

“The Small Made Large”

This exercise is based off of the standalone essay “The Lizard” in T Kira Madden’s memoir-in-essays, *Long Live The Tribe of Fatherless Girls*. In reflecting on the process of writing her memoir-in-essays in April 2021, T Kira Madden offered this: “In terms of knowing which memory to write about, or which memory might work well on the page, you have to first write about the moments that hold charge for you. Remember memories that hold charge can hold charge for so many different reasons. It could just be a memory that you’ve turned over in your mind again and again. It could be a memory that is confusing or befuddling to you. A memory that holds shame. A memory that holds joy. Any memory that holds charge is also sharp, and if you write with enough care and detail, the metaphor or meaning will surface.”

For this exercise, please complete the following to draft your own powerful standalone moment (whether an essay, poem, or work of fiction) that holds charge for you or your character.

1. Choose an emotion that holds charge for you in this moment. Could be anger, or joy, or something less concrete and defined: curiosity, admiration, affection, hunger, etc.
2. List 10 memories that embody that emotion.
3. Looking this list over, write down a new or evolved or completely separate second emotion that this list of memories induces or make you feel.
4. Now choose only one of those memories and write about it in one distinct present-tense sentence that follows any one of the following (or, if you’d prefer, just dive right into it): “Here’s an early/a recurring/a sharp/a necessary memory:” “A thing I cannot stop thinking about:” “Why do I remember this?:” “What I need/want you to know:”
5. Finish this sentence: “Years/months/days from now, I will...”. This should, ideally, be a definitive, concrete statement that is not immediately or obviously linked to the memory itself. You will tear a page from a notebook and pin it to your bulletin board. You will quit smoking. You will watch the snow fall over the Cascades. You will earn enough money to come home. You will learn the Tlingit word for *cute* and wrap your mouth around it. You will stain a shed blood red.
6. Now write about this event in the present-tense, beginning with #4 and ending with #5. As you write, work to incorporate the #1 emotion or the #3 emotion or both, either by way of mood/tone/atmosphere or the way the essay makes the reader feel by the end of the piece.

The Lizard (from *Long Live The Tribe of Fatherless Girls*)
T Kira Madden

Here's another early memory: I'm chewing up a grilled cheese sandwich on the floor of my living room when I see it, the lizard, dashing out from behind the TV unit. It skitters across our white tiles on its lizard legs. Its head twitches around and around, looking for something in lizard motion, unpredictable in a way that makes me feel sick. I don't trust it.

My father is asleep on the couch, a sports game blaring, the remote still gripped in his hand. His chapped mouth hangs open; he's zonked but balanced, almost poised, on an elbow.

I pick up one of his empty glasses off the coffee table, a thick layer of extra crystal on the bottom of it. I'm clumsy with the glass; my hand can't even wrap the circumference. I sniff the inside. Gag, dramatically. I decide I must capture the lizard, show it who's boss. I decide that I must take control, for once, of a situation.

The lizard is unmoving beneath the kitchen counter. I take off crawling toward it, and it runs. I stand up, chase the lizard into the kitchen. I rush it up and down the wall, cupping my glass against the paint. My bare feet slap-slap the tile as I chase the lizard through the hallway, and down one step, until it slides beneath the mildewed crack of the garage door. This isn't enough. Now that I'm chasing it, now that my chest is pumping, now that the lizard is scared, I don't want to stop. I open the door and let my eyes adjust. Sunlight leaks around the garage door like a glowing picture frame. I look under paint buckets, around the oily car stains, I will find it, and then I do: the lizard, motionless, in the far right corner of the garage.

You can trust me, I say, Shhhhhh.

I move slowly, carefully. I make my voice sound high and coddling.

This time, when I approach it, the lizard does not run. It stares at me, breathing, its little red lizard balloon pumping at its throat.

I'm not going to hurt you, I say. I said that.

Once I am squatting right next to the lizard, I move the glass out from behind my back. I stare at the lizard, its darting eyes, the tiniest nails. I hold the base of the glass in my palm; I am perfectly still for two counts of Mississippi before I snap the empty side down, right on top of the lizard. The glass does not break, but the lizard does. The edge of the glass has severed the tail off, right in the center. It went down smooth, without resistance, as if the tail were made of lizard putty. The lizard tail begins wagging across the concrete garage floor while the rest of the body jumps inside the glass, pushing against it.

My scream cleaves the air as I run back into the house.

I never take the glass off the lizard. I never let the air in. Instead I become afraid of the garage from that day forward, that awful rubbery smell, what it meant to be a grown-up.

For years, the lizard came to me each time I began falling asleep. I couldn't push it out from behind my eyes: all those lizard movements, the way it had finally trusted me. I thought of the way I had chased it, the blood rush of that. I thought of not much else. A body, severed, does not die right away. It fights, thrashes. Every part of remembers.