

## A Solemn Pleasure: To Imagine, Witness, and Write

**Melissa Pritchard**

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*From grief to daily rituals to the shape of a dachshund, Pritchard insightfully connects the most obscure of subjects to reveal gems of truth about the human experience.*

The wide range of topics Melissa Pritchard addresses in her essay collection, *A Solemn Pleasure*, may at first seem unrelated to one another. What, after all, does a miniature dachshund in the swimming pool have in common with a young woman on the battlefield in Afghanistan? How does American literary criticism relate to the plight of a Sudanese refugee? The author herself is the keystone here as Pritchard celebrates the writer as witness to all that life offers, from the mundane to the silly to the profound.

Pritchard has truly seen and written about the gamut of human experience, both as an imaginative fiction writer and a fearless journalist. If there's a prize for fiction, she's probably won it; she has received the Flannery O'Connor Award and the Pushcart Prize, among many others. She's written for the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Nation*.

This collection of previously published essays demonstrates how a writer's acute observations can bring out the truth in any situation. The title piece, for instance, manages to mine the depths of grief as Pritchard navigates her parents' deaths, even as it calls out the sheer strangeness of our cremation and burial rituals. Other essays, such as the thoroughly entertaining "Doxology," will teach you more than you ever thought possible to know about dachshunds. (Do you know why they're shaped the way they are?) The journalistic entries are as personal, in their own way, as the mini memoirs, as Pritchard can't help but become emotionally—and sometimes physically and financially—invested in her subjects.

A writing teacher's sensibility—Pritchard teaches at Arizona State University—ties many of these subjects together as Pritchard considers the power of perspective in storytelling. "Whose story is this?" she asks over and over again, knowing that if she can capture the individual's experience, she has illuminated everyone's.

SHEILA M. TRASK (Summer 2015)

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