

*Wag's Revue* is proud to award "The Country I Came From" by Lili Wright its Inaugural Prize in Nonfiction.

"Ms. Wright is able to evoke the swiftest humor and pathos with the shortest, swiftest strokes in this essay. While marvelously crafted, I chose this work because of the pertinence of what it has to say. From her vantage point atop so-called Old Journalism, Ms. Wright looks upon this beast that is the internet, and the writer's precarious citizenship in it, contributing much to today's dialogue about the death of print."

-Sandra Allen, Nonfiction Editor

# THE COUNTRY I CAME FROM

Lili Wright

**What we knew and what we loved no longer exists.**

**The man tells us this as he paces the seminar room, his expression as dark and triumphant as an open umbrella. Newspapers are dying. Bloggers outpace reporters. Copy editing jobs are being shipped to India. Objectivity, that old journalistic credo, has been replaced by Transparency.**

**“There has been a fundamental change in the way we think about the media,” he says. “I am not suggesting there was no value in what we did, but those days are over.”**

**We are journalism teachers. We’ve come to New York for an all-day workshop in New Media. We listen, leaning toward the Power Point screen like plants yearning for sun. The man is confirming our worst fears. The ensuing sense of sadness and betrayal smacks like adultery. Our skills are outdated. We are not loved or even respected. We have become the proverbial dodo.**

**The man is no youngster himself: silver-haired, acne-scarred, ex-military, ex-newsroom. He begins his presentation on a personal note. By the end of the day, he says, some of us will hate him. He knows this. He is ok with it. He also wants us to know he has phlebitis. This is why he paces. In the past, some people have commented on the evaluations passed out after his talks that he sounds angry. He is not angry. Not angry at all. It’s just that he’s in pain.**

*oo*

**The hotel where I am staying has 1949 rooms. My room is on the 43<sup>rd</sup> floor and my ears pop on the long ride up. The room has a large window that drops to the ground. The cars in Times**

Square look like toys you could pick up and throw. For our safety, a small sign reports, the windows cannot be opened. The sheets have a high thread count. The bed is hyper-puffed, uber-swaddled, and has seven white pillows of various sizes.

Riding the elevator down 42 floors feels like falling down a drain. The elevator has its own video screen that broadcasts the latest headline news. Joe Biden's mother has fallen ill and was taken to the hospital. A juror is accused of Twittering during a trial. Louisville is the worst city in the nation for allergies and asthma. The mini TV also knows the time and temperature and how the stock market is doing and the value of the yen.

In a blur, we pass the eighth floor, where people with nametags are milling around the journalism conference I am supposed to be attending. I am supposed to be chaperoning the four college students who traveled with me, but instead I sneak out to catch up with old friends. After college and again in my thirties, I lived in Manhattan and it feels like I am visiting a homeland where I no longer quite belong. This trip may be illuminating. I can feel that already. Lately, only when I travel do gain any sort of clarity—where I've been, where I am, where I'm going. Perhaps this statement reflects badly on marriage or motherhood or maybe it's always been easier to see things from a distance, like an Impressionist painting that becomes clearer the farther you step back.



When I started out as a reporter in Greenwich Village, our newsroom did not have computers. There was no Internet or e-mail or blogs or FaceBook or eBay or Amazon or cell phones or iPods or scanners or digital cameras or streaming video or YouTube or Google or Yahoo or Blackberries or laptops or even fax machines. We wrote our stories on manual typewriters. When you hit the keys hard, the paper fluttered like a sail luffing in

the wind. To erase a word, you painted it with White-Out. If you wanted to move a paragraph, you cut it out with scissors and stapled it in the correct order on a fresh sheet of paper so you wouldn't have to retype. Sometimes I cut and stapled individual sentences or indicated edits with wild looping lines. The stories I sent to the typesetter resembled plates of linguini. Money was tight so instead of buying paper, we typed stories on the back of press releases. Instead of buying manila folders, we cut two sides of incoming 8x12 envelopes and stuffed papers inside them. We sold our weekly newspaper out of a Bowery storefront for 25 cents. When we'd saved a couple bucks, we bought new ballpoint pens. These sound like stories a grandmother would tell. I am forty-five years old.



The man is still pacing. His face is flushed. He tells us journalism is not broken, but the business model is. Success today is not contingent on a skill set, but a mindset. You must be obsessed with technology. “If you don't know basic HTML, you are doomed.” In the modern newsroom, breaking stories must be rewritten every four minutes. You have to be fast and you have to be accurate and you have to understand web culture. Journalists are now evaluated on three—and only three—criteria. He pauses to be sure we are listening, then holds up three fingers. “Errors and speed and clicks.”



The first thing I notice is the scaffolding. I'd forgotten about scaffolding. There is no scaffolding in the small Midwestern town where I teach. The second thing I notice is the sidewalks smell like food. Good food. Garlic and soy sauce and toast. The third thing I notice is how black everyone is. Black hair. Black

clothes. Black boots. Black coats. Black purses. Black backpacks. The fourth thing I notice is that on almost every corner in New York you can buy a cupcake. Manhattan has become the cupcake capital of the planet. The fifth thing I notice, or rather remember, is the hollow ca-chunking sound cars make when they drive over manhole covers. It is an ominous sound, a shout out to the dead. The sixth I notice is the cabs have TV sets. When I was last in New York, Joan Rivers kept nagging riders to buckle up on a taped recording. Now a TV screen reminds you to tune into “The View.”

In Starbucks, I take a stool facing the window. My knees press against the glass. A Tibetan monk in a beige cloak strolls past. A body builder searches for milk. His chest is a triangle of muscle. His head is big as a globe. The man next to me is talking into his cell phone: “Everybody is fucking talking shit about each other.” I sip my coffee and burn my tongue. The seventh thing I notice, before I stop keeping track, is that Starbucks now lists calorie counts on bakery items. It is hard to tell which number is the price and which are the calories. Many numbers begin with four.

Someone taps me on the shoulder. A thin-haired man with a belly says: “Hi, sweet hunka of burning love.” He says this in the tone not of someone quoting Elvis, but of someone who has put parts of his body inside mine. I look into his eyes. I do not see any old boyfriend there, not even one I might have dreamt or forgotten. His hand covers his mouth. His eyes widen and his face drips like an egg as he babbles “I’m sorry” and runs away, literally, runs.



I became a reporter because it was the only job I could think of where you got to write every day. I stayed in journalism for the stories. I wrote stories about whippet weddings and beauty

pageants and the depleted state of feminism. I wrote stories about old people who play slot machines and the gender issues of snow shoveling and fat people who are proud to be fat and school budget increases and racist advertising campaigns and swindlers with aliases and the ground-breaking of a new Mormon temple and the cat show and a Zoning Board of Appeals hearing about a non-conforming tree house and the doublespeak of academia and the national shortage of cadavers.

There was no technology in journalism, not really. Just a typewriter, and later a computer. What we had was paper. I love paper. Maybe I was in journalism for the paper. The smell. The feel. I liked that readers could cut out my articles and hang them on the fridge or mail them to their mothers and never once did I have to wonder what I'd done on a particular day because I could hold up my story: I made this.

Some of the best stories happened in the newsroom itself, like the story of the night-shift reporter in Salt Lake who used to keep a bottle of booze under his desk and one night was so drunk he tried to close his head in the file cabinet.

Or my old boss, Lise, a large Jewish woman who wore linen tent dresses and noshed garlic bagels and smoked Capris as she edited my stories with one finger like a crippled pirate, a woman who – because Paul Newman lived in our town - clandestinely freelanced for *The National Enquirer*. When she edited an error into one of your stories, she'd say: "Mea culpa. Mea culpa." And if you were still pissed, she'd pout and say: "If you want, we'll run a correction."

Or my boss at my very first newspaper job, an oversized elf with a beard and cigar who, when I asked to be paid—it had been three weeks—accused me of being selfish. How could I ask for money when he hadn't been paid for two months? When I quit—he owed me five weeks salary—I knew I'd never see the money so I scouted around the office for something to steal as compensation. The only thing of value was a beige Swingline

stapler, which I slipped into my backpack. I still have it.

Or the Jersey tabloid where I worked which featured every day a local woman in a bikini on page six. In winter, these women came into our offices and posed on the boardroom table. In summer, I used to drive to the Jersey Shore with our Pulitzer-Prize winning photographer to scout out fresh “Page Six Girls.” Our editor warned us that Page Six Girls were the only thing keeping us afloat so it was my job to concoct feature stories that could be illustrated with girls in bikinis, which, come to think of it, is not that different from what the man is now suggesting when he urges us to figure out which key words are popular on Google searches and write stories using these words.



My friend Phillip visits me in my hotel room. Phillip was on my freshman hall in college. We all knew Phillip was gay back then, but it took him a couple more years to come out with it. Phillip works in advertising. He used to have red hair but now it's gray and buzzed short as a putting green. When I look into his face, I still see the boy, the innocent, the freshman trying to decide which classes to take.

“You are really up there.” Phillip sits on the couch, cranes his head over his shoulder to look down at the view.

“I feel such like a target,” I say. “If someone were going to bomb New York, where would they do it? Here. Times Square. And here I am on the 43<sup>rd</sup> floor.”

“Yes.” Phillip agrees with a nod. “But do you realize that the people at the top of the Trade Towers were twice as high?”



Phillip and I go to a Broadway show, a dramatic comedy about a dysfunctional family. The set is a house that has been sawed in

half. Divorce, pedophilia, incest, addiction, this family has it all working and the relief I feel watching their chaos reminds me why I love Woody Allen movies. It is a comfort to watch families crazier than our own.

My favorite moment in the play occurs during a family dinner. A fat uncle is stumbling through grace. He is not a good speaker, but he means well, and he struggles to find words for all that lies in his heart. Everyone is holding hands. A cell phone rings. The sleazy boyfriend of one of the daughters excuses himself to take the call. The sister and her brother-in-law have to stretch their entire bodies to make up for the gap, to be sure the chain of hands is not broken. Oblivious, the uncle carries on with his prayer, giving thanks, giving thanks, giving thanks. Arms stretched, the brother-in-law hangs his head. He looks as though he's been crucified.

Over curry, Phillip and I talk about our mothers. Phillip's mother died when he was 25. My mother died three years ago. Though our fathers are still alive, we feel like orphans. His father remarried seven months after his mother passed away. My father is still in shock, too damaged to function. We are middle-aged, yet it is hard to fathom that we will never again be mothered. We have grown out of a time we had no desire to leave.

I can't help stating the obvious. "I miss my mother a lot."

Phillip says: "I miss my mother. She missed so much of me."



The man has brought a friend along, who he now introduces. She is his protégé, a web whiz kid he discovered because, unlike most young people he meets, she was smart enough to take his advice. She now runs the homepage of the largest daily newspaper in the country. She literally decides what the American public will read. She is 23 years old. Her brown hair is

pulled off her face like a cheerleader. Her gold earrings dangle like miniature moons. She says the key to her success has been her willingness to embrace new technology, look forward, and most of all, knock down silos.

“I am always knocking down silos,” she says. Her gold earrings flutter. “I hate them. HATE THEM.”

At first I think I know what she means by “knocking down silos,” then I realize I don’t. What is so terribly wrong about silos? They stand alone. They are old. These do not seem like mortal offenses. As she talks about optimizing Google, I picture the silos on the farms in Indiana, the ones I pass driving my daughter to ballet. Most are silver and round, their triangular tops shaped like missiles. They are part of the rural landscape, stoic and rusted, with a faded grandeur akin to barns and water towers and bleached-out billboards. Silos are humble structures that hold our most basic provisions, buildings that, in the case of apocalypse, would keep us alive.



My friends Frieda and John invite me to dinner. Frieda freelances for magazines. Her husband, John, writes graphic novels. We met in Mexico, where I lived with my family on sabbatical for a year. It seems strange to see them squeezed into a rent-stabilized apartment when we used to sip cocktails on a patio surrounded by lilies and honeysuckle. Back then, Señora Frieda was la patrona who ran the pool guy and the gardener, the tutor and the cook. Their lives seem smaller in the city. Frieda has lost weight. After dinner, we settle on couches, sipping wine and nibbling rugala, while their 12-year-old daughter Stefanie gets ready for bed.

The news flies out in no particular order. John is publishing a new book. Frieda has a new client. Stefanie has pubic hair.

John's dad died six months ago. We talk about his mother. She has cancer that may be inoperable and is unsure what to do. She is taking a new experimental treatment. They have tried to talk with her.

Frieda explained her frustration. "I keep asking her: 'What do you want to do? Do you want to travel? Do you want to go to Paris?'"

Frieda stares into the kitchen to the dinner table we've left behind.

"She just keeps saying: 'I have so little time left.'"



After dinner, we walk to the kitchen in search of water. It's a small room and we bump shoulders as we peer out the window into the night. John points out the two new apartment buildings that popped up in their absence, blocking out strips of the sky. We can see inside the apartments. The TVs flicker like lightning. Everyone, it seems, has a wide-screen TV. I squint and try to see what programs they are watching, but can only make out abstract flashes of color. It seems incredible that inside these huge metal buildings, inside boxes of carpet and glass, are people with soft skin and fallen arches, mothers and fathers, children with sniffles. Frieda says: "Look how they all put their TVs in the same place."

When it's time to go, I wait for the elevator. By the door hangs a framed copy of a New Yorker cover I have never seen. The reason I have not seen it is that it was never printed. John submitted the cover but it wasn't accepted. The drawing shows New York City covered in scaffolding and in one corner, before a plate-glass building, a wrecking ball about to crash.

My friend Page catches me up her dating life. I live vicariously through her exploits. It is like staring through a window at someone else's TV. After her divorce, she started Internet dating, where she met a nice man who tutors Spanish and landscapes and everything was lovely until she learned he was sleeping around—with a man and a woman. Page learned this because one day he forgot to log out of his e-mail. One of the e-mails referred to his “hot burning dick.” Stunned, shaking, Page walked downstairs to where he was fixing her desk. She asked about the letters. His face turned white. Furious, he demanded Page log out of his e-mail. Page rushed for her computer, clutching her laptop against her chest. He lunged at her. She screamed: “Are you going to hurt me?” He said: “No, I am just going to log out.”

She tells me this and I say: “Oh, Page.”

She frowns. “I know.”

Since then, Page met a nice man, but he lives in Oregon and she lives in New York and so they e-mail and sometimes have phone sex.

One time my mother came to New York for this same journalism conference to help me with the baby. My daughter Madeline was one. Mom wasn't much help, but I didn't care. We both knew that she'd come to spend time with us, to visit a place she wouldn't have had the nerve to explore on her own. My mother got breast cancer when she was 48. She'd been fighting back for 15 years. As her energy wasn't great, she was more than willing to hole up in the Edison Hotel while Madeline napped. The two of them napped together. My mother and my daughter. They breathed in the same room—Madeline in her foldout crib,

Mom in the cranky double bed—while I walked the streets of New York and when I came back bearing packages and a tall cup of coffee, it seemed like my whole world was clustered in four walls in Manhattan. A dusty light came in the window. Mom lifted her head, then rested it again, happy to see me, too lazy to move. I lay down next and felt that I was home.

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My friend Fiona's old boyfriend Gary asked her to go to a hotel with him. Fiona tells me this at dinner. Fiona is the most stable human being I know. She's had the same job for 25 years. She calls her mother three times a day. She is Jewish and zaftig and is the closest thing I have to a mother. We are eating with our friend Benjamin. Benjamin is an agent. His clients star in sitcoms I have never seen. Benjamin tells us he is on a diet where he only eats brown rice, acorn squash and moong—daal because spring depresses him and he needs to cleanse. Or something. Fiona and Benjamin were my first friends in New York, back when I worked in publishing. Gary was Fiona's boyfriend from high school. Now that they are nearly 50, Gary tells Fiona that he made a terrible mistake letting her go. He wants her back. They met at a reunion. He is a lawyer. Gary wore a hang-dog suit and carried a briefcase, which everyone agreed was sweet and pathetic. Gary is the life Fiona didn't have, the way we all have lives we didn't have, the way we all had to choose.

Who Fiona has instead of Gary is Macky. Fiona's marriage to Macky is happy, as best as I can tell, although Macky has never found his calling. Macky might want to be a teacher and he might want to write children's books and he has done a lot of work with Second Life. He coaches their son's Little League team and around town everyone calls Fiona "Coach Macky's wife." Macky also grows pumpkins.

"Pumpkins?" This is news to me.

“Pumpkins,” Fiona says. “It’s his new thing. I wake up in the middle of the night and he’s not in bed and I peek out the window and he’s out in the backyard impregnating the pumpkins with a Q-tip.”



We thought we were heroes. The Fourth Estate. Ernie Pyle. H.L. Mencken. Woodward and Bernstein. Lois Lane. We made no money, but we had truth on our side. Reporters brought down the powerful, the corrupt. We questioned authority. We comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable. We gave voice to the voiceless. We wielded the mighty power of the pen. We believed in clichés but never wrote them. My old boss, a galoot from Virginia, a bull in the barnyard, coined the motto: “Raise hell. Tell stories.”

The Internet changed everything. This is true. But even before then, you could see change coming. It started back in the eighties with USA Today. USA Today wrote short. Their stories seldom jumped beyond the front page. They liked graphics and bright boxes with statistics on candy bar calories and vampire thrillers. Each state was allotted a single paragraph of news. Pretty soon, our newsroom was told to write short. The American attention span was shrinking. Newsprint cost the moon. Stories were cut back to briefs and briefs became headlines and headlines moved onto the Internet and 24-hour cable news stations and now they’re on tickertapes that circulate through cell phones and elevators and taxis and ribbon around the buildings on Times Square and no one can imagine reading a whole news story about anything. We barely have time to Twitter.

The man tells us the modern-day journalist is supposed to Twitter before he files his story. The modern-day journalist is supposed to Twitter wherever he goes.

Twitter is not a new idea. Twenty years ago, we had a word

for preliminary observations. We called them notes. When a printed story read as if a reporter had dumped his notes onto the page without editing or context, we'd joke that he'd barfed into the computer.



In the hotel mirror, I examine the gray bags under my eyes. I am drinking too much coffee. I am drinking too much wine. My tongue feels grainy. I have shin splits. I can't sleep on the 43rd floor.

It is time to optimize my beauty.

A woman named Lucy gives me a facial. Lucy is in her sixties with gray hair. She is from Russia and her accent reminds me of rye bread. She tells me my skin is not so bad, "just a little black."

We talk about how expensive New York is. Lucy sighs. "Yes, but Russia is the most expensive country. Cup of coffee there is ten dollars. There is no middle class. All gone. You either very rich or very poor. Everything has changed. The country I came from does not exist. I came from the USSR." Lucy gives me a final pat. "Now there is Russia. The only thing that is the same is the language."



The man believes in being blunt. Journalism is under siege; there is no time for niceties. Go back to your newsrooms, he exhorts. If you have students who went into journalism because they like to write, explain that it's not going to work for them. "I get long-form stories from students all the time. All the time. Everybody thinks they are Norman Mailer. The world is full of 22-year-old Norman Mailers." Someone has got to tell them the truth: "Yeah, I read that article. It sucks."

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**I didn't tip Lucy for the facial. I didn't tip Lucy because I was feeling broke after the cumulative price of New York. Or maybe I didn't tip Lucy because she kept leaving me. She'd set the steamer and disappear for 15 minutes, slap on a mask, disappear for ten minutes. She could have rubbed my feet. She could have massaged my neck. She could have told me more about Russia, but instead she left me lying in a chair in a cubicle in a building between buildings on the edge of the island of Manhattan, alone, with no music or comfort but the distant Russian patter in the next room. My mother is dead. I am back in New York. I am in no mood to be left.**

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**On Ninth Avenue, there is a long row of battered newspaper boxes, all empty. There is a red one and a green one and a yellow one and a blue one. They look like M and Ms, without the chocolate.**

*700*

**I meet a nice journalism professor from North Carolina whose business cards say he works on the second floor of the Self-Help Building.**

*700*

**After the facial, I check my skin in the mirror. That's when I realize I've become so far-sighted I can no longer see my pores.**

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**My mother is dead.  
Benjamin's mother is dead.  
Phillip's mother is dead.  
John's father is dead.  
Page's father is dead.  
Newspapers are dead.**

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**The man reaches a symphonic crescendo. He is preaching like Cotton Mather. He is making lists, pressing us to set vows for the coming new year.**

**We need to learn search-engine optimization.**

**We need to learn content-management systems.**

**We need to live on the web: Face Book. Friendfeed. LinkedIn. Del.icio.us. Twitter. "You need to make this part of your life. This is your obligation."**

**In the classroom, we must reward convergence. "If you have students who only want to write for newspapers, give them a D."**

**The man is pacing. His face is on fire.**

**"Punish them for it," he says. "P-U-N-I-S-H T-H-E-M."**

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**I ask Fiona how Adeline is. Adeline is another friend from our publishing days. Adeline wore black eyeliner and cowboy boots and used to get into bar fights with girls. Fiona frowns and looks at Benjamin. Benjamin shakes his head and turns his spoon in his tea.**

**"Crazy as ever," Fiona says. "She had this terrible accident."**

“What accident?”

“A really terrible scary accident,” says Benjamin. He is trying to prepare me.

“And . . . .”

Fiona sighs. “Adeline was driving on the highway and her car broke down and she stopped and flagged down someone and this man pulled over to the side of the road to help her and, while he was standing there, a truck went by and decapitated him. His body flew up one way and his head went another.”

Fiona looks at me. I don’t know what my face is doing.

“Literally?”

“Literally,” Fiona says. “The Good Samaritan was decapitated in front of her eyes.”



In the Q & A, a middle-aged professor asks the web whiz kid with the gold globe earrings what her dream job is. Where can she go from here, if at age 23, she edits the website of a newspaper with millions of visitors a month?

The web whiz kid looks down at her laptop. She reflects. Her job is okay for now, she says, but what she’d really like to be is a reporter.



My cab heads towards LaGuardia. The mini TV set is on. The students I am traveling with are diddling their cell phones. They do this instead of biting their nails. It’s only seven in the morning and the sky is filling with the faintest beginning of light. Times Square hasn’t let up, with its pulsating billboards and music videos of rock stars humping. At the traffic light, our taxi driver falls asleep. I nudge him. He apologizes, accelerates.

Along the streets, the police are setting up for the St. Patrick's Day parade. We rattle along. I consider the scaffolding—its weight, its geometry, its reason for being. I always thought scaffolding was a platform to stand on if you needed to wash windows or fix something up high, but it now occurs to me that its other use may be paramount. Scaffolding is modern-day armor, a layer of tin over your head, the one you hope will protect you should anything unexpectedly fall.