

**The First Two Pages: “The Short and Slightly Speculative
History of Lavoisier’s Wife” by Amber Sparks
From *I Do Not Forgive You: Stories And Other Revenges* (Liveright)**

An essay by Amber Sparks

I’d like to do something a little different here and talk about—rather than the first two pages or even the first two sentences—the first two words. If that seems perhaps slightly limited in scope, consider that every single paragraph in this story starts with those same two words: “Lavoisier’s wife.” The opening:

Lavoisier’s wife was a chemist; or rather, Lavoisier’s wife was a *chimiste*: from the Latin *alchimista*; see also, alchemy.

Let me back up a bit, and explain. Some people—people who amaze me—can just sit down at their notebooks or their computers or whatever and just write. It’s fantastic! How do they do it? How does anyone just stare at the dead blank white of a paper or a screen and manage to create characters, setting, plot, all out of such a void-like beginning? Anyhow, I can’t.

For me to begin, I need to know the very specific form I’m writing my story in. It doesn’t matter if I have a plot in mind, or a character I’ve fully fleshed out. The characters and plot have to have a home, and that home is a very specific structure: a menu, a list, a song, a fairy tale—whatever it is, I need to know before I can face that blank screen.

So when I decided I wanted to tell the story of Marie-Anne Paulze Lavoisier, the wife of the famous scientist, I knew I had to find my way in through structure. And this was incredibly hard. Any way that I attempted to tell the story, it felt like a history lesson or a lecture. Marie-Anne was a real person, and it was important to me to share her with the world—her name had been nearly lost to history, and all of her many significant accomplishments had definitely been forgotten or subsumed in her husband's. How to convey this, and to tell her story, not his?

I sat there in my favorite coffee shop, muttering to myself “Lavoisier's wife, that's all she become, just Lavoisier's wife,” and then I realized—I could write this story with absolute deadpan irony, highlighting the obvious erasure by pointing to it, over and over again. I'd start every sentence with “Lavoisier's wife.” Until the end of the piece, I would never refer to her by her name, but only by her husband's. An added benefit—repetition is funny! By repeating, I could inject humor into the story so it wouldn't feel like an absolute scold, a total drag.

Once I set to writing it, I quickly realized that I couldn't start every sentence with “Lavoisier's wife.” It became way too monotonous and it made the story incredibly clunky, with no flow. The idea was still good, but it would be enough to make the point to put it at the beginning of each paragraph instead of each sentence.

I also decided to explain my use of the name, to teach people how to read the story, which is something I really love to do in my work. So about a fourth of the way down, I wrote:

Lavoisier's wife was called Marie-Anne, and in full Marie-Anne Pierrette Lavoisier, nee Paulze, but for the purposes of this narrative she shall be known as Lavoisier's wife. This is not intended to strip her of her humanity or personhood, as a woman; rather, it is meant to focus a tight and somewhat ironic spotlight on the role she will play in her husband's drama, and to signal (*wink wink nod*, as the OED would do) her eventual and historical erasure from it.

I had so much FUN writing this story, which is not something I can say for about ninety percent of the stories I write. But the structure freed me up to get wild within its confines, and allowed me to introduce back into history the accomplishments of an amazing woman and scientist. All with two little words, "Lavoisier's wife."

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