

300 ARGU- MENTS

"[MANGUSO'S] PROSE FEELS TWICE DISTILLED: IT'S WHISKEY
RATHER THAN BEER."—LESLIE JAMISON, *THE ATLANTIC*

SARAH MANGUSO

300 ARGUMENTS

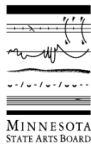
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A great photographer insists on writing poems. A brilliant essayist insists on writing novels. A singer with a voice like an angel insists on singing only her own, terrible songs. So when people tell me I should try to write this or that thing I don't want to write, I know what they mean.

You might as well start by confessing your greatest shame. Anything else would just be exposition.

It can be worth forgoing marriage for sex, and it can be worth forgoing sex for marriage. It can be worth forgoing parenthood for work, and it can be worth forgoing work for parenthood. Every case is orthogonal to all the others. That's the entire problem.

I wrote my college application essay about playing in a piano competition, knowing I would lose to the kid who had played just before me. *Even while I played knowing I would lose, I wrote, still I played to give the judges something to remember.* I pretended my spasms of self-regard transcended the judges' informed decisions about the pianists who were merely the best. I got into college.

I assume the cadets are gay, but then I see they are merely unafraid of love. They are preparing to go to war, and with so little time to waste, they say what they mean.

At faculty meetings I sat next to people whose books had sold two million copies. Success seemed so close, just within reach. On subway benches I sat next to

people who were gangrenous, dying, but I never thought I'd catch what they had.

What's worse: Offending someone or lying to someone? Saying something stupid when it's your turn, or not saying anything? Tell me which, and I'll tell you your problem.

The trouble with comparing yourself to others is that there are too many others. Using all others as your control group, all your worst fears and all your fondest hopes are at once true. You are good; you are bad; you are abnormal; you are just like everyone else.

Some people ditch friends and lovers because it's easier to get new ones than to resolve conflicts with the old ones, particularly if resolving a conflict requires

one to admit error or practice mercy. I'm describing an asshole. But what if the asshole thinks he's ditching an asshole?

Inner beauty can fade, too.

The waterbirds near my house are in middle school. The coots' voices crack; the seagulls bully the ducks; the egret just got braces and stands, humiliated, by himself.

Many bird names are onomatopoeic—they name themselves. Fish, on the other hand, have to float there and take what they get.

I used to avoid people when I was afraid I loved them too much. Ten years, in one case. Then, after I had been married long enough that I was married even in my dreams, I became able to go to those people, to feel that desire, and to know that it would stay a feeling.

In a dream my friend and I begin the act and both immediately want it to be over, but we have to continue, impelled by some obscure reason. I wake wondering whether we could ever enjoy it. I think about it all day, really dedicate myself to it. I think about it for two more days, and that's how I fall in love with my friend.

Like a vase, a heart breaks once. After that, it just yields to its flaws.

In the morning I wake amid fading scenes of different characters, different settings, all restatements of that first desire, a ghost who haunts me as the beauty he was at sixteen.

My friend learns Chinese and moves to China, but her limited vocabulary is good for grocery shopping, not for falling in love. When her heart breaks she is obliged to ask, *Why won't you fuck me?*

I've put horses in poems, but I've never ridden one. They just seem like such a good thing to put into literature.

Biographies should also contain the events that failed to foreshadow.

Facility means *prison* (building), *lifelessness* (art), or *grace* (athletes). Within a gesture of apparent perfection, a mortal heart must beat.

I remember a girl who was famous in school for having woken from a drunken blackout and said to whoever was there, *Are you my judges?*

In real life, my healthy boyfriend said that he envied my paralytic disease—that I'd earned the right to a legitimate nervous breakdown. A few years later he was in an accident and became paralyzed from the neck down. That's just bad writing.

It isn't so much that geniuses make it look easy; it's that they make it look fast.

Of a page of perfect prose I read in a dream, I remember only this: *"Thank you," she said. Her simple answer concealed the truth.*

The man who had me in a phone booth married quickly after the affair ended. His novel had everything in it—the phone booth, the shame, the sash he sewed to wear over the surgical appliance in his belly. In the novel it covers a plaster leg cast. The front page of his website is a glowing glass phone booth standing alone in snow. The book got bad reviews. He has two children.

I never joined Facebook because I want to preserve my old longings. And also yours.

We like stories that are false and seem true (realist novels), that are true and seem false (true crime), that are false and seem false (dragons and superheroes), or that are true and seem true, but it's harder to agree on what that is.

The fastest way to revise a piece of work is to send it, late at night, to someone whose opinion you fear. Then rewrite it, praying you'll finish in time to send a new version by morning.

Having a worst regret betrays your belief that one misstep caused all your undeserved misfortune.

I don't write long forms because I'm not interested in artificial deceleration. As soon as I see the glimmer of a consequence, I pull the trigger.

My teacher cried while I listened. None of his books had ever made money, not even the famous one, he said. He'd spent his life trying to write perfect books, and when he tried to make money, he couldn't. I didn't think I'd ever feel as old as he seemed at that moment, but here we are.

The difference between writers under thirty and writers over forty is that the former, like everyone their age, already know how to act like famous people: people whose job it is to be photographed.

I wish I could ask the future whether I should give up or keep trying. Then again, what if trying, even in the face of certain failure, feels as good as accomplishing? What if it's even better? And here we are again.

Horror is terror that stayed the night.

I can't bear to think of my dead friend, but I don't mind rereading a few things that have nothing to do with him and that always move me to tears. The grief

I write in defense of the beliefs I fear are least defensible. Everything else feels like homework.

Our fifth-grade class assembled cat skeletons from bags of bones and blocks of red-brown plasticine. One of my friends worked on the vertebrae, hastily sticking the clay between them. I worked on the jaw, just that one joint, trying to align the two bones perfectly. Even when I was ten I wanted to master one small thing. When I think I should change, I remember that I've never really changed, might never need to.

Finally, a form I'll always have time to write—but of course it demands more than time.
