

COMA STORY & THE COMMA

Betsy Warland

From

Breathing the Page

Cormorant Books, 2010

This essay is for my Memoir of Inquiry 2020 course. You must ask my permission to reproduce this essay.

When my narrative subjects are different, why do they end up sounding the same?

A coma story is an autobiographically based story that we retell and retell. Usually it is a story about a lived experience from the past that was difficult, remarkable, pivotal, or humorous. Often a coma story is an embroidered or exaggerated lived-experience story. With the repetitive telling of particular coma stories the teller soon believes them to be unquestionably true. All coma stories are told for the purpose of entrenching a perspective that the teller prefers listeners maintain about the teller, or his or her story's subjects. Myth and sacred stories differ from coma story as they vary with the teller, are constructed with underlying levels of meanings, and are concerned with maintaining a long-standing community.

How can we spot a coma story imprinting itself on our writing? Typically, coma stories use simple language and narrative structure that often include clichés and stereotyping. They are relatively short. They are told exactly the same time after time and not infrequently, are told (in one version or another) throughout one's lifetime. They always smooth over complexities and contradictions. Although typically based on one's lived experience, coma stories can also be hand-me-down coma stories passed on to us via a family member.

I call these stories *coma stories* because their narratives are hermetically sealed. The teller and the listener are in a static, predictable relationship, for the teller will not allow any variation or disparity. When challenged, arguments will often ensue between the teller and listener(s). Although the act of forming such stories is liberating initially because they ensure our perspectives of these event are evident to others but they quickly entrap us in our habitual and reductive way of retelling of them.

For a writer, a coma story may provide the initial impetus for a narrative. These narratives may become realized in any genre. *Bloodroot – Tracing the Untelling of Motherloss*, is an example of this in my own writing process. I had a coma story about how my mother would never really want to know who I was. A year prior to her death, she “confessed” to me she “had another daughter” whom she wanted me to meet. My mother frequently lapsed into senility. I had learned not to correct her, but to follow her circuitous logic. This time, the other daughter turned out to be a metaphor for me – her actual daughter – the daughter she didn't know. If I had clung to my coma story, I would never have allowed this remarkable opening my mother gave me: I would have quickly corrected her error and our relationship would have remained sadly static. I would not have recognized the gift being offered to me that later became *Bloodroot*.

When we recognize the trance we can easily fall into, we can then awaken ourselves from the coma story's grip on our narrative. Though we tend to think of a trance in terms of

hypnosis, it more frequently is a state of being dazed; a state of being detached from our physical surroundings and our bodies.

As we re-sensitize, we begin to see that there is a difference between fidelity to an event and what Denise Levertov called “fidelity to experience.” Recounting an event results in reportage—we fail to awaken from the coma. Recreating the unfolding of an event immediately locates both writer and reader inside the unpredictability and subtleties of that specific experience. This is the effect that we are after: it is the dynamic experience that we are intrigued by, not the static event.

During the process of writing my 2005 book *only this blue*, I discovered that it wasn’t the specific causes of my life-threatening illness that drew me to write the book but rather the how my illness radically altered my experience of ordinary daily things so dramatically that it forever changed my perception of them. It was challenging yet invigorating to discover how to replicate—as much as possible—that on the page, how the ordinary was no longer the ordinary.

As a writer, it is essential that you study the narrative structure of your coma story. Why? Because your story may appear to change but the underlying template of the original coma story can still remain operative. Our coma templates form the habits with which we unthinkingly and repeatedly inscribe in our poetry or prose. Our templates are usually poor fits for our non-coma narratives. In fact, those coma forms are most often at odds with the requirements of the narrative we are writing. The fit can be so inappropriate that it not only alters the writer’s narrative intentions but distorts the narrative itself. One poet with whom I did manuscript development had a template preventing her from discerning her true manuscript. She had a “tangent” of poems that she kept dismissing: they didn’t fit in with the “real” manuscript. Upon reading her manuscript, I asked to read her tangent poems and discovered that these poems possessed remarkable energy and originality. Once she extracted herself from her template, she recognized their worth and they became the sole basis of her new manuscript for which eventually she received a national award.

The value in coma stories is that they are an efficient method of memory retention. When recounted, our intimates automatically “fill in the blanks.” Our readers, however — outside this close circle— do not. Coma stories function as a personal codification system that can, when worked with consciously, connect us to the narrative we long to access. A narrative about being a tree planter in a remote region of British Columbia can read like a coma story when written as a description of the job. Or, it can “take us there” by evoking and reflecting upon the philosophical, sociological, and political states that drove you to the very precipice of your mental and physical capacities.

If we lack this larger narrative awareness, we are easily seduced by the comfort and the predictability of a coma story for it reins in the inevitable complexities of the narrative. This makes the narrative easier to write. All too often, however, it results in a loss of the reader’s attention. As writers, we are often troubled by a dull sense of “something missing.” When you hear a voice saying “the reader really doesn’t want or need to know about this” you are likely in the clutches of a coma story. This is when you know it is time to surrender to the real power trapped inside the coma story: let the story tell itself. Then our narrative seizes its life in a way that excites and sometimes even initially terrifies us.

When I encounter coma story, I ask the writer to elaborate verbally about their narrative. Almost without fail, they begin to decode the coma and their narrative immediately becomes far more engaging. Upon my remarking on this, usually their response is “It’s already there in the poem,” or in that scene. I ask them to point this out on the page. Most writers are surprised to discover that it is not there – that it is still locked in their minds. At this exciting point, a writer can “puncture” their hermetically sealed poem or piece of prose by “writing into the commas” of a coma story. As Ezra Pound says, “make it new.” For each comma — figurative or literal— is a potential opening to what imaginative and associative possibilities the coma story seeks.

Most commas function as appropriate grammatical signals of pauses or separations within a fully realized sentence or lyric line: there is no need to write into them. We must, however, investigate, even interrogate, those pauses and separations (inscribed by a literal or figurative comma) that signal what the narrative requires. We might think of these commas as the currents of a river. If we write only about the water, we remain on the surface of the coma story. If we write into the currents, then the narrative pulls us along of its own free will and we do not know what will be revealed, how the narrative will move, nor exactly how it will end.

Keep in mind that imagined (completely fictional) stories also can become coma stories! As writers, we can become fixated on our original idea for a narrative and refuse to recognize what the narrative's requirements are.

How do we consistently recognize a coma story? Some typical signals for which to look are: abrupt transitions; patches of awkward syntax; tangents; generalized, clichéd lines or phrases that camouflage disparities; images or words that unintentionally appear repeatedly that are seeking your attention; gaps, or juxtapositions of lines or sections that inexplicably "don't add up."

As an exercise from time to time, write a coma story that's related, directly or indirectly, to your writing project or subject. To do this, it should be a story you have told numerous times in the same way. Make every attempt to render it exactly as you tell it – refrain from making it literary or from explaining or improving any aspect of it. After you have written a coma story, write into a comma in your coma story by doing one or more of the following:

- Insert a comma before the first word of the story and write (whatever comes to you) into that comma
- Insert a comma (or caveat) anywhere in the story where you know or sense there's more to tell (including the censored or dismissed) and write into that comma

- Delete the period at the end of the story and replace it with a comma and write into that open space. It may be productive to set a timer and allow yourself do a free-writing exercise for 5 minutes without pausing or judging it

When we have become proficient in knowing our coma story templates, our writing will still migrate in and out of it. It can happen from one poetic line to the next, from one paragraph to the next, from one chapter or one narrative to the next. Sometimes coma story, although initially crucial to building a narrative, must be removed later in the writing and revising process just as a builder removes scaffolding in later stages of construction.

Occasionally, the nature of a particular narrative requires that we consciously work the edge between the coma and comma as this is an inherent struggle within the narrative itself. The pervasive power of the coma story and its formal template can never be overestimated. When, however, we write into the surprising narrative territory of the commas, our narratives pulse on the page.