

Judges' Commentary for "On Dissociation"

by

Rachel Hutchinson

**"On Dissociation" shared first prize in the University of Pittsburgh's
2007/08 Composition Program Writing Contest**

A relatively open assignment asking students to develop a sensibility through detailed work with some familiar topic, while also imitating the use of notes or lists in one of four assigned essays, encourages Rachel Hutchinson to embark on a risky exploration of the limits and possibilities of communication. Her own experience with the anguish of mental dissociation provides not only her familiar topic in "On Dissociation" but also a subject on the rim of language—impossible, perhaps, to make understandable to anyone lacking firsthand knowledge, yet far too important for silence.

A composer less determined to forge connections with readers might have concentrated only on the challenge of finding words that capture personal dissociative experiences. But, from the outset, Hutchinson is clearly intent on accomplishing more:

Desperate fingers on a tired keyboard told me that writing this piece was necessary. I'm not an expert on dissociation. I only know my own experiences and how they fold together and how I seem like less of a human while my eyes are wild, my mind dilated. But every episode has a very human story to tell. ... [T]hese experiences are also about something less specific to me as an individual and more relevant to that which we call a society: the disorganized collections of individuals and the uncertain connections between them.

To strengthen her own uncertain bond with readers, she repeatedly follows intense description of a particular dissociative episode with a question that reaches out, urging her audience to consider the scene's relevance to their own

lives. A section depicting how dissociation subverts the author's sense of wonder during a church service leads, for example, to a broad question about human perspective:

My face held one of those stares others might perceive as childish, or even vacant. I was so amazed by a particular particle of dust, as it danced before my eyes. Perhaps I was imagining that the tiny spec held a tiny world. Perhaps I was perplexed that the pews of people were not aware of such a spectacle. I was truly blissful watching it, until it floated out of the light, disappearing before my eyes. At that instant I knew that it wasn't a dust particle, but a bomb that would explode and we'd all die. These pews of people stared blankly towards the priest, oblivious to this obvious danger. This is the sort of situation where I began practicing the art of silent tears.

... Each of us are touched deeply by certain things, things that may be like dust to others. **And what do we treat as dust that affects others greatly?** This is a question relevant to every being that forms relationships.

By adding the extra weight of bold font and emphatic positioning to each of her questions that reach out, the author ensures attention to the ever more resonant refrain that shapes her essay overall. The questions become, that is, a distinctive and insistent list, pressing readers to expand their own capacities to reflect on how differences in perception and "the power held in those gaps" affect us all:

This understanding is all about the pain and love involved in the disparity between my reality and yours and how our differences are interwoven into every aspect of our individual and collective lives, from art and poetry to an instance of small talk ... from a glare of contempt and condescension to crying within a warm hug after a difficult conversation.

The courageously sustained creative effort manifest in Rachel Hutchinson's difficult conversation with readers makes "On Dissociation" not merely an ambitious undertaking but a poignant, illuminating, and memorable achievement.

To read the full text of Rachel Hutchinson's essay, [click here](#)