, loss, and longing humped through the fields of war by American GIs unfolds through list after list: of what they carried in common, of the distinctions between what they carried, of what they discarded, of what they dreaded, of what they dreamed, of what they joked their way into denying. Lists of standard-issue equipment are shot through with lists of individual particularity. After "P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water" comes this: "Until he was shot, Ted Lavender carried six or seven ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity. Mitchell Sanders, the RTO, carried condoms. Norman Bowker carried a diary. Rat Kiley carried comic books. Kiowa, a devout Baptist, carried an illustrated New Testament that had been presented to him by his father, who taught Sunday school in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. As a hedge against bad times, however, Kiowa also carried his grandmother's distrust of the white man, his grandfather's old hunting hatchet."⁴ O'Brien's lists pile up and push against the silent rows of white tombstones and names carved in black granite. They communicate to those not there the burden carried by those who were.

I arrived at lists in my own writing through a prolific, long-distance correspondence that I maintained during my dissertation fieldwork. I was an ethnographer living in the burgeoning megacity of Beijing; my correspondent was a creative nonfiction writer living in the small town of Matías Romero.

Wendy Call and I first met in 1999 when we were tossed together as room-mates at a writers' conference. In 2000, when our email began bouncing between China and Mexico, we hadn't seen each other since and had spoken by phone only once. When a call from the wonderfully eclectic, genre-bending, now sadly defunct journal *Chain* came our way, we began crafting our messages into a submission for issue 9 devoted to "dialogue." In what became "Living Elsewhere in 16 Steps," we experimented with the alphabetical series as a means of organization and dialogic juxtaposition. We started with A. Address and ended with P.P.S., with entries along the way like H. History Museum and I. Indigenous Means. Of our method, we wrote, "As 'non-fiction' writers, we find ourselves thinking a lot about what constitutes 'truth,' how to honor the voices of the people with whom we speak, and also about the uncanny, contradictory, parallel, and paradoxical elements of our experiences on opposite sides of the world."⁵

Little of that writing experiment made its way into my dissertation, but during the slow process of revising it into a book, I snuck in a line from A. Address.⁶ Slightly altered to account for the passage of time, it now reads:

I made lists, like this one, of what I passed in the daily transit from my apartment to the nearest subway station, of what was there but would likely be displaced, in the wake of demolition, in months or years to come: husband and wife shops selling yogurt, melon seeds, liquor, cigarettes, shampoo, and toilet paper; three competing salons with hairdressers who had repeatedly dyed their hair, waiting behind plate glass for customers and watching TV; the pigeon cage, noisy with flapping wings, on the roof of an enthusiast's apartment; a government family planning clinic; the south entrance to the hospital where victims of the *falun gong* self-immolation in Tiananmen Square were treated a week before their fanaticism showed up on the fruit seller's television set; a couple of dimly lit stores selling bed-side toilets, canes, neck braces, and prosthetic limbs resting motionless under glass; at least four stalls, open night and day, selling funeral clothing and paper money to burn for an afterlife of prosperity; several fresh fruit and flower stands; a Muslim restaurant blaring Uyghur music with barbecue mutton for one *yuan* a stick sold out of the kitchen window; three street-side bicycle repairmen with basins of water for finding the leak in a tire; a mishmash of clothing shops crowded with students in baggy pants, leg warmers, and disco t-shirts, trinkets dangling from their cell phones; the gaunt old man staring blankly at them while clip-

ping his fingernails; a string of CD/VCD/DVD stores, with overflowing cardboard boxes of jumbled cellophane-wrapped pirated goods; a hot pot restaurant with showy tanks of doomed fish breathing heavily; a 24-hour Taiwanese-style noodle, dumpling, and soy milk cafeteria; two Adam and Eve™ branch sex shops (nos. 5 and 8), with sales people in white lab coats and advertisements of blond, big breasted blow-up dolls in the window; a store selling light bulbs of all hues and wattage; a trophy store; a roasted chestnut stand; the mandatory dumpling stall; a few old moon-gate entrances to residential alleys; and the homeless woman dragging along the uneven pavement in Cultural Revolution braids and green soldier's uniform.

Fifteen years later, this excessive sentence conjures the sensory, emotional, experiential time and place of my fieldwork and the sense of my daily path through a city undergoing massive physical and social transformation as one among more than twelve million.

I wouldn't know it until I came "home," but as cranes and construction sites riddled the city of Beijing, cancer tumors did the same to my sister's body. As I wrote or didn't write through the years that she was living and dying, I learned from her another list-like form of correspondence, a shared practice of counting, meditation, and making do. Kara had discovered haiku. Its three-line form required only short moments of focus, and the puzzle-like 5-7-5 syllable count was perfect for a boggle-scrabble-sudoku master like my sister. While taking a medication with the side effect of sleeplessness, she sometimes stayed up all night writing haiku after haiku. In the morning, I would find dozens of new poems—tiny blasts of wisdom, anger, insight, and love—in my inbox. I struggled to keep up, sending back mine in exchange for hers. We traded litanies of pharmaceutical peril, televised escape, childhood joy, and brightly colored games of skill and chance:

drugs yuck I hate them
sutent, temodar, keppra
dexamethasone

but wait there are more
kytril, zofran, marinol
and VP-16

no more morphine no
hate the nightmare dreams it brings
no percocet either

*oprah oh oprah
ellen ricki dr. phil
regis and kelly*

*so who wants to be
our next top reality
star search survivor*

*you're my monk my house
my crime scene cold case closer
and law and order*

*spring days carefree sun
shortcuts through neighbors' yards long
for our kid days past*

*etch-a-sketch lite-brite
chutes and ladders candyland
monopoly life*

These simple, ordered lines helped us communicate what had become almost unspeakable. They cut to the quick, the living and dying heart of things. They provided respite along the way toward an uncertain end.

As much as lists rule my life, as they accumulate on my computer, on sticky notes, on crumpled, pocketed slips of paper, I have also learned to listen to lists, to find meaning, poetry, and reprieve in them. They have a rhythm of their own that can sometimes only be heard when read aloud. On a night not long ago, as I read E. B. White's *Stuart Little* to my six-year-old and we neared the end of the anthropomorphic mouse's journey from city to country in search of his missing friend Margalo the bird, I savored the sound of this sentence as it unexpectedly wrapped us in a verdant world of wonder:

In the loveliest town of all, where the houses were white and high and the elm trees were green and higher than the houses, where the front yards were wide and pleasant and the back yards were bushy and worth finding out about, where the streets sloped down to the stream and the stream flowed quietly under the bridge, where the lawns ended in orchards and the orchards ended in fields and the fields ended in pastures and the pastures climbed the hill and disappeared over the top toward the wonderful wide sky, in this loveliest of all towns Stuart stopped to get a drink of sarsaparilla.⁷

Notes

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1. Sahil Rizwan, “13 Animals Who Are Way More Gangster Than You,” *BuzzFeed*, September 22, 2015, accessed September 26, 2015, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/sahilrizwan/gangstanimal>.
2. Jorge Luis Borges, “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” in *Other Inquisitions, 1937–1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 103.
3. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), xv.
4. Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 4–5.
5. Wendy Call and Sasha Su-Ling Welland, “Living Elsewhere in 16 Steps,” *Chain* 9 (2002): 69.
6. An external reviewer of the book manuscript didn’t care for this experimental list of a sentence, so out it went again.
7. E. B. White, *Stuart Little*, special read-aloud ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 100.