

A Conversation with Leslie Jamison

This interview between Leslie Jamison and Merve Emre originally appeared in Paris Review Daily and is reprinted here with permission.

ME: While many of your readers know you primarily as a creative writer, you also have a career in academia, pursuing a doctoral degree in English at Yale. I've been thinking about how these various professional roles inflect your essays. Do you think your life in academia has encouraged you to anticipate potential arguments against what you're doing? You're often so meticulously, beautifully self-reflexive in deconstructing your own position as an observer and a creator, the kinds of privilege those positions entail.

LJ: There's a part of me that has always felt more comfortable arguing in writing than in person because I get to control all the puppets. I get the satisfaction of argument because I can always lift or project voices of disagreement, but I also get to construct and control the entire theater in which that disagreement is happening. That means there are probably whole layers of disagreement that I don't anticipate. But there's something compulsive to me about imagining the critique of what I've just said. And that compulsion is so structurally resonant with what's embedded in the feeling of shame. Shame doesn't exist as an emotion without the projected or perceived sense of judgment coming from somewhere else.

ME: This is what Eve Sedgwick writes on shame. I'm ashamed to paraphrase, but the performative utterance "Shame on you!" transforms and intensifies the relationship between the "you" that's being addressed and the "I" that's doing the shaming.

LJ: There always have to be two different consciousnesses at work for shame to get any traction. Even if one consciousness is hypothetical. That tension is where the heat of an essay lives. I was talking to a friend of mine recently, a filmmaker, telling her about someone who'd made fun of me for constantly taking recourse in the language of "heat" when I talk about essays: "I just try to follow where the heat is." We were talking about what

that phrase means, or what I mean when I say it. There are certain emotions that feel to me like signposts, pointing at something important happening under the surface, and shame is one of those. Whenever we feel shame it's a mark of some deep investment or deep internal struggle. But the shame is also pointing to some kind of conversation, an argument that's happening.

ME: Who are your projected interlocutors? Who's on the other side of the conversation, shaming you?

LJ: That was actually something I struggled with during different revisions of "Grand Unified Theory"—the question of who I was arguing against, and the fear that I was building and attacking nameless straw men. It gets recursive: I started fearing that someone might critique the essay by saying, "Whose critiques are you responding to? Who are you arguing against?" Because I was responding to something very ambient, an energy in the atmosphere, something I believed in because so many other women felt it too. I was afraid I was looking for scapegoats, voices saying *don't play victim*. Sometimes the mouthpieces I found were women who had already internalized the imperative. When two girls accuse each other of being wounds—"No, you're the wound!"—they're quoting this ambient judgment all around them. The medical study I cite, "The Girl Who Cried Pain," felt like proof that this nebulous effect is actually manifest in palpable ways.

Months after I wrote that essay, one of my best friends had an experience where she was in a serious amount of pain that wasn't taken seriously at the ER for about 10 hours—and that to me felt like this deeply personal and deeply upsetting embodiment of what was at stake. Not just on the side of the medical establishment—where female pain might be perceived as constructed or exaggerated—but on the side of the woman herself: my friend has been reckoning in a sustained way with her own fears about coming across as melodramatic. *That's* the sense of urgency beneath the essay: I want to make a case for some world in which that fear is of being melodramatic is dissolved.

That's one of the ways "Grand Unified Theory" connects to the sentimentality essay. It's another example of an emotion as signpost—fear, in this case. Our fear of melodrama, what's that about? You follow the feeling to a set of questions. On an aesthetic level, it's a fear of crudeness or lack of subtlety, and on a personal level, it's a fear of being selfish or demanding too much. Confessing pain starts to feel like an ask: *I'm not just saying something about myself. I'm demanding something from you.*

ME: But have you ever had that moment of frustration with a friend where you think they're talking too much about their woundedness? Is your empathy limitless?

LJ: [Laughs]. Yes, I've felt that. But I think my greatest moments of frustration are produced by the refusal to own certain emotions rather than requests for emotional response. The moments that really frustrate me are the moments where people seem to be asking for sympathy in this very coded—not quite passive-aggressive, more like passive-confessional way—when they suggest that something has been hard but refuse to outright say it. One version of this is talking about a really difficult experience in an intentionally coy or jaded way—where there's not just a plea for sympathy but also a plea for some kind of credit: *admire my stoicism*. Sometimes, of course, there's a genuine crust or brittleness there—and I get the ways that jadedness or coyness can function as protective callouses, produced by need. But this affect can be frustrating, like wanting to have your pain-cake and eat it too—wanting to have that pain and deny it too.

This gets old to me: the woman who wants to be sculpted by pain, but also wants to be better than the character type who sculpts herself by pain. Naturally, I judge myself for judging this affect. Which is the point: sometimes empathy doesn't feel like instinctive sympathy; sometimes it has to push back against a strong sense of impatience or judgment—sometimes *those* are the feelings that are most intuitive.

Maybe I just came down too hard on people who present potentially loaded things in an affect-neutral way. There are so many reasons people do it. Sometimes it might come off that way when I talk about my own medical history; I've just talked about it so many times that it doesn't have a lot of affective charge anymore. That's part of what the SP format evokes in the first essay. I think of friends who've had really hard things in their lives that make it almost *more* exhausting for them to go through the whole spectrum of their own emotions every time they open their mouths. It's not necessarily coming from shame or a passive aggressive plea for sympathy. It's just a trodden path.

ME: My parents are both physicians, and I'm always conscious of how they tend to quantify both the act of suffering and pain relief. Have you encountered different or competing ways in which other people conceptualize empathy?

LJ: It's funny how that question resonates, because I think a lot about how my parents' work relates—in these oblique ways—to what I write about.

My dad is an economist who does global development research, and what he practices is a kind of quantifiable empathy. His research is devoted to trying to figure out cost-effective ways to ease global disease burden—and in a way that’s like empathizing with the entire system, figuring out what’s causing the most aggregate suffering and then figuring out how to address that suffering in the most efficient way. The texture of it is so absolutely different from what I do—but the stakes of investment are shared, even if the scales are different. It makes me think about empathy in terms of action more than imaginative identification.

ME: Though sometimes having a very straightforward way to quantify the pain that’s been relieved—the people that have been saved, or the dollars that have been diverted to helping hungry people get food—can threaten to absolve the obligation to think about empathy in more abstract ways.

LJ: Right, yes, though that kind of absolution is perilous in both direction. Sometimes the guilt I feel about being a writer has to do with worrying that I find absolution too quickly—that I believe if I think hard enough and long enough about this stuff, and feel so guilty about it, that I don’t need to do anything anymore. That’s part of why I’m fascinated by James Agee: he was troubled by that question too: *I’ve put so much labor in all this guilt, but what does it accomplish in the end?*

ME: And do you think that performing your self-reflexivity over and over again can make an essay feel less politically or ethically urgent?

LJ: We’re back to the shame of the confessional. Or confession as obstruction. In inhabiting your own guilt, you’re just undermining the project of documentation by diverting even more attention away from the people you’re writing about. The hardest question I’ve ever gotten at a reading happened in Boise a couple of weeks ago. I read the piece about Agee, and getting hit in Nicaragua, and my memories of Luis and nudging him away so I could get into the door of my house. You get used to a certain range of questions at readings. There’s a certain set of boundaries that they stay inside of—boundaries that I’m not usually aware of because they always stay inside of them. But this one kid in Boise, he must have been 19 or 20, raised his hand and said, “You’ve been talking a lot about empathy tonight—and I’m wondering why you didn’t let that boy into the house.”

It was a wild moment for me. Even if people are aware that the writer is also the character inside her work of nonfiction, they tend to direct their questions to the writer instead of the character. But his question stepped

through some membrane that had been invisible to me. It's like asking, *why did you feel like your abortion was okay?* I ended up trying to make it explicit—the weirdness and difficulty of the moment—to acknowledge openly that it was a hard question, and to explore why. It brought up all the questions of the essay itself: What good is guilt? What does it mean for me to be a writer sitting here and thinking hard? His question made me remember how electric these tensions are: you can come up with abstract responses or justifications, but there's still this core heat in you—that "heat"!—and his question pushed the bruise directly.

ME: But that's the point right? That we're never going to have totally satisfactory answers to these answers?

LJ: And it goes back to your earlier question about interlocutors. Questioning the efficacy of guilt is also in conversation with some spectral other who's talking to me as I'm writing that essay—who's asking me, *what good is guilt?* So I write the question down to appease or respond to that aggressive force.

ME: The most ungenerous criticism of the collection that I could imagine—and I'm just ventriloquizing here—is, "Oh, she keeps putting herself in these positions to experience pain or woundedness so she can have something to write about and what a privilege that is." I can see people thinking as they're reading, "She's a real glutton for pain."

LJ: That's why it felt right to put "Grand Unified Theory" at the end. If the idea of being drawn to pain has emerged as a pattern, the last essay speaks to that directly. What position of pride do I have in relationship to these experiences?

ME: Or sweetness. That's how I saw the saccharine essay fitting in—that there can be a sweetness in the experience of pain.

LJ: To me there's an important distinction to draw between chosen and unchosen positions: Going to the Morgellons conference is a choice in a way that getting hit in the face isn't. Not to say it's always so neatly divisible. But the collection does choose to bring all of those experiences together, and what kind of appetite is being spoken to there? In certain ways, as a writer, you do profit off your own experiences of pain. There's an inspirational way to see that profit—turning pain into beauty—and a cynical way to see it—"wound dwelling" in some corrosive or self pitying way. For me, the honest vision dwells somewhere in between.

The original draft of the Morgellons essay was about a hundred pages long, the first draft I wrote after Austin. It was swollen with much more guilt and self-awareness about my own process. I didn't just narrate the experience of having a parasite, for example, I talked about how I deployed that story in my interviews. Because I did deploy it. I was a little confused about how I was deploying it, but I felt like it offered useful moments of resonance. Like I was trying to tell people, *I have been looked at by a doctor in the same way that you have*. There was some genuine empathy in that, but it was also instrumental: *I think you'll trust me more if I tell you that I've been in some version of that position*. That's another way you reap the profits of a hard experience.

In terms of seeking out certain kinds of experiences, it definitely inflects an experience to have chosen it—or to be inhabiting it with an eye towards its documentation. When you know you're going to write about something, you bring a weird set of nerve endings to every moment. In Austin, when they started doing the lottery for the microscope, part of me thought, "Oh it would be so embarrassing to win," and part of me was like, "Oh, but that would be such an amazing moment for the essay." As I was walking up there to get it, I was already thinking, *how will this play out in the story?*

ME: I love that moment in the essay. It feels so emblematic of the tension between your position as an observer and a writer, but not a corroborator or participant in the disease. Which brings up another question: Do you show your essays to the people who are in them? What's that process like?

LJ: It's different every time, but always fraught. I felt a lot of anxiety about how the Morgellons community would react to that piece. I was giving them visibility, but I knew I wasn't giving them the kind of visibility they wanted: *the fibers are real*. I didn't feel like I'd made any promises that I was failing to deliver on, but I'm also a pathological pleaser. It's hard to be a people pleaser and a nonfiction writer. The part of me that wants everyone to love me all the time is very troubled by the idea that I would write something that someone didn't want to hear. That desire to be loved motivates the writing, and then haunts its execution.