

Reader's Companion

The Nail in the Tree: On Art, Violence, and Childhood

By Carol Ann Davis

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Introduction to *The Nail in the Tree: On Art, Violence, and Childhood*

The Nail in the Tree is a collection of essays that examines the author's experience of parenting her two sons through several lenses simultaneously. These lenses refract sometimes quickly from one to the other, and the essays are lyric and meditative, moving between and among their many subjects with speed and agility. She considers recent experiences related to the shooting that took place in her town of Sandy Hook, and the effect of that day and its aftermath on she and her family; more remote experiences of her own childhood on the east coast of Florida and early readings of poetry that deeply impacted her; and historical examples of artists whose work deals with experienced traumas, including war and genocide. The goal is not so much to arrive at a conclusion as to fully extend the ideas at work in the writer's imagination as she examines incidents of trauma and violence alongside those of artistic creation and rebirth.

The collection begins with the day of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and then moves around in time, from two years before the shooting to many moments in the years afterwards. In order to find, as the poet Rumi wrote, the keys to their "gradually growing wholeness," she examines in minute detail certain moments of her own and her sons' lives—a hummingbird's mistaking her eyes for a bloom, mothers at the bus stop lingering after the children have left, the aisle of the grocery store where, in the aftermath of the shooting, children's skin seems to glow, her sons, years before the shooting, playing fighting with foam swords.

Though that wholeness tends toward the elusive and temporary, the essays begin to articulate and approach the lived moment that seems sensible or at least possible, given the author's supposition that she is unlikely to reach resolution in the current moment. The realization that no one, least of all her own children, is entirely safe is not a conclusion but a starting point for a set of mediations that move her toward the recognition that the events that have occurred are part of the ongoing nature of human violence. Even so, she continues to reject the premise that these violences must define her own or her children's consciousnesses.

An experience of reading this collection is immersive and, at time, frustrating, in that it examines moments of intimacy that naturally evaporate. In this way, it imitates the experience of one of its major subjects, parenting, that eternal experience that is always on the edge of disappearing from the record, forever.

The time line given in the table of contents for each title, and the references each entry gives to those artists discussed, are meant to offer guideposts on what is by nature a blind journey: that of loving others in a time of extreme violence.

To the Reader on the Shape of the Collection and How It Came to Be

I began writing this book before I began writing it. That is to say, the essays in this collection were born of the moments in which they were written. Some, such as “On Brotherhood and Crucifixion,” were written not only before the shooting that would come to define the collection, but before I knew I was writing *an essay*. I remember distinctly that the first line of that essay (“twin of the one in my mind, this cross is uneven”) issuing itself forth as a line of poetry. In fact, that whole first paragraph began as a lineated being, a thing in lines rather than in prose. Then something happened. The ideas began to assert themselves as topic sentences, the images interacted with the ideas in a way that didn’t always happen in the poems, and I found myself writing an essay that leapt and jumped through several works of art, but that connected them, thematically, to the experience of brotherhood, something I grew up observing (I have five brothers) and then up close experienced when my two boys were small.

The essay form seemed to allow me an exploratory depth that appealed to me. I still jumped from subject to subject—an associative muscle I most enjoy when I write poems—but the essay returned me to the shore of idea more often than the poem did, and so I stretched and experimented—with this idea of exploration, with how far from the central point (the theme of brotherhood) I could leap and still return, and what those forays added to the whole.

Many of those forays—and many forays in the collection as a whole—are forays into the world of art. For many years in my poems, and in both of my collections of poetry, I engaged in dialogue with works of art. Though this activity (whether in poetry or prose) is described as *ekphrasis* (the definition of which is the “the use of detailed description of a work of visual art as a literary device”), I think that definition captured only part of what art does for me. I’m not so much utilizing the art as a literary device as I am engaging with art as a way of finding comity with my own experience. The artists, as they deal with the quick of their own experience, teach me how to deal with mine. My essays therefore describe not the art but my own experience, and then—sometimes in argument with it, sometimes in praise, sometimes in grief—utilize that interpretation to continue to exist inside what seemed during the times of their writing increasingly difficult moments of being.

And it has to be addressed that this collection chronicles increasingly difficult moments of being. On December 14, 2012, in my town, when a gunman murdered 20 first graders and 6 female educators in a neighboring elementary school two miles from my two sons’ school, most of what I knew about the world fell away. That loss of knowledge included most of what I knew about writing. When I returned to my desk I sought new forms and new ways of approaching my experiences, now that they included those events. Some old habits took on new resonance in this moment. My practices of writing about art, and of leaping toward exploration, both well developed in my poetry life and utilized anew in the writing of essays, were both challenged mightily by those difficult days in the aftermath of the shooting. Whereas I had written about my sons for their entire lives in my poems, and even in “On Brotherhood and Crucifixion,” and I had already begun to utilize writing about art as one lens through which I viewed my parenting and their early childhood experiences (see both *Psalm* and *Atlas Hour* for more poems about how art

inflected their childhoods), now I had a new perspective on my own parenting, one that included almost uncontainable loss and a sense of present danger.

I struggled with some of the basic assumptions that had underpinned my literary life (and especially my teaching) up to that day, the most immediate of which was that literary texts create meaning from experience. This experience was not one that attached itself to parable, or moral thinking; I had a sense early on that “senseless” was an important word, as it has become in the gun violence debate. And as I made room to admit that there would remain unsayable, untranslatable aspects of that experience—there would be unanswerable questions embedded into my life from this event that would never have satisfactory answers—I realized that I had been doing something quite similar all along in poems that resisted resolution, that ended on questions rather than answers, or lived in the spaces between the words in poems (something that began to happen more and more as I worked on the poems in *Atlas Hour*, with their gaps between phrases and lack of punctuation). My day to day lived reality showed me the gulf between what could be said and what couldn’t be said about my new life as a parent in Newtown. So, I began to embrace a new way of proceeding, an entirely exploratory and impression-based prose style. My writing simply became a way of proceeding into an unknown world, an altered reality. My prose became, in crucial ways, the whitening skin over a scar.

Into this moment of difficulty, I began as I had as a young poet, with description. I described my day to day life in great detail, not to make meaning so much as to see it, to recall it, to understand its nuance and immediacy. It was in this spirit that I wrote the essay that begins the collection, the first essay I wrote after I was changed by the events of December 14, 2012, entitled “The Day of the Shooting” in this collection, but original titled “The One I Get and Other Artifacts.” I now realize the “artifacts” of the title are those items I can describe from that day, and all the other essays also seek “artifacts,” both from my own life, and from the lives of the artists I explore, as sites from which to describe—and therefore better see—the experiences of trauma that I am interested in moving nearer to. I say I am interested in moving nearer to those traumas because pushing them away—denying their existence—feels an inauthentic way to proceed. My parenting life tells me to be with my boys is to accept even this event into their lives. As my exploration of the lives of the artists I include here, including one who survived the kindertransport out of Nazi Germany and another who fled the Armenian Genocide on foot at a young age, have shown me, every survived childhood is both extraordinary and extraordinarily difficult.

I wrote “The Day of the Shooting” because I knew that carrying around the artifacts of that day in my body was not healthy. I placed it first in the collection and then oriented every essay in the collection for its relation to that day. I did this in order to admit to myself—and to explain to you, reader—that this day changed my life forever, and changed the lives of my boys forever. That’s what I meant when I wrote in that essay that that day was a process of taking “the things of *before* that will come with me to *after*.”

Everything that was with me before and accompanied me to after went through a transformation. In some ways every essay in this book that is *after*—and they all come from after except for the brotherhood essay I mentioned before—is a chronicle of the shift to living in aftermath. The very

title of the book, *The Nail in the Tree*, is one example of someone, my son Willem, thinking of his *before* as transformed by *after*. The tree, which once did not have a nail, now lives with a nail driven into it. *Before* exists, but it is changed by all that comes *after*. The essays in their own ways narrate that shift. But it's important also to realize *before* is always changed by *after*—that that is something everyone experiences, whether trauma is a part of one's immediate environment or not.

As I write this I am at the farthest point *after* I've yet experienced. Each moment, and therefore each essay, bears the mark of their particular moment in time. Perhaps one reason these essays are accompanied by so many works of art is because those, too, mark moments in time and live in aftermath as they move away from those moments in time. We live in the aftermath of the events of the lives of so many who've walked through fire to reach us, and their pieces of art remain as artifacts.

I think of Miklos Radnoti, the Hungarian poet who died during a forced march but whose body, when exhumed, was accompanied by new poems—poems we can find today on the internet. Their survival, their ability to speak to us across the unanswered-unsayable, is both comfort and companion. I hope this collection doesn't make sensible the senseless events we have survived so much as provide companionship as we make our way toward each other, in art and in the world, utilizing what we can of our shared, generative, creative, and loving spirit, the same one that makes art, the one that reaches out from its moment toward the future.

For me, reader, that future is you.

Carol Ann Davis is a poet, essayist, and author of the poetry collections *Psalm* (2007) and *Atlas Hour* (2011), both from Tupelo Press. The daughter of one of the NASA engineers who returned the Apollo 13 crew from the moon, she grew up on the east coast of Florida the youngest of seven children, then studied poetry at Vassar College and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. A former longtime editor of the literary journal *Crazyhorse*, she is Professor of English at Fairfield University, where she is founding director of Poetry in Communities, an initiative that brings writing workshops to communities hit by sudden or systemic violence. She lives in Newtown, CT, with her husband and two sons.

**Interview with Carol Ann Davis by *The Georgia Review*'s Jenny Gropp,
on the occasion the nomination of "The One I Get and Other Artifacts"
for a National Magazine Award**

"A poignant and poetic essay about terror; specifically, the terror that occurs when you have two children who very well could have been witness to a school shooting. It speaks to the way that life barges in on what should be the idyllic innocence of childhood."

– Elisabeth Donnelly, *Flavorwire.com*
reporting on finalists for the 2015 National Magazine Award

Jenny Gropp: ["The One I Get and Other Artifacts"](#) lyrically documents your family's painful experience living in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, during and after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings on December 14, 2012. In the essay, you unfold the reactions and reflections of psyches in trauma, and allow us to move through that fear with you, one that hearkens to the very real fragilities of life. Given that Sandy Hook was not an isolated incident of mass violence in this country, could you speak a bit about how the continued episodes of violence in the U.S. affect you, especially in the wake of your own experience?

Carol Ann Davis: I wrote this essay as part of a revisiting of those crucial first hours when I discovered what had happened at Sandy Hook School. At one point in the essay I talk about being in my university office and gathering from my desk "the things of before that will accompany me to after"—and writing the piece was a way of fully embracing what my life would be in that after. To answer the second part of your question, part of *after* is certainly being much more aware of episodes of violence wherever they occur, and I have a different perspective now about how these events relate to each other, since many of them have in common the availability of guns in this country. That was an irrefutable fact before, as it has been after the events that so impacted me and my family, but it's more present in my life now as something that I must reckon with.

It's my view that these acts of violence affect all of us no matter whether we live where they've occurred or identify personally with a group or individual on whom violence has been visited; they are part of our common responsibility. Their increased frequency at least invites us to consider that they may be the consequence of decisions we have made as a society.

JG: One of the most difficult ethical aspects surrounding the Sandy Hook tragedy was the treatment, by journalists, of children's voices. When writing your essay, did you feel a particular burden in trying to present the reactions of your sons and of other children as opposed to those of the adults?

CAD: When I was writing the piece I was focusing entirely on practicing a descriptive and documentary approach to telling the events exactly as I personally experienced them. It was important to stay with my own experience rather than to speculate about others. My own

experience involved the reactions of my older son and certain details about my younger son; as it progresses the essay becomes largely preoccupied with their well being rather than larger issues that later became part of a national conversation. Because it's a documentary-style telling, it includes snippets of conversation or writing by my older son. This is a technique that I had utilized in poems for a number of years, and it felt a natural process to include those passages in prose. I really had not thought about that formal choice in relationship to the journalistic treatment of children during coverage of the tragedy, but I see now it does have a relationship to that issue, since my essay has become a part of the larger discourse. My initial goal in writing the essay was to revisit those hours and see what it was that I could learn from precisely describing them.

The goals in writing the essay—to learn, to understand my own experience—are different from the consequences of publishing it. I published it, I think, because I felt that I had learned enough through the composition to have something to share with others, something of use. I think a writer, like many others, would like to be of use—I hope my work has a use for those who read it.

JG: In a previous [interview](#), you stated that you are “deeply agnostic.” Your essay, with its almost incantatory repetitions of phrases both haunting and reassuring, seems to hold agnosticism in its chorus, functioning as ritualistic composition. I wonder if you could speak a little to this—about how this piece works for you as an act of agnosticism, or how it affected your views on agnosticism itself.

CAD: I grew up in church—singing, repeating Bible verses, etc.—so the incantatory possibilities of language are very much a part of my daily life; quite possibly those experiences led to my choice of vocation. The idea that repeating words leads to internal revelation is definitely inherited in me from childhood, though I no longer associate that experience with any particular religion. I sing songs in the car, over and over the same ones, studying their formal qualities and seeking a deepening of emotional experience. I understand and am grateful that all of this has its roots in my early religious practice. That said, what I love about agnosticism is that it holds in a useful and productive tension the ideas of knowing and not knowing; so do most religions, through the concept of doubt. Agnosticism doesn't say there is a higher order but neither does it deny there could be. The emphasis remains on inquiry, and possibility. In that way, for me, the constant searching is about beauty and about redemption. Everything is possible, but nothing is truly knowable. It's an open field. If a writer allows herself or himself to live inside that uncertainty, there's a richness and depth that emerges; there's something akin to faith in the doing of that kind of living and writing. This practice been a comfort to me all my writing life, though my experience of agnosticism has not really been changed by the experience of December 14.

The essay takes up some of these ideas when it talks about how you can get near to a thing, but never really approach it or know it fully. In the passage I'm thinking of, I'm writing about my efforts at understanding my older son's experience of that day. Being near but never arriving at that knowledge approximates (in some way) my understanding of agnosticism.

JG: Your essay opens with an epigraph from Elizabeth Bishop's “Under the Window: Ouro Preto.” Did you come across this poem before or after the Sandy Hook tragedy? And can you tell us about

any other texts that might be in dialogue with your essay, or other pieces you've read that readers of your essay might appreciate?

CAD: The Bishop poem is simply one of my all-time favorite poems; Bishop's work has been a constant in my life for thirty years, and her poems come to me the way the hymns of my childhood do—to reuse a word, they are inherited in me at this point. Interestingly this particular poem takes place as Bishop overhears all the activity in a town square while she sits in a window, listening to what is happening “under the window,” alert to but also apart from her surroundings. It occurs to me now that because I was new to Newtown when the tragedy occurred, I made use in my own essay of the distance Bishop takes, and of her descriptive approach. She is one to allow the details of the landscape—and of human speech—to deliver to her information about her own emotional life, and I was hoping for that. She leaves herself open to those reverberations the concrete noun and the precise adjective can give a writer in understanding his or her inner life. I was trying to coax the physical world into dialogue with what I can't see—my emotions and the possibility of their adding meaning to what I could see, touch, taste, smell, or hear. Flannery O'Connor cites Joseph Conrad as saying something about describing the visible world in order to infer an invisible one; I'm paraphrasing a paraphrase but you get the idea, and it's an idea passed from one writer to the next over eons.

Bishop is with me, always. I recommend her poems be read and reread, but I don't really have a sense of what this essay is in dialogue with. I wrote it out of necessity, using the training I had, which includes long study of many poets and writers. When I wrote it I was reading a lot of Rumi, and looking at art.

JG: Is “The One I Get and Other Artifacts” now part of a larger project of yours, or did the writing of that essay spur other similar pieces relating to the Sandy Hook event or other related tragedies?

CAD: I have one other essay that is specifically about living in the aftermath of this tragedy. It's called “On Practice, School Buses, Hummingbirds, Rumi, and Being Led”—you can probably see the ways in which the title brings up some of the same preoccupations I've discussed in this interview—and it was published last year in *AGNI*. I've been writing essays for a number of years on various subjects, and I have published five or six that might eventually be collected into some sort of book. The essays from this period in my life might also pair meaningfully with poems from the same period, given the lyrical qualities of both and their common concerns. It's hard for me to really see this as a project per se because I am writing continuously, and staying down inside the work—rather than thinking analytically about it from above—is the most useful way for me to keep that writing process healthy and ongoing.

I also don't see the writing I've done in Newtown or about the tragedy as separate from any other work I completed previously. Prior to the events of December 14, 2012, I had written quite a lot on the theme of children in danger—considering my own children as well as historical examples. The central poem in *Atlas Hour* (Tupelo Press, 2011) explores the idea of parenting during the holocaust after my husband and I visited the museum in Prague that holds a collection of children's art from Terezin; many other poems about my children in that book deal with various traumatic possibilities, as do some of the poems in *Psalm*. In the same interview in which I talked

about my agnosticism, I also discussed the idea that parenting is itself a harrowing proposition. That interview took place in November before the tragedy occurred in December, so if anything I've become increasingly aware of the themes in my work that had already made themselves felt. Put another way, I can see how my work has prepared me to keep doing that work—I feel as if I am always writing, it turns out, toward some spiritual and actual deadline I can't see. The trick is to work hard enough, and to be receptive enough to the possibilities the world gives you. to be able actually to recognize them, appreciate them in all their specificity, and write about them in ways that continue to reveal their depth and mystery.

JG: This essay was nominated for a 2015 National Magazine Award in Essays and Criticism, and as a result is receiving quite a bit of attention. I wonder if this causes disquiet for you, since the essay deals with such a sensitive subject, felt both privately and publicly. And what would you hope comes out of all of this recognition?

CAD: I live a pretty quiet life. Even my primary genre of poetry is quiet! As a poet, I don't have much attention come my way, and when it does, it's a low-key thing—publication, a compliment from someone I've long admired that comes in an e-mail or in the actual mail (imagine!). The reception of this essay has been very different. The idea that I might be speaking for any group of people is a little unsettling, given that the essay—like all of my work—speaks only for itself, and only for that moment; I'm really still only speaking for myself, but I understand that any word out of Sandy Hook gains amplification given its circumstance. That said, I am not exactly the person I was when I wrote the essay. I recognize her as an earlier version of me. Now that I'm much closer to people who live here, I don't feel the Bishop-distance I felt and that enabled me to try for some level of objectivity in the essay. At the same time, I am comfortable with the essay and its reception; I'm grateful that its subject and utterance are relevant to a national conversation that I feel must continue to take place even as anniversaries pass. Personally, when I read it it brings me back to the particular difficulties and emotions of a time that is and always will be a very important one in my life.

As I said earlier my hope for the piece is that it might be of use. If it gives those who were not here on that day a sense of what it was like to be here, then it creates some sort of empathy. That's the most I can hope for, I think—to add to a common understanding.

Arts and Crafts: Two Ways of Approaching Trauma

The following short meditations weigh the benefits and risks of approaching writing about trauma through two distinct technical strategies: writing about art and utilizing craft as an instrument of inquiry. These two approaches represent the two major strategies deployed in *The Nail in the Tree*.

I. Approaching Trauma through Art

In an earlier reader's companion that accompanied *Psalm*, my first book of poems, I wrote that I used art as a point of departure, a way allowing my thoughts to associate freely:

Once they get going, once association begins to build around a certain image or idea, those threads tend to resonate with each other; in becoming their own fully-formed idea, they speak to other ideas, speak to the history of art, and grief and everything in between. They are metaphysical and also practical.

I still feel this way about the way in which looking at art functions in my work; it moves associatively, and working with the art (whether that art is visual art or another piece of writing) allows me to move between the metaphysical and the practical, shuttling between my own domestic moment and the moment the art opens. It's interesting to note that some of the themes in *The Tree in the Nail* are present in these descriptions of how I approached earlier work, including grief and creation, two themes that present in the essays. If anything, what has shifted since I first wrote about writing about art is not how I do it but my choice of focus, and what those new focal points lead my work towards. I was nearly finished with this collection before I realized that every artist I discussed had experienced childhood trauma or war.

In retrospect it's clear that I was confronted with the realities of the shooting at Sandy Hook, I gravitated toward artists whose subjects approached their own trauma. This therefore allowed me to unlock my experience of those works of art in ways I didn't often anticipate and which I might've avoided had I known that the art was going to connect so directly to my own life. For example, I was attracted to the work of Arshile Gorky before I learned he fled the Armenian Genocide on foot with his mother and sister, later losing his mother to starvation in their exiled city of Odessa (he later emigrated to America and took a Russian name, further complicating his relationship to his Armenian past). That background has given me a different view of his emotionally expressive abstract subjects with highly biographical titles, such as "How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life"; in "Loose Thread," the essay that explores Gorky's work, meditations on those paintings, so directly inflected with his own childhood trauma, lead me to consider the ways my son Luke's early childhood might be affected by the shooting in ways I, as his mother, can't anticipate or fully insulate him from. What the art has to tell me works itself out in the writing of the essay; I am led by it to conclusions that I would not reach if I were to approach the subject of my own trauma directly.

Similarly, Helene Cixous' approach to Rembrandt's painting "The Slaughtered Ox" helped me to understand how and why I was compelled to write at such length about a violent event and its aftermath, opening me to a discussion of the ways in which questions of violence and beauty coexist (see my essay "On Slaughter and Praying"). I know without her own special way of writing about art and trauma through the example of that hanging piece of meat, I would never have approached the most difficult images I needed to approach in my imagining of my own most violent experiences.

In that earlier reader's guide I wrote so many years ago, I was at pains to make sure that readers would not be put off by so many artistic references, and I still feel a hesitation that this collection contains so many of them. The truth is, though, I live intimately with these works of art; they resemble family relics by the time I am finished thinking about them. Rereading my earlier engagement with this topic in the reader's guide I see that I felt this same way more than a decade ago. Then I described it this way:

I mean for [the pieces of art] to become a part of the familiar imaginative landscape of the reader and not part of a lecture. I talk about art in that sort of familiar way because it belongs to me, and to the reader, together: it's ours, the artist gave it to everyone equally. It belongs to us. Because it's ours together, it's a place for us to meet up; it's not unlike grief or birth or the search for a god in its universality. In a very real sense I feel we have the right, even the responsibility, to live it deeply and love it well, and that's what I hope the poems do with art: love it well. Our shared world is here, inside us. Making that art is part of what we do to communicate with each other.

The sentiments expressed here are only more resonant for me after the trauma of Sandy Hook. If anything, I see that the artworks I engage with speak to me more urgently, about subjects of acute importance in the here and now of my life in Newtown, of a life in America shadowed by gun violence. And "what we do to communicate with each other" feels now, as at no other time in my adult life, a matter of life and death, and of the lives and deaths of our children. Everything is at stake in what, a decade ago, I called "our shared world."

At times the art I examine in *The Nail in the Tree* also teaches me about the ongoingness of beauty, its staying power, and the small ways the practice of art can be transformative. Toward the end of this collection I write about the midcentury painter, Agnes Martin, who painted into her nineties though she battled her own schizophrenia and found herself with long intervals during which she wasn't able to paint. In the essay that examines her work, "No Sheltered World," I approach the intensely personal subject of the ways in which each of us must shelter, or create shelter, on our own, largely because the shelters society has provided for us are inadequate. Recent discussions about the psychological affects of "lock-down drills," building hardening measures, and other aspects of the discourse around school safety resonate with Martin's story; the measures we are taking to ensure the safety of children serve to emphasize our powerlessness to shelter anyone, even small children. My examination of Martin allows me to think analogically about the ways in which her own interior artistic process provided a necessary shelter from an equally pervasive reality, her own schizophrenia. I doubt I could have approached the heart-wrenching subject of

“shelter” in a less direct way than this, or admitted to myself, as I do in that essay, that my sons have learned the hard way “there is no shelter in this world but their own.”

One way to approach trauma, therefore, is not to approach it. Emily Dickinson said “tell all the truth/but tell it Slant/Success in Circuit lies,” and in this way the art I’ve utilized in this collection helps me to approach my true subject: the vulnerability of our lives, and the strain of knowing that vulnerability up close because so much has been taken from those closest to me.

II. Through Craft toward Difficulty

Of the nine essays in *The Nail in the Tree*, seven engage with art in the ways I’ve described in the previous section. Two essays, the first and the last, do not. These two essays deal directly with traumatic and violent events without engaging in explorations of art. At first, it seemed as if these two essays didn’t belong because of their tonal dissonances with the other pieces. It was clear, though, that they should be included, partly because of the stories they tell. The first, “The Day of the Shooting,” told the story of the day of the Sandy Hook shooting from my perspective, and that is an important starting point for the collection because the experience is formative for myself and my children. The last, “Of Morning Glass: Becoming a Swimmer,” was written six years after the shooting and begins the important work of integrating the experience of the shooting into other traumatic experiences that happened when I myself was a child. Both essays, therefore, held important insights that expanded and deepened the seven other works of ekphrasis.

Yet both of these pieces were written in an entirely different way from the others. From them I have learned that a direct approach to writing about trauma that relies on craft elements can also assist in the engagement with experiences of trauma that had previously been unpalatable or unapproachable. In “The Day of the Shooting,” I utilize an immersion-journalistic style to stay entirely with concrete detail, and I use the brief period of time being described to isolate and vividly describe the experience of going to pick up my older son from his elementary school on the day of the shooting. I then use a fragmented narrative structure to weave experiences from the weeks of aftermath into that initially stable window of time, the time it took me to pick Willem up interwoven with the weeks that follow. This narrative structure combined with the specific detail create a craft-based instrument of inquiry into an otherwise inaccessible period of time in my life. I knew to rely on concrete detail to guide me into the deep water of that essential work.

For “Of Morning Glass,” I again relied on craft-based decisions to literally guide me into the deep water of this piece. This essay, one of the longest in the collection and the one that spans the longest amount of time, again utilizes two anchoring elements of craft to propel its movement. The first is the use of the second person singular, “you,” as the narrative voice. This allows me directly deliver the thoughts the speaker has as she has them, and adds an immediacy to the telling that seems to create urgency even though the events of the piece are in the distant past of the speaker’s childhood. In addition to this choice which creates the narrative pace of the essay and propels it forward, I also depended on the natural music of the language to guide me. In his effort to convince poets to rely on craft as an instrument of inquiry, the poet Richard Hugo advises them

to “depend on rhythm, tonality, and the music of language to hold things together.” He goes on to advise that, “it is impossible to write meaningless sequences. In a sense the next thing always belongs.” In this essay, which relied so heavily on the music of the thoughts of the you, I found that I could trust that the next sentence *did* belong, and that allowed me to write many sentences that had been coming toward me for a long time.

Observed in the context of seven essays that operate so differently, I can now observe that these two essays, which deploy a direct approach to trauma through the conscious shaping and limitation of craft choices is one avenue available to accompany the avenue opened up by writing about art. It is not lost on me that in fact the practice of art follows a similarly crafted set of rules—that Agnes Martin’s adherence to the grid is, through its very rigor, providing her the means by which to explore, and the shelter to do so. In some ways I am describing the very shelter of craft that allows the writer to explore traumatic events directly.

Discussion Questions

1. The author has mentioned that she relies on concrete detail (among other craft elements) to anchor her in moments of difficulty and remain in the discomfort the narration of events produces. Can you find a particular passage where she uses an element of technique to remain inside a difficult moment?
2. Are there specific images in the essays that remain with you? Do they come from the author's life or from the art? Why do you think that those are the ones that stay with you?
3. After reading the collection, does your perception of the author's experience living in Sandy Hook after the shooting there differ at all from popular portrayals in the press of the events described? If so, how so?
4. Many of the events described in this collection are revisited several times. References to the events of December 14, 2012 are approached in nearly every essay, and the children who died that day are variously described as "taken," "lost," and "murdered." Why might it have been important for the author to return to these events, and why do you think her language shifts when she does so?
5. The author has stated that part of her aim was to present this experience as it was for she and her children. Did she successfully portray the events in a way that the reader could enter them without the sense of a bias or ideological framework? If so, what elements of craft or storytelling seem to have created room for the reader?
6. Consider the order of the essays given the time line offered in the table of contents. How does your perception of the experiences narrated in the collection change if you read them chronologically (beginning two years before the shooting) versus the way they are arranged? Why are they arranged in the manner that they are?
7. The essays employ various approaches to writing about personal experience. Some, such as the first and the last, directly describe the author's experiences and are set in time and space. Others, such as those about art, move around in time and space, and discuss the artists' (rather than the author's) experiences at length. Are there experiences in your own life that lend themselves to one or the other of these approaches? When might you imagine using one or the other approach in your own writing?
8. The appendices for this reader's companion provide a selection of poems from the author's previous work that engage with themes found in *The Nail in the Tree*. How do the poems differ from the essays? How are they similar?
9. The reader's companion provides two interviews with the author. What does she discuss in these interviews that is especially relevant to your reading of *The Nail in the Tree*?

Appendices: Poems about Children and Art through Time

These appendices offer readers of Carol Ann Davis' poetry a chance to see how the themes discussed in this reader's companion have refracted through her poems over time, with special attention to the themes in *The Nail in the Tree*, specifically her explorations of art, violence, and parenting, beginning with her first book, *Psalm* (2007), moving on to her second book *Atlas Hour* (2011), both available from Tupelo Press, and ending with the first poem she wrote and published after the shooting and an interview she did with *The Kenyon Review* about the poem.

Appendix A: Poems from Psalm (2007)

Cenotaph

~from the Greek *kenos* 'empty' and *taphos* 'tomb'

After the so-much-work of fireflies,
they come from the town to ring the bell.
Somewhere a stone is laid over. Like them,
I have held the closed corpses of Romans
to my mind like a loved thing. When they come,
my shoulders are covered with blue cloth,
the bell hung just as they left it. The boy-miracle
is stored in the silo for feast day. In my cell,
a tiny dream of olives has gone looking for deep water
without my help. I suspect the day's coming
~as on the fresco in the church—
when I'll spring out of Adam's torso half-formed.
I'll not know whose blessing to want.
I'll walk up to Jesus and take his terra cotta hand
as if it would part from his body and become mine.
Where angels and devils are carving worlds out of fruit,
I'll discover I've been given no eyes or ears or mouth.
No one will tell me not to eat
the bit of original wood
in my hand.

**Listening to Willem Squeal while Django Reinhart
Attempts to Remind Me of the Existence of All Things**

The three leaves we picked up
off the trail last week
deepen into a red

they only halfway wanted, and guitar strains
stretch from the state border
into the Atlantic

with its cliff and shelf, the window's blind blades
meaning something just now,
behind them, the sick crepe myrtle,

ghost of a maple. Love is round,
is perseverance, is next week
paid in horsehair. Love owns

this part of the melody, turns the world
away from ruin for the second it takes
to inhale a breath,

then for less than that,
obscures the chords
so I hear my own ear canal contract,

and the melody again,
translucent under the skin. In the psalms,
it's all right to want,

it's all right to starve,
and to pledge yourself to the air—
in this muddy room,

a measure's left to keep proving
it still wants us,
our world quickly made

of stones and river water
and grief transmuted into fire.

Matisse in Morocco

~for Willem at four months

The blue is nothing like yours,
streaked with white
to the almost-black rims,
but you're afraid of mirrors. When nothing consoles,
what you find in the sea-blue
just beyond the girl's dark hair
sets your mouth a little open,
quiet. No interest yet in the veil,
in the orange fish, three of them,
their yellow undercoats swimming
in your own fish-eye,
incomprehensible. Behind them,
the night-blue wall
makes everything real,
background to your first dreams. If she floats
among so many blues much longer,
she might stop being something else,
become a girl posed
with her legs crossed under her.
She kneels our way
about to make the best tea,
her slippers off; if she said something,
it would be one natural word,
something she learned
at your age. Her robe's yellow pattern
goes muted to green diamonds
near her face, an ellipsis of flesh
with a full mouth,
stick-eyes you'll know one day
without asking why. As in this room,
there's a window somewhere
giving a triangle of light,
imperfect for being early,
the very early morning
of tea not yet made, slippers off,
as I said before—

there's something of a trance
one's sadness allows;
blues you find
as if born to them.

Appendix B: Poems from *Atlas Hour* (2011)

In the Butterfly Room with Luke at 8 Months

I would bless the fingers of your hand
prune stained and prune busy
your father's sweet efforts to feed you
when you want nothing so much as naps
and then to wake into the eaves of the vivarium
your brother calling everything a *blue morpho*
and in a way he's right
they are dim on one side and brilliant
on the other so much the rhythm
of our blue risk and retreat
nearly native now you look
into the owl eye of the largest wing
as the volunteer comes with his feather on a stick
to rouse roof sleepers as if such a thing existing
made the world realer or opened it just so
earlier the dawn flight and the cold rain
the blowout in the coat check line
the alarm of the other patrons at your skin's glow
rare as something kept under glass
upstairs the magical creatures of the sea *from Africa*
your brother would say all the windy way back
to the hotel room the last leaves of fall
orange and wet under our feet and later
both of you having learned of street sound having felt the hiss
of radiator heat on bare ankles
across town in the warm of that room
with its vines and pools of nectar
each in its own time to be harvested

II.

if I could stitch your name into history somewhere
strange fish I would follow you into possible water
or walk out into the deepest
music of childhood perfect jellyfish-bunny-ears-starfish-electric-eels
so like pictures on postcards
but here the names of the dead are so many children
their dreams asleep in an apartment full of bees
a museum so full of names our own children
think to tell you *Christ in Limbo*
made safer for seeing detail
our boys barely thought of
your mother still lost somewhere
in the rain that was coming remember
the day on the street we walked a little ahead
noticed the third floor storm drain
the basement full of yard goods
saw what little protection a devil offers
a thousand sirens calling children
most of them gone now the *house of the minute*
stitched on register paper drawn by a child
and pent up inside us an undersea world
a feeling the wind a little story
the annunciation told backward
hem of a skirt *prehensile* and its antecedents
all of it something I wanted

Appendix C: Busy Their Hands & *Kenyon Review* Conversation

Busy Their Hands (published in *Kenyon Review* Spring 2014)

How bright our misfortunes how glimmering with frost
shivered in new air stunned by the outlines of their own hands
how fuzzily they focused their eyes on us unsure who we were
how uncertain their conclusions and temporarily not-made-of-words
as we cupped in our hands the soft parts of their skulls and sleeping
to put our loud noises *it's all right* we said *it's not dangerous*
you can't follow how strong our small holdings
quick to grow and thoroughgoing their straight lines
as they did every hour on the hour how blonde and brunette red dark
misfortunes seemed as they grew asking a thousand questions
how quickly they wound their way ahead down the path to the beach
which were large *too large* we called after into unhearing winds
how furiously they stood at an angle against seas we worried
but didn't of suffering they asked in the most eliding of ways
in their brightness toward some understanding then shared it
we looked we found very little and determined set out
the parts of our heartbreak inventing new spellings for grief
once they knew more than they should've
after details and facts just the answer to which of their playmates
they said *but what can we do* their skin bright as ever and thin
happened can't unhappen they said no thinner their skin
than at any other zero hour and busy their hands back

in their infancy they
in black space
or what a smile was
their perceptions
then restless nowhere
if some sounds go where
their bones and enamel
their circles and singing
and bright-faced our
about every wrong thing
toward the waves
and small as anything
would eat them
after others they worried
with us saying *wherever*
naming like snow
no questions they said
no wondering as we had
had perished *sad* yes
as an atmosphere *what's*
I reminded myself
to what they were doing

From *Kenyon Review Conversations*

Is there a story behind your KR poem “Busy Their Hands”? What was the hardest part about writing it?

“Busy Their Hands” was the first poem I wrote after the events of December 14, 2012, happened in my town (Sandy Hook, CT). I wrote the poem on Sunday, I think, after the shooting occurred on Friday. I have two children who do not attend the school but another nearby, and the poem chronicles my telling the older one about the tragedy, as well as my thoughts about raising both of them from their infancy to the present moment. I think the poem can be read as a poem about parenting in general, about accepting the sense of danger that is always everywhere surrounding children once you admit that to yourself; the specific event that incited the poem is the tragedy, but small, almost imperceptible dangers dog children all the time. In the poem, I recall watching my children run toward the ocean—suddenly so big I worried all that water would consume them. It doesn’t, and mostly, the dangers pass. But they are there, right there (“thin as an atmosphere”). Recently I listened to another poet answering questions about whether he feared death now differently than earlier in his life. He said something along the lines of, “well, I never worried about death at all but now I have children and so I’m terrified of dying.” The person asking said he didn’t have kids, so he didn’t understand why that changed things, to which the poet answered, “well, I just love them so much I’m terrified all the time.”

So there is that reality to raising kids, or more broadly, to loving anyone or anything—the reality of separation, which can happen unexpectedly and permanently. As James Wright says in “A Blessing,” “they love each other / there is no loneliness like theirs.” “Busy Their Hands” brings me near enough to my own isolation, and to those fears, to experience them intimately, and simultaneously asks me to remain near my children, who continue to grow, who return to their tasks seemingly unchanged by this sense of danger that is paralyzing to me. We often think of children as unaware of danger; we pretend we can protect them. I think it may be the opposite; as my son shows me in this poem—children are habituated to danger in a way that seems, to adults, intolerable. The poem grapples with or tries to accommodate that understanding. (Or so I came to understand after the writing of it.)

“Busy Their Hands” builds from tender and innocuous images of infancy to a much more disquieting picture of danger and fear in childrearing. However, while the poem intensifies emotionally as it progresses, the tone and pitch remain consistent throughout. Could you tell us about your diction and pacing choices and how they serve the larger aims of this poem?

The poem is in a very strange form—a form that I’ve written in for a couple of years. I’d say altogether I’ve written in this strange form for about three years, and this poem came around the 1.5 year mark of my experience with this form. I have noticed as I worked with the form that it relies more on the musicality of language than my other poems had previously. These poems tend to repeat snippets of language and rely on inverted or totally exploded syntactic structures; meaning, as such, flies in and out of view and doesn’t seem quite as important as the tonal resonances that build inside the structure of the poem. So I can see what you mean about the poem intensifying as it progresses. In this poem in particular, that intensity is especially important,

given the subject matter, but I would say the form (rather than the subject) and its focus on language is what intensifies the emotion for me. The experience of the language is always, for me, the most important experience I have in the writing of a poem. So, the diction and pacing choices are language rather than subject-driven, and I simply work with the poem until it reaches a sort of tonal color or pitch that seems to suit it. Then I look back (not without fear, I might add) at what it is the poem might have *said* while the machinery of all this music was being visited upon me. I think the results elide themselves in interesting ways and resist meanings in ways that I find—what shall I say—emotionally responsible? That’s high-minded, but what I mean is I find more out about how I feel than what I think from these poems in this form. They provide a sort of linguistic and emotional gut-check.

What have you learned about the writing process in the last five years?

That I need it in ways I could never have appreciated earlier in my life, and that it’s very important that I show up to do the work they require.

Which non-writing-related aspect of your life most influences your writing?

Love. Love of persons and places and the existence of same. Love of language and paint and mica flecks and yellow leaves. And so on.

Of all the things you could be doing, why do you write?

Writing helps me move toward (though never arrive at) the person I would like to be. I don’t know of anything else that could help me get to that person, that person who knows how to love. I do know how silly this sounds, by the way, but you asked!

In the 1950s, John Crowe Ransom invited a coterie of critics (William Empson, Northrop Frye, etc.) to write a “credo” for *The Kenyon Review*. The results became an essay series by 10 leading critics on their core beliefs regarding literature and the critical practice, entitled “My Credo.” What would you include in your own credo? What core beliefs do you have about literature and books?

I have only one question for my own writing and for literature I read: does it search? I need the answer to be yes.

Could you tell us a little about one of your current or upcoming writing projects?

I’m writing poems and essays now, sort of how I want when I want, because I’ve finished a few manuscripts and feel freed up by those finishings. I’m free not to gather things into a book but to let what’s coming come to me singly, severally. Perhaps I’ll keep writing poems in this form or move out of it—I don’t know. I would like to know that, but I guess I won’t know it until it happens. In the meantime, I’m reading a bit about Vermeer and a few other painters, and I’m enjoying the essay writing I’m doing.