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Artistic Truth

Jennifer Jones

Utah State University

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Preface

Since I began writing personal essays I have looked at others' writings differently. I analyze writing techniques and look for hidden how-to instructions from which I can learn more about the craft from the masters. One technique that has continually fascinated and challenged me as a writer is the weaving of fact and fiction into meaningful and colorful works of art. As I grew more serious about writing creative non-fiction my senior year, my interest in the shaping of truth in writing intensified and the idea for this study was born. Part One of the following is a compilation of academic research and observations of how writers of memoir, poetry, biographies, fiction, and essays handle the different shades of artistry and reality, truth and fact. Part Two is an application of these principles to my own personal essays in the form of a metatextual analysis of the texts. Producing these pages, I must say, has been the most rewarding academic experience of my college years.

I am truly indebted to Helen Cannon who four years ago introduced me to the essay form and gave me the confidence to write in it. She has greatly contributed to this study in providing materials and suggestions, and in regularly rekindling my enthusiasm. For this, I thank her as a teacher, scholar, and friend.

I would also like to express my appreciation to Tom Lyon and Anne Shifrer. Their insight and criticism have improved the following selections, and I continue to feel their influence as I write.

Finally, I am grateful to my wonderful parents who give more hours than they have to support me, and to my dear grandparents who believe in me.
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Part One
The Dilemma

Writing facts, truth, and reality wouldn’t be so difficult if we could all agree on what is factual, truthful, and real. E. B. White wrote, “real life is only one kind of life--there is also the life of the imagination,” and Goethe said, “Great imagining is the imagining of truth, the effort to grasp the truth through the imagination” (Fox 42). If truth can emerge from the imaginary, then perhaps Philip Roth is right in saying, “Reality is what the author creates, not what the author is” (Roiphe 3). I agree that by nature, the process of writing is creative; often there is more than one version of reality, and giving facts isn’t always the best way to portray Truth.

Truman Capote wrote of how a personal crisis helped him discover something about the balance between art and life, something made him understand “the difference between what is true and what is really true” (xvii). Exactly what is the difference? Joy Kogawa said in an interview with Janice Williamson that she writes about what is real within her: “What you are true to is the feeling and not the situation. Not the facts as such, but the facts of one’s feelings” (156).

Just before Christmas I met Blaine Yorgason at a book-signing. The words “A True Story” on the cover of One Tattered Angel induced me to buy the book, and I mentioned the topic of my senior thesis to Mr. Yorgason. He remarked, “This book was hard for me to write, because I felt that I had to really expose myself in order to write honestly. That wasn’t easy.” He is not the only writer to find personal honesty in writing a challenge. According to Tracy Kidder, “Just because they are committing words to paper does not mean that writers stop telling themselves the lies that they’ve invented for getting through the night. . . Certainly some people are less likely to write honestly about themselves than about anyone else on earth” (xii).
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Many decisions of personal honesty cannot be verified by even a fact-checking department like the *New Yorker* Magazine's. So, how is a reader to react upon hearing that Farley Mowat, author of *Never Cry Wolf*, exaggerated the amount of time he spent doing fieldwork and that he interpreted his data liberally? Or that Malcom X only claimed his grandmother was raped by a white man when actually she was his willing partner? Or that Emerson and Hawthorne, in editing her *Memoirs*, "reinvented [Margaret] Fuller in their preferred image... to suit the prevailing female fashion" (Dickenson ix, vii)? Or that Thoreau compressed two years into one to write *Walden Pond*? Or that New Journalists invented and reported dialogue that told what a person meant, not what they said? These examples (if indeed true) show varying degrees of diverging from reality; does that mean they also show varying degrees of reader betrayal, or not?

Patricia Palacco, author of popular children's books, relates that when she was a child her grandmother used to tell her stories. On one occasion after her grandmother had finished the story that became *The Keeping Quilt*, the young Patricia asked, "Is that true, Grandma?" Her grandmother replied in the same way that other writers might answer that question, "Of course it's true, but it may not have happened." And that is the dilemma.
Inventing Memory, Writing Art

Jean Fritz began writing *Homesick: My Own Story* by recording her childhood memories of living in China, but she quickly became frustrated: “My memory came out in lumps... [And] my preoccupation with time and literal accuracy was squeezing the life out of what I had to say.” Fritz explains that her eventual decision to lace memories with fiction and shape them into a story helped her “recreate the emotions that I remember so vividly. Strictly speaking, I have to call this book fiction, but it does not feel like fiction to me. It is my story, told as truly as I can tell it” (Donelson 257). For Fritz, fiction was a tool that enabled her to write her true memories.

Judith Barrington, author of *memoir*, observes, “We talk as if there are real dividing lines between these genres--fiction is one thing and memoir is one thing and poetry is one thing--but I think that they blur and blend into each other. Stories are stories” (24). All three genres blend together in Donald Murray’s poem, “Black Ice,” in which the persona of the poem describes skating on thin ice and the trauma of watching his friend, Alex, fall through the ice and drown. Murray comments, “It is true that the boy, myself, skated on thin ice and that he skated at Sailor’s Home Pond in Quincy, Massachusetts, although the thin ice may not have been on that pond. He did not, however, see a fish in the ice until he wrote the poem... There was no Alex; no one I knew had drowned by falling through the ice until I received the poem; I did not... stare up to see him skating above me until after I wrote the poem. I do now. The poem that was for a few seconds imaginary has become autobiographical by being written.” (70)
Here there is no clear division of genre—poem and fiction are now memories, and memoir. Another poet, Canadian Bronwen Wallace, is careful about too much fiction in her work. She writes many poems about abused women in which she takes the persona of a shelter worker and says, “I can only write about my own experience. . . I don’t have the right to write as someone who was battered” (289). Wallace places a division between what is invention and what is true in her work, in a way that others find impossible.

The gray area between fact and fiction is uncomfortable for Morag Gunn of Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*. Morag writes stories calling herself a “Wordsmith. Liar more likely. Weaving fabrications. Yet, with typical ambiguity, convinced that fiction was more true than fact. Or that fact was in fact fiction” (21). Morag, like other writers, analyzes her memories looking for her true history, but she must first sort through her own versions of what happened.

In his essay entitled “How Memory Speaks,” John Kotre makes this observation based on his studies of memory:

“Autobiographical memory’s real interest [is] the creation of a myth about the self. A myth, in the sense that I’m using the term, is not a falsehood but a comprehensive view of reality. It’s a story that speaks to the heart as well as the mind, seeking to generate conviction about what it thinks is true. (208)

Morag desires to develop her own comprehensive view of reality, but her quest is complicated by her belief, “A popular misconception is that we can’t change the past—everyone is constantly changing their own past, recalling it, revising it” (Laurence, *Diviners* 49). With this, Kotre would agree. He writes that even as the brain “revises itself” physiologically, “Memories don’t sit inertly on the shelves of a library; they undergo constant revision” (206).

In this way, memory is not always a reliable authority. (Mark Twain, for instance, claimed meeting a 76-year-old woman who could remember anything, “whether it happened or not” [Kotre 204].) Kotre writes, “Autobiographical memory
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is interested in specific events, but only insofar as they contribute to meaning. Ultimately, meaning will arise in a comprehensive story of the self" (210). This suggests that an underlying meaning may override the details of memory until the memory becomes something else: a true story that didn’t really happen.

One example of “inaccurate truth” that Kotre cites is John Dean’s testimony before the Senate committee investigating the Watergate cover-up. When actual recordings of the same meetings Dean described were later found, memory scientist Ulric Neisser found “rampant reconstruction” in certain details of Dean’s testimony (such as “who sat where, who said what... an opening compliment [to Dean] from the president”), but that “in the sense of what the meeting meant in the larger scheme of things, it was all true” (Kotre 210). This shows how a subconscious interpretation of events can move one to “remember” things that never took place.

In Alice Munro’s “The Progress of Love,” Fame’s memory, like Dean’s, confuses actual events for what, in her mind, should have happened. Fame describes her mother burning $3,000 in the wood stove in the kitchen, “She put it in just a few bills at a time... My father stood and watched her” (26). To Fame, the story isn’t about burning money; it is about the relationship between her father and mother. She says, “My father letting her do it is the point. To me it is” (26), but later she admits, “My father did not stand in the kitchen watching my mother feed the money into the flames... He did not know about it...” (29). It is hard for Fame to accept the real memory over the invented one where her father is present. She puzzles over the reason she has invented the main point of her story, “How difficult it is for me to believe that I made that up. It seems so much the truth it is the truth; it’s what I believe about them. I haven’t stopped believing it” (30). The story Fame believes is true, but not factual; as Kotre would say, it is a created “myth” with deep meaning that reflects a true “comprehensive story of the self.”

As Eavan Boland, in her book Object Lessons, seeks to develop a comprehensive story of herself, she searches for the story of her grandmother. Her need to “make the past” (5), to piece together death and marriage certificates, letters,
and family stories into a meaningful history of her grandmother, is as great as her need to define herself as a woman and a poet. In truth, they are the same quest. Boland writes, "the way I build that legend now is the way I heard it out of rumor, fossil fact, half memories... [But] no matter how poignant the details, the narrative is pieced together by something which may itself be a distortion: my own wish to make something orderly out of these fragments" (10, 32). Her comprehensive story is inseparably connected to the grandmother she never met, and the myth she makes for her ancestor shapes Boland's own identity.

The inclusion of invented details is one way in which stories differ from real life; the omission of certain details is another. A distortion of the truth by leaving out certain details is evident in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*. The caption below a photograph of Japanese beet workers in Canada hurts Naomi: "Grinning and Happy." These are supposed to be "Facts about evacuees in Alberta" that Aunt Emily has indexed (231). Naomi writes, "Facts about evacuees in Alberta? The fact is I never got used to it and I cannot, I cannot bear the memory" (232). Naomi remembers the flies, the manure pile, the chicken-coop house, the cold, the heat, the bedbugs and welts, the swampbugs and dust, the muddy water (234). The newspaper drops these details from the story and presents happy workers instead. Naomi denies the smiling photograph; it does not represent the truth. She writes, "That is one telling. It's not how it was" (236).

I remember working for the Utah legislature as a senator's intern a few years ago. The days and evenings were long, with everything in a constant state of change. Would Senate Bill 238 make it out of committee? Would the amendment to House Bill 87 pass? Would the leadership stall? Would this year's clock run out? I often came home exhausted and bewildered to review my notes and piece together what had happened that day. Somehow, the newspaper's version always differed from mine. We might agree in the essentials--SB 140 passed the House--but my "how" and "why" were different. Even interviews I had witnessed were scarcely recognizable on the page. Was I more insightful than the reporter? Was he more
objective? Was my memory right, or was his? Where was truth? Did it matter?

Aunt Emily insists that Naomi remember what she has lived through: "You have to remember... You are your history. If you cut any of it off you're an amputee. Don't deny the past. Remember everything" (Kogawa, *Obasan* 60). With her books, folders, documents, and newspaper clippings, Emily remembers. She claims, "It matters to get the facts straight... What's right is right. What's wrong is wrong" (219), and she prefices statements with a bold pretense of understanding, "The truth of the matter is..." (220).

Morag looks for meaning differently than Emily. When she reads the newspaper after Dieppe and sees the casualty lists, she asks, "Are any of the stories true? Probably it does not matter. They may console some. What is a true story? Is there any such thing? The only truth at the moment seems to be in the long lists of the dead" (Laurence, *Diviners* 117). As she reflects on her past, she wonders, "What really happened? A meaningless question. But one I keep trying to answer, knowing there is no answer" (49).

The accusations of some that Malcom X falsified history, fitting it to the agenda of his autobiography, makes me uncomfortable. Because historians in every age have had their agendas and have arranged their information accordingly, this is hardly something new. Ross Peterson, a history professor at Utah State University, shared with me that the evidence against Malcom X came out in the last decade with the release of the book-based film and was probably founded on court records in which the alleged perpetrator was acquitted. Still, considering this was such an emotionally and racially charged trial, Peterson points out, "Who can believe the courts?" It is likely that to Malcom X the rape of the grandmother was real, "a part of the family lore—what he believed" (Peterson, interview). If Malcom X's autobiography records what he believed, then he was writing the *truth*; opposing viewpoints may claim their own versions of the *truth*, but neither side can justly accuse the other of lying.

Exploring "what really happened" is sometimes painful. The main character
of Lorrie Moore's piece, "People Like That Are the Only People Here," is a writer whose five-year-old son develops cancer. Her husband urges her to "take notes." She replies, "No. I can't. Not this! I write fiction. This isn't fiction" (61), but the story ends: "There are the notes. Now, where is the money?" (73). The notes are the story, labeled "fiction," that the reader has just finished; the money Moore received for writing it is presumably paying her son's hospital bills. Her story makes readers confront the inescapable dilemma: "All fiction has its autobiographical roots" (Trevor xi), and, as Northrop Frye believed, "a piece of work is shelved with autobiography or with fiction according to whether the librarian chooses to believe it" (Wolff 12). Knowing whether to believe a work or not is not simple. Moore poignantly shows that fiction and reality intertwine not only in writing, but in life.

Life is a terrifically complex thing to remember, and more so to write. "This is a reconstruction," says the narrator of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, "It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air and on the tongue, half-colors, too many" (173-74). She is right: distortion is inevitable, even inherent in recording our "true" stories. First there is the remembering, then the writing.

In preparing her memoirs, Virginia Woolf found that "At times I can go back ... I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there. That is, I suppose, that my memory supplies what I had forgotten" (7-8). She describes her first memory: traveling with her mother. She writes, "Perhaps we were going to St. Ives; more probably, for from the light it must have been evening, we were coming back to London. But it is more convenient artistically to suppose that we were going to St. Ives, for that will lead to my other memory..." (5).

I don't know that we revise the past merely for "artistic convenience," but perhaps because that which is artistic comes closer than anything to truth. Recently
I received a phone call from a friend I haven’t seen in six years. When our conversation ended, I asked my sister if she remembered Brian from North Carolina. She said, “Oh, yeah. Wasn’t he the one that took you to a formal evening for all the pages on a big ship?” She went on and I was astounded. What she was saying was all vaguely familiar, but I am certain it didn’t happen. My sister, by selectively combining memories I had shared with her (or maybe she just had a dream), had innocently fabricated something that seemed true. It didn’t happen, but it could have, even should have. At least, it may be “artistically convenient” to suppose it did happen, but perhaps that is taking Woolf’s meaning too far.

Fern Kupfer writes, “We all like good stories, especially those taken from real life. . . we also don’t like being lied to. . . But shaping the truth when writing memoir is an acceptable aspect of the craft” (22). Kupfer recognizes that “the literal truth isn’t always the artistic one” and suggests that certain “lies” are ethical in “accessorizing the truth.” For example, writers may create details when their memories are unclear, make characters composites of more than one person, compress time, fill in blanks by speculating about what they don’t know (“the gift of perhaps”). Kupfer holds that “memoir shouldn’t read as slowly as real life,” but that there are reasonable boundaries within which writers must remain. To her, the craft of writing memoir is balancing real life and art (22).

Although Ray Bradbury appears to stay within Kupfer’s ethical guidelines for writing memoir, like Jean Fritz, he called his childhood memory book “fiction.” I read Dandelion Wine as Bradbury’s autobiographical memory shaped for artistic convenience. In the book’s introduction, Bradbury shares his re-naming of Waukegan, Illinois “Green Town,” and continues:

“Was there a real boy named John Huff?
There was. And that was truly his name. But he didn’t go away from me, I went away from him. . . I borrowed [him] from my childhood in Arizona and shipped him East to Green Town so that I could say goodbye to him properly.” (xii, viii)
“Was there a Lonely One?
There was. And that was his name... 
Is the ravine real and deep and dark at night? It was, it is.” (xii)

Bradbury captures the essence of Wolf’s “artistic convenience” in re-arranging geography and details from his childhood into stories while preserving everything that is meaningful about them.

Bradbury, Fritz, Woolf, and other (perhaps all) writers reconstruct the past in a manner consistent with the views and interpretations of the lives that they present in their stories. That is, as Kotre says, they make their memories subject to their meanings. Knowing how real lives and stories are in the present, they interpret the past, “setting up a beginning that will explain the ending” (Kotre 213). Then, memories and crayolas in hand, they make art.
Reflections on Creative Biography

Recently, my friend Helen Cannon gave me a book of Margaret Atwood's short stories entitled *Bluebeard's Egg*. The introductory piece, "Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother," impressed me with its colorful characterization of the narrator's mother and father. Later, I encountered the same characters in two other stories in the collection: "In Search of the Rattlesnake Plantain" and "Unearthing Suite." These pieces give the feeling of a sort of family history taken from oral tradition: stories the parents once told their daughter, and the stories she now tells of them. These are not short stories that fit the plot diagram I learned in high school, with rising action, climax, and resolution. Rather, they have the friendly feeling of personal essays, and I am tempted to identify Atwood and her parents with the characters of these pieces.

Indeed, Atwood dedicates *Bluebeard's Egg* to her parents, but I am warned from reading them strictly as personal history by Atwood's philosophy: "most history, may or may not be true" (*Bluebeard* 319). Atwood's most recent work is a heavily researched historical novel. In writing her "biography" of Grace Marks, Atwood has done her homework (in the tradition of Irving Stone, I believe, and his pages upon pages of documentation at the end of *The Agony and the Ecstasy*). Atwood claims, "I have of course fictionalized historical events (as did many commentators on this case who claimed to be writing history). I have not changed any facts, although the written accounts are so contradictory that few of the facts emerge as unequivocally 'known.' . . . Where mere hints and outright gaps exist in the records, I have felt free to invent" (*Alias Grace* 464-5).

It is not hard to imagine Atwood fictionalizing, and yet not changing any of
the truth in her stories of her parents. If they are not accurate in a historical sense, neither are they entirely fictive. This is the same type of "new biography" genre in which Maxine Hong Kingston writes. Kingston says of her own works, "they are the biographies of imaginative people. I tell the imaginative lives and the dreams and the fictions of real people. These are the stories of storytellers. . ." (Kingston, interview). After writing Loving Kindness, Annie Roiphe wrote, "Some of us [writers] use truth as a basic ingredient in our illusion. There was autobiography in my novel, not just on the surface but supporting the entire structure, motivating and pulsing throughout it. The facts were all lies, but the book was all true" (3).

The mother in the three pieces by Atwood is herself a genuine storyteller. She has specialized stories for certain audiences and places; among the most intriguing are her kitchen stories for women only. Many of her stories begin, "I remember the time we almost died" (Bluebeard 15). The daughter describes her mother's theatrical techniques, "When she tells them, my mother's face turns to rubber. She takes all the parts, adds the sound effects, waves her hands around in the air. Her eyes gleam, sometimes a little wickedly. . ." (8). It is from these dramaticized stories that the daughter has constructed her mother's past. She writes,

Her only discoverable ambition as a child was to be able to fly, and much of her subsequent life has been spent in various attempts to take off. Stories of her youth involve scenes in trees and on barn roofs, breakneck dashes on frothy-mouthed runaway horses, speedskating races, and, when she was older, climbs out of windows onto forbidden fire escapes. . . my father first saw her sliding down a banister.
(Bluebeard 303)

The stories the mother tells of herself lead me again to the idea of the creative biography. When we tell our own stories, we are selective. We cater to audiences, and we invent details we don't remember. Also, we condense time. The daughter admits that for years she believed her mother's early life was all "sustained hilarity
and hair-raising adventure. (That was before I realized that she never put in the long stretches of uneventful time that must have made up much of her life: the stories were just the punctuation)" (Bluebeard 7).

Based upon my parents’ stories, I once had a similar impression of their early lives. My father described accompanying real cowboys on cattle drives as a boy, elk hunting trips with his cousins, and once killing a deer with a knife. My mother tells of riding horses through the woods, family trips to the Oregon Coast, and her discoveries as a cleaning girl for old rich Mrs. Gregory. I particularly remember my father’s account of my uncle K.C. trying to rope a runaway horse during the middle of the night from the bed of a moving pick-up truck while my father listened from a camper. The horse ran up the road, tu-tum, tu-tum, and the truck followed Vroom, then the horse went back down the road tum-tu, tum-tu, and Vroom, the truck followed. K.C. persisted in missing his throws and progressively got more angry. My father laughs as he makes the sounds of the truck and horse and mocks his brother’s frustration, but then he stops. He’s not sure how the story ends. “I think I finally went out and just walked up to the horse and caught it.” K.C. tells another ending, “That horse was so tired, I finally roped him.” Who is to say which version is true? Probably both of them are.

If Atwood’s mother’s stories are supposed to entertain, her father’s are to educate. He walks in the woods, followed by

...one or two or a clutch of children of any age... Their eyes getting larger and larger as wonder after wonder is revealed to them: a sacred white larva that will pupate and fly only after seven years, a miraculous beetle that eats wood, a two-sexed worm, a fungus that crawls. No freak show can hold a candle to my father expounding Nature. (Bluebeard 305)

The daughter observes that one of her father’s purposes is “to explain everything, when possible” (Bluebeard 306). It is expected that while he dishes potatoes and ladles gravy he will pontificate on his theories that “both Hiroshima and the
discovery of America were entomological events... and that fleas have been responsible for more massacres and population depletions than have religions...” (Bluebeard 314). While not directly about himself, the stories of the father reveal much about him and his values: he is a closet-college professor after the tradition of Emerson.

Indeed, Atwood is not as concerned with dates and events in her parents' lives as she is in preserving their stories. Even the stroke her father suffers while driving, she tells as a story, sparing the journalistic details. Atwood shows the father, almost completely recovered, “who takes five kinds of pills to keep from having another [stroke], who squeezes a woolen ball in his left hand, who however is not paying as much attention to his garden as he used to” (Bluebeard 267). This last detail is the clue that the father is ill. Although he can report with glee that during his brain scan he heard a doctor say, “Well, there’s nothing in there, anyway” (265), his serious hallucinations disturb his family. The mother is worried and afraid: “She has a list of everything he’s failed to eat and drink over the past five days” (272).

This episode in “In Search of the Rattlesnake Plantain” contrasts with the opening scene of “Unearthing Suite” where both parents are in perfect health and, like children, are excited as if waiting to reveal a secret joke. “We went down and bought our urns today,” the father says (Bluebeard 301). Atwood’s parents dream of being sprinkled and thus united with the earth. This yearning for union with the earth is the connecting theme for the stories that make up “Unearthing Suite.” Atwood writes, “My parents do not have houses, like other people. Instead they have earths... The smell of my childhood [is]: wood, canvas, tar, kerosene, soil” (306-7). In one highly condensed sentence she tells her childhood was spent, “... sitting in the bottoms of canoes that would tip if you lurched, crouching in tents that would leak if you touched them in rainstorms, used for ballast in motorboats stacked precariously high with lumber...” (309).

The adventures her parents live are a form of nature worship. They make
pilgrimages between their three gardens throughout spring and summer, “mulching, watering, pulling up the polyphilprogenitive weeds, ‘until,’ my mother says, ‘I’m bent over like a coat hanger’” (Bluebeard 316). To father and mother, even a kingfisher dropping on the roof is spiritualized as a “miraculous token, a sign of divine grace; as if their mundane, familiar, much-patched but at times still leaking roof has been visited and made momentarily radiant by an unknown but by no means minor god” (323).

It is possible that Atwood’s parents never bought urns or found sacred bird droppings on the roof. Perhaps these are only myths Atwood invented. In an interview Atwood said, “it’s what is real to you, not what has “happened” to you that counts in writing” (Draine 369). A creative biography, then, is an appropriate tribute for Atwood to make to her parents. The stories in this collection, fact or fiction, are real, true even though they may not have actually happened.
Part Two

Illustration for “Snapshot,” page 23
A Fiction or Two

There was a sudden quiet and the doodles in the margins of my legal pad stopped dancing. Had I heard correctly? Had everyone at the Key West Conference heard correctly? Did Annie Dillard really just tell us she had "invented" the bloody rose-paws of her tomcat in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek--that she had never owned a cat? It appeared as though she had said that, and I wasn't the only person to take notice. We listened to Dillard explain, "I heard the story from a graduate student I knew, and years later I tracked him down and asked his permission to use it in Pilgrim."

The man in front of me wearing a gray turtleneck leaned toward the woman at his right and said, "That makes me wonder if she lied about the giant water bug, too."

The woman, whose hair was tied loosely in a bun, replied, "Actually, I heard she did lie about that. You mean the episode where the bug poisons the frog and then sucks it out of its skin?" The woman fingered her hair and continued, "Well, if I remember right, she said in an interview or something that she had read about that in a biology book, but she never saw it happen."

Now I was really dumbfounded. No tomcat with bloody paws--no tomcat at all. No frog vaporizing, leaving only a putty of skin. No Creek? Dillard sat down, but the mini-panel discussion in our corner of the auditorium didn't stop. The bun-woman philosophized, "To me it matters more whether that type of water bug really lives in northern Virginia than whether she actually saw it. A water bug alien to that area would be a real fiction."

Another man chimed in, "Just for the record, those giant waterbugs do feed that way. They are hemipteran. I have seen them digest small fish before. Of course, small fish don't shrivel up like frogs might."

The woman untied her bun and began to twist it again. She was still talking,
"Maybe Dillard was so astounded by reading about the bug that she really wanted to see it—or for her readers to see it. It should have happened, so she made it reality by writing it, giving it a place in her book."

The turtleneck man said, "You can't make something reality by writing it. It's still a lie. She made it up. Anyway, how do I know that you didn't make up that she'd only read about it?"

*How do I know indeed,* I thought to myself. Or, I would have had I been there and listened to this conversation. The truth is, I was not there, and neither were the people I described—I made that up. I actually heard about the "lie" in a writing class. I became intrigued and felt a need to find concrete facts, the truth about Dillard's Key West confession. It mattered to me what she said about what she had written because *truth* is something I try to achieve in my writing. My challenge is that often the truth is elusively hard to define. Here is another version of the above that is more "factual:"

Annie Dillard spoke to an audience of approximately 300 at the 14th Annual Key West Literary Seminar in January of 1996. Her announcement that she had "invented" the tomcat in her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) surprised many.1

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1 Margaret Atwood made a statement that would refute the turtleneck man and support Dillard's position, one with which I tend to agree. Still, I'm not certain how far it can be taken. She said, "... To me your 'own experience' is any experience that is real to you. It can be something you read in the newspapers. It can be a story one of your friends tells you. It doesn't necessarily have to have happened to you... It's what's real to you, not what 'happened' to you, that counts in writing, and what is real to you partly depends on how well you can write it—whether you can make it real" (*Interviews with Contemporary Writers* 369-70). I believe it is the ambition of writers to make what is real to them real to their readers as well, a challenge intensified when they attempt to make it real to themselves first.

2 The confession is especially surprising to me in light of these words written by Dillard: "The essay can do everything a poem can do, and everything a short story can do—everything but fake it. The elements in any nonfiction should be true not only artistically—the connections must hold at base and be veracious, for that is the convention and the covenant between the nonfiction writer and his reader" (*Atwan* 9). Although this seems contradictory (even hypocritical), I don't presume to judge Dillard. Perhaps her theories and techniques have
Apparantly all the facts are there, but I can’t be sure. That is, I’m relying on the witness testimonies of Allison Wallace and Shepherd Ogden to write this. With a little detective work, research, and surfing the internet, I traced my “hearsay” sources to them; they tell me what, where, and when the occasion was, how many people were there, and what Dillard said. The publisher of my copy of Pilgrim tells me it was first printed in 1974. Still, even in this journalistic version I am following Dillard’s precedent: my sources are other people’s stories and books. Does not claiming to be a witness make my second version less deceptive? I speak with the authority of “knowing,” yet my sources are the same ones I used in the first telling.

I didn’t entirely invent the conversation I recorded earlier. I based it on the on-line comments from June to September of 1996 made by Randall Roorda, Melissa Green, Charlotte Freeman, Brad Hurley, Andy Herrmann, and Alan MacEachern, all members of The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment. Many of them and others expressed strong feelings about accuracy and truth; others insisted that the art and craft of writing took precedence over the content (Dillard wasn’t, after all, writing field notes).

I suppose a line must be drawn between fiction and nonfiction, artistry and truth. If I am to do the drawing, perhaps I’ll draw a circle. Or, more likely, a line resembling a creek: full of frogs and waterbugs and stones that tomcats and writers may skip over.

changed over time on this issue.

3 Tom Lyon connected me with Wallace and she led me to these internet conversations at gopher://ecosys.dr.doe/virginia.edu/H1/communication. I had a sort of wild goose chase finding the posts because of the time lapse between the January conference and the original post by Wallace in June, but they were worth searching for. (And as Wallace commented to me, “We nature types like goose anyway, right?”) As we corresponded via e-mail, Wallace added more insight by describing Dillard’s announcement as “little more than an aside, really, made in answer to a question from the audience, concerning her preference for the more violent facets of nature.” This detail, while interesting, I chose to omit as it was irrelevant to the issues I wanted to present in this piece. Misleading? I’ll grant that perhaps “confession” is too charged a word for what actually happened at Key West; however, the piece is more about the issues than about Dillard.
The script on the back of the photograph reads, “Christmas, 1981.” The woman sitting on the wooden sled is my mother, and I am the child in front of her. I wear a coat I recognize, a blue one with thin stripes of red and yellow on the sleeves. It is the week of my eighth birthday.

Behind us, my father runs on the packed snow. He leans backward, adjusting his weight to the slope of the hill and the cargo in his arms: my one-year-old brother, Connor. Derek, at age six, skips beside my father, jumping and swinging his arms. Our shadows dash behind us, lengthening in the afternoon sun. The photograph is appropriately blurred; it is my family captured in fast motion.

The distant Blue Mountains of Oregon dominate the upper right corner of the photograph. (They are blue even when snow-covered.) In the foreground is a dark smudge (unidentifiable), and white snow grooved by inner tubes and sled runners. There are a telephone pole and cement curb behind us. We are in the city, on steep Twelfth Street which closes to traffic each winter. Twelfth Street is not far from the home of my grandmother, whom we are visiting for the holidays.

4 The idea for this piece came from the first chapter of Margaret Laurence’s The Diviners where Morag looks at snapshots of her childhood of which she has no recollection. She describes her parents’ personalities, her home and bedroom, her dog, Snapdragon, in great detail as she looks over the photographs in her possession that were taken before her parents died. In italics Morag confesses, “All this is crazy, of course, and quite untrue. Or maybe true and maybe not . . . I recall looking at the pictures . . . Over and over again, each time imagining I remembered a little more” (7-8). The inspiration for the essay came from the actual photograph in my family’s album.

5 Everyone in my family who has seen the picture agrees that it must have been taken in La Grande, Oregon (the mountains and the date on the picture verify that). None of us, however, can identify the exact location of the shot. My mother, who grew up in La Grande, denied that it is Twelfth Street, saying, “Twelfth Street is much steeper than that!” I suspect her memory of reconstructing Twelfth Street into a mountain. I would call it
My mother is laughing. Her two rows of white teeth show, and her hair waves downwind. My father, I believe, is saying something that he and my mother find funny. Derek hums (a subconscious habit), and Connor grunts at being held and bounced downhill. I don’t hear them. My knees are in my chest, my lips pursed, my eyes set dead ahead: I am driving.

Not in the picture are the sounds of snow and sled. Also absent are my cousins and my uncle who is calling, “Look over here!” My mother is the only one to hear him. She alone looks at the camera.

Missing from the photograph are the snow train we built and the real train that brought us to Grandma’s and will take us home again. Invisible are the children’s violin lessons, soccer practices, band concerts, summer jobs, and the parents’ pursuit of higher degrees, career changes, and three other children. These are not present in the photograph, but the speed, the motion tells everything.

Grandma’s own street, but I can’t place the mysterious telephone pole, and something that appears to be a row of lights in the upper left-hand corner has me baffled. I chose to call it “Twelfth Street” because: 1) we did sled there at least once in my childhood; 2) it does indeed close to traffic for winter recreation; and 3) I like the sound of it—a fitting name for a nostalgic holiday playground near grandma’s house.

6 Derek still humms, so it is not difficult to imagine him doing so here. Connor’s grunts are my invention; again, they are fathomable as a baby’s noise caused by jolting movement.

7 As I wrote this, I could remember (or almost remember?) this happening, much as Vanessa from Laurence’s A Bird in the House experienced a filling-in-the-blanks with forgotten memory, “I remembered something I didn’t know I knew” (165-66).

8 Actually, I didn’t build a snow train; my older cousins did, and I saw a picture of it that was printed in a local newspaper. I helped build snow-forts, but I was only an accessory to their games. (I prepared piles of snowballs for an ambush.) The other details are factual; I remember well taking the train to Grandma’s and my family’s being forever busy. What I wanted to capture here with the play and train and the business, speed, and motion, was a flavor of my childhood. I wanted to turn a single memory (albeit reconstructed) into a true portrait of my early years.
Mrs. Miller’s Lessons

"Toby, stop singing!" was probably the phrase most often repeated by my violin teacher. Toby, Barbara Miller’s golden retriever, felt the irrepressible inspiration to howl along every time he heard a chromatic scale. Toby had very little singing talent and a great deal of persistence, so Barbara commanded him as she would a child, "Toby, stop singing. Now slur four, Jennifer," in the same breath at every lesson.

Toby’s vocalizations weren’t the only distractions at my lessons. Every time a human, dog, or cat walked the sidewalk in front of the house, a spontaneous explosion of barking and a mad scrambling to the large living room window to view the passersby followed. Toby had an accomplice in this ritual, although I believe it was actually Teddy, Barbara’s old terrier, who started it.

Their barking was generally loud enough to disturb Fritz, the green parakeet, into a fit of squawks as well. Fritz, whose cage was on a stand between the ancient grand piano and the window, was quite well-behaved during my lessons, and only parted his beak to express disapproval at the dogs’ playful immaturity and at my

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9 This essay is based on the many real-life stories that make up my memories of Barbara Miller, her animals, her home, her violin, and my weekly lessons. Robert Atwan wrote, “Once essayists begin to tell stories...” They move dangerously close to fiction, especially when they add characters, dialogues, episodes, and climaxes. When constructing personal narratives, the essayist confronts the toughest challenge of the craft: telling stories that are at once artful, true, and believable... The personal essayist, then, must balance craft and credibility, aesthetics and accuracy...” (5). In shaping the essay I included quotes that I remember which I may not have actually heard. They are true to me, however, and believable. And they portray Barbara’s character in her own voice. My decision to use them (invent them?) was my way of balancing artistry and truth.

10 I called Barbara’s husband, Akeley Miller, to verify the dogs’ breeds (fact-checking!) However, his information (aside from that which I had already guessed) wasn’t very helpful. I didn’t want to complicate the matter with pedigree trivia that would detract from the essay.
exercises when they were out-of-tune. "Fritz only squawks when you’re flat, Jennifer. Raise that G sharp and don’t let the low two pull your pitches down."

Mrs. Miller’s animals seemed to communicate well with their mistress. I remember Barbara’s telling me more than once about Charlie, her cat, and his ability to tell time. “When he wants to go out in the neighborhood, I just say, ‘Charlie, come back at ten o’clock,’ and he does.” Charlie often sought attention during lessons, and would rub against my legs as I played. Nero may have played while Rome burned, but he never tried to play in Mrs. Miller’s home.

Barbara Miller had the amazing ability to live with four animals, teach violin lessons, cook dinner for her husband, and talk on the phone simultaneously. While we played through a concerto together, the phone would ring and she would get up to answer it saying, “Keep going, honey.” Or mid-scale she would remember a pot boiling on the stove and run to check it. She seemed to be always switching her glasses as she moved from violin to piano, to writing, to some other activity—regardless of which pair she was wearing at the time.

My lessons took place in her living room, and I probably spent as much time on the couch waiting for her to finish another student’s lesson as I did playing music with her. She always gave her students more than the half hour they paid for, which explains why she was always a lesson or two behind schedule by late afternoon.

The worn couch showed the permanent indentations of guests, students, and pets. Toby was always anxious to put his seventy pounds on top of anyone who sat down, and would beg for petting until Barbara shouted, “Off, Toby!” Teddy, who was otherwise antisocial, preferred to show his attention by barking from a distance. The animals left their hair on the couch, and it was easy for me to distinguish between the fine black and white hair of Teddy, Charlie’s black cat hair, and Toby’s bristly red shedding.

Flat olive green carpet lined the floor, and next to the piano stood a cupboard full of music with bent pages and ragged edges. Photographs of her grandchildren
were scattered throughout the room, and were always updated but never replaced. With music stands in the corner, violin cases under the piano, and knick-knacky violins of porcelain, glass, bronze, and wood sitting on the mantle, the room was unmistakably the retreat of a music lover. A violin triptych hanging above the couch completed the motif.

On the adjacent wall hung a portrait of Barbara, her large dark eyes and lipstick reminiscent of more youthful days. Although her face had aged, the black hair she wore every day resembled exactly the hair in her portrait.

I remember the first time I saw her without her hair. She came to the door with Toby and Teddy, “I’m sorry you had to come all the way up here. I’m not feeling well, so I’m not teaching today.” It wasn’t until that moment, when I saw the fine white whisps she always hid under thick black curls, that I realized how greatly her illnesses had aged her. She had to follow a strictly prescribed diet, and I believe she had arthritis in every part of her body. She was always in pain of varying degrees, especially in her back—which pain accounted for her occasional uncharacteristic sharpness at lessons. As it grew worse and clusters of doctors mulled over possible causes, they discovered that Barbara was missing several disks in her spine.11

For years her doctors urged her to quit teaching, at least to cut back, but Mrs. Miller loved teaching as much as she loved playing. Her students came first, even if house, children, and husband suffered. (The pets could take care of themselves.) Immediately after a wrist operation, with left hand hidden in a glove of white

11 I am aware that this description of Barbara, bald, ill, and suffering, is not flattering. Still, it belonged in the essay because I wanted to tell the truth about her. As Geoffrey Wolff wrote, “A personal essayist means to tell the truth. The contract between a personal essayist and a reader is absolute, an agreement about intention. Because memory is fallible, and point of view by nature is biased, the personal essayist will tell a slant tale, wilfully-nilly. But not by design” (Atwan 13).

When The Christian Science Monitor printed this essay, they left out this section. In so doing, they portrayed a prettier, never-get-down Barbara (and saved space), but they lost some of the depth I wanted to show in Barbara’s character. They also showed that sometimes the issue of honesty belongs to the editor and not the writer.
gauze, Barbara continued giving lessons. Although she couldn’t play along with me, she listened intently, and with her right arm she would pull my elbow, “More bow! Saw logs!”

The time we spent tuning before a lesson we also spent talking. She was interested in what I was doing in school, what we were playing in orchestra, and what I thought about the latest newspaper headline. “March 14 already?” she’d say in disbelief as she wrote the date each week. Or she’d comment, “Oh, I hated algebra. I always got the right answers, but I could never tell anyone how I got them.”

Mrs. Miller once took two other students and me to a concert she was playing in Salt Lake City. She drove a frightful Elmer Fudd contraption that most respectable drivers were alarmed to see on I-15, but for her it was sufficient. The conversation both ways was animated; she told us about performing tours she had been on in Europe, and we talked about everything from nuclear weapons and pollution to Alaska and gray cows. Mrs. Miller took us backstage in the concert hall, and we felt honored to be the guests of the concertmistress. I think Barbara was probably the concertmistress of every orchestra she played in.

The summer I began taking violin lessons, Barbara gave me two lessons a
week so that I would be ready to join the sixth grade orchestra in the fall. She was too concerned about getting me caught up by then to charge me for the extra lesson. In fact, Barbara often forgot that her students were paying her. If a parent asked, “So how much do I owe you?” she would look with confusion in her scheduling book and often count back nearly a year to the last paid date. Mrs. Miller hired one mother, who couldn’t afford violin lessons for her three children, to clean her house as a method of payment. She almost seemed surprised when I gave her my mother’s check every month; she’d smile and say, “I don’t even think of money when I’m teaching.”

While she wasn’t thinking about money, she was thinking about music, and violins in particular. My first violin was a box. Its four strings could have been elastic bands and its tone quality wouldn’t have been affected. But when Mrs. Miller occasionally demonstrated a scale or arpeggio on it (to prove that the violin was not my handicap, but rather my lack of practice) she made it sing: more like a church choir member than Pavarotti, but it sang nevertheless. I believe she was relieved when I purchased a want-ad violin that was a step up in quality, but I soon outgrew that instrument as well.

Barbara offered one of her violins for me to play, one worth far more than I could afford to buy, saying, “It needs to be played.” The violin she played was made especially for her by the master hands of her friend, Peter Prier. She loved her violin and revered it, much as I did the violin she placed in my hands. A German instrument made in 1813, it had a brilliant, rich sound that amazed me. Barbara began selecting competition and recital pieces especially for the violin and me. She saw us as a pair and gave us Mozart’s concerto in G to learn to play “with flair.” Barbara was all energy at her student recitals. She would have her recitals in shifts, and dozens of us would crowd into her familiar living room or one of her student’s homes to play. She would accompany all of us, and would then play herself. She often performed recitals for the community with her friend and fellow musician, Dr. Armstrong.
After I finished high school, I no longer played in recitals or took lessons, but Barbara’s violin stayed in my hands. I am not a great musician and can never bring praise or fame to my violin teacher. The time I spent with Barbara I value because from her I learned about living.

At Barbara’s funeral the minister paid her tribute with the thirty-third Psalm, “Sing unto Him with the psaltery and an instrument of ten strings. Sing unto him a new song; play skillfully with a loud noise. For the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord.”

I still play Mrs. Miller’s violin, and when I do I think of Fritz, Toby, Teddy, and Charlie, and how she cared for them as if they were her children. I think of her students, who came before anything else. I think of her love of music. And I think of how she sang loudly, with her instrument of strings.

13 This sermon hung in my mind for months, waiting for me to write about Barbara before it left me.
Cars

"Some people have nice cars and boring lives." My grandmother said this three years ago when I complained about driving our family's 1984 Honda. The car had bronchitis: a carbon-and-spark-plug problem. It lurched, coughed, and sputtered, particularly when moving uphill. This mattered little to my father, who had trained me how to administer clinical treatment:

- Remove #1 spark plug and scrape carbon build-up off head with steak knife. In extreme case, do same to #2 spark plug and reverse their positions.

My repair kit consisted of two blackened knives and an assortment of old spark plugs that I could try as a last resort.

I think about what my grandmother told me often—at least every time another car breaks down. These frequent catastrophes have resulted in a bank of car knowledge that isn’t common in many other women that I know. I can fix a car heater with cardboard and take it out before the engine overheats. I know how to slam on brakes ferociously until they don’t stick, and I know where to hit the dashboard when the radio skips. I have experience dealing with common problems of all Subaru wagons made in the 1980s. I can cross certain wires and make lights work. I know where to spray starting fluid, and where to pour oil, antifreeze, and water. I have tested creative methods of getting water from rivers when necessary. I diagnose a Toyota’s asthma as a vapor lock, which I treat by reading a long book at

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14 This is true, and when I heard her say it, I knew an essay was in the making. Of course, I had to experience a few catastrophes before I could prove her thesis, but now I feel qualified to do so.

In honoring the reader/writer trust described by Phillip Lopate, where "In effect, a contract between writer and reader has been drawn up: the essayist must then make good on it by delivering, or discovering, as much honesty as possible" (xvi), I have tried not to exaggerate the facts.
the roadside until it runs again. Unfortunately, I horribly misuse car terminology in
the presence of real mechanics.

I'm not embarrassed by the appearance of our cars. In fact, I enjoy explaining
to friends that there are no floorboards under the mat of our brown Dodge because it
used to belong to the Flintstones. My father takes anything that's free and runs, and
if it doesn't run, he goes to an auto shop and makes a sacrifice to the automotive
spirits until it does. The cars are never really sold or bought because they aren't
worth money, but they are always being traded and rotated with an order that only
my father can understand. With all their defects, I am amazed that we are able to
license them.

Once in high school, I took some girlfriends to a football game in a Chevy
Cavalier and lost power on the freeway. Across an empty field Emily spied “Lynne’s
Body Shop;” she scaled the chain-link fence and a tow truck came to get the car. We
didn't want them to overcharge us--four young females--so we bought them
doughnuts and Emily answered their phone, “Lynne’s Body shop, Lynnette
speaking.” Two hours and thirty dol'ars later we were on our way.15

Of course, if we’d had a cellular phone, we wouldn’t have gone to Lynne’s.
Now, seven years later, whether I’m stuck in town at a drive-through bank teller or
a hundred miles south, my father is only a phone call away. He’s proven reliable;
Lynne’s was the first and last time I was commercially towed. I’m now proficient at
being towed by another car. In one long week last month we towed each of our
three cars over 60 miles.16 On the road home Dad always points out the newer cars

15 Actually, it was called Andy’s Body Shop. I didn’t want to change the name to Lynne’s, but I
had some fear of hurting Andy with our selfish motives for bringing the doughnuts or with my story about Emily and
the phone (she didn’t really answer it “Andrea speaking,” but would have, had it only rung at the right moment).

16 This may not be accurate, but I have never been good at estimating geographical distances. For the
record, the Toyota broke down in Murray, the Subaru in Layton, and the Peugeot on I-80 twenty minutes east
of Ogden. After that week we refrained from traveling further than Richmond, but that still didn’t prevent the
Subaru’s fit at the U.S.U. Credit Union drive-thru.
that are broken down, as if to say, "We are in good company," or, more likely, "See, it doesn't matter how expensive it is, every car has problems."

I think our car situation is really an ego thing for my father. He takes pride in being able to put a lawn-mower motor in a Geo Metro and see it go, and I don't hide the fact that I like watching him at work with his conjuring tools tinkering with brake pads or a clutch. When there is a smudge of black grease on his cheek his face suddenly turns boyish; school counseling is his profession, but cars are his childhood hobby. Among my favorite moments with my father are those I've spent with him under a car. It is a privilege for me to be a surrogate right shoulder for him, turning this wrench or holding that part in place. Still, I can see it frustrates him not to have the strength that he used to have.

If my father's physical body is becoming less reliable, his economical mind hasn't changed. A few months ago I heard him talking about an ad for a new Dodge Viper priced at $35,000. "The insurance on that is probably $2,000 a month!" he said. "That's more than we pay for three cars and their insurance in two years!" As much as my mother and I would like the family to have a reliable car (just one), we aren't likely to get it. We live with the trade-offs. After all, people with nice cars don't often have adventures when going to a drive-through bank.

I realized I am learning to appreciate my grandmother's wisdom last week when I went out with my friend Matt. He is painfully quiet and drives an antique pick-up with a new teal-blue paint job and a CD player hidden somewhere inside. When we had to push-start it, I told Matt, "Some people have nice cars and boring lives," and he appeared to understand. I think I'll go out with him again.
A Sweet Sensation of Joy

Four years ago I wrote a paper on Elizabeth Bishop’s poem, “The Moose.” My analysis focused on the moment of epiphany when the moose comes out of the woods and the bus driver suddenly stops. I wrote:

Bishop’s theme lies in the moose’s marvelous contrast with the familiarity of the earlier bus ride. The final stanzas of “The Moose” hold the message of the poem while sending the poem’s subjects abruptly on their way. One can still see the noble moose, “by craning backward,” and her smell lingers in the air, and yet, the dim odor is blended with “an acrid/smell of gasoline” that snaps the travelers back into reality.

My reading now is somewhat different. Perhaps it is because I, too, have ridden a bus southward to Boston where yellow road signs say, “Watch for Moose.” I have heard the conversations of unknown travelers. I have been an unknown traveler.

Bishop paints the poem’s setting in a six-stanza sentence of nostalgic prepositional phrases,

- on red, gravelly roads,
- down rows of sugar maples,
- past clapboard houses,

that closes when a lone traveler bids relatives farewell while “a collie supervises.” A series of short sentences follow in which “The light/ grows rich;” and evening sets in. The fall of night brings “a dreamy divagation” to the speaker, and the reader

\[17 I have included this piece in part to prove Devan Cook’s statement, “…Not everyone reads the way [writers] do: with the passage of time, they won’t read as they did at the moment of writing, either” (42). I have found that I am neither the same writer I was my first year in college, nor am I the same person.\]
hears the woeful (and distinctly universal) tales of other travelers on the bus, “uninterruptedly/ talking, in Eternity.”

In conversing, the travelers share their reality, but when the moose comes out of the woods, they share something marvelous. They are childish, the moose maternal. She is safe, grand, otherworldly, “high as a church.” This close portrait of the moose makes her seem even larger than the “neat clapboard churches” they have passed on their journey. She is a religious experience.

The moose emerges from the woods, as if she were hidden but present all along. These religious innuendoes of the poem are especially meaningful to me. I think of the church images, the light growing rich, Eternity. And I think of Bishop’s question:

Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

This sweet joy marks a spiritual awakening. The passengers cease talking in eternity and begin feeling eternity. The headlights go off, and the moose stands in moonlight--heavenly light.

Why do we feel this sensation of joy? I felt this joy when a hummingbird landed on my finger to sip sugar-water from a red feeder. It is what I felt when my mother and I discovered the sacred bower of matted grass where a family of deer slept during the summer. This is joy I have hungered for when I have been alone on a bus in Massachusetts, in Oregon, in Chile--a spiritual joy to interrupt the loneliness of being transported. The next time I see a yellow sign, “Watch for Moose,” I will--in hope, waiting to experience a spiritual awakening, a sweet sensation of joy.
A Nick to Remember

Nick Knighting had appendicitis for a week before going to the hospital, because “it didn’t hurt that bad.” He also scaled the brick of the three-story junior high as a ninth grader. Nick can’t be tackled and is merciless at friendly games of football and frisbee. He hosts annual November wars in his family’s orchard, using the rotten, frozen apples on the ground as ammunition. The apples hit him like rocks and explode on his forehead; this leaves him slightly dazed. When my parents aren’t home Nick sword-fights with my little brothers.

Nick is a friend of my younger sister, Brooke. I have seen Nick only a few times. He has black hair, buzzed, and his 19-year-old face grows a scrappy beard. His high school dress code required students to be clean-shaven; by noon every day he was sent home to shave again. Even when clean he looks dirty, but Nick’s smile is big, white, and genuine.

Brooke tells me that Nick once decided to carry a canoe to White Pine Lake in northern Utah late at night. He took Lori Greene (another of Brooke’s friends) on the hike, and somehow they both arrived without falling off the trail in the dark. Once on the lake, Nick spotted a moose and paddled over to take a picture. Lori was terrified when the moose began to lower its head and paw the watery earth, but Nick

18 Nick didn’t know I was writing about him and as we are barely acquaintances, I didn’t feel comfortable sharing that with him. In this piece I wanted to paint Nick as I saw him, and having to show it to him would have inhibited me. I finally chose to change his name and leave out certain other details that would unmistakably identify him in order to have greater freedom of expression; however, this was a trade-off because first, his real name is a gem (much better than anything I could invent). Second, it meant that in order to be true, I was being false. In this instance I felt as if it were impossible to follow the code of Philip Gerard: “Every strategy, every dramatic convention, every selective choice must be employed in the service of making the story more not less truthful” (4-5). My final decision was that it was more important for me to be true to his character than his name, a decision I might reverse in another situation.
has fear of nothing.  

I am not told how they made it out of the scrape alive, but Nick's freedom from routine fascinates me. I don't think he even knows it exists. And I wonder, "Why haven't I ever wandered at night through a grove of trees carrying a canoe?"

My mother knows Nick. "Oh, yes, the doctor's son. I taught him in sixth grade," she said when I asked her about him. "He shows up every once-in-awhile. Last summer he really scared me. I answered the door and didn't recognize him. He was leaning over and clutching his side, like a criminal who'd been stabbed. He asked if Brooke were home, his voice kind of croaking, and when I told him no, he asked to use the phone. I don't know why I let him."

About a week after this incident Nick tried to bike to Bear Lake (also in northern Utah) from his house in Logan, through Cove Canyon. I don't know where Cove Canyon is, but I know of no road there. The only road I know of from Logan to Bear Lake is 47 miles of mountain valleys and summits. Nick made it to the lake, but his bike was in pretty bad shape, and he was dirty, sweaty, bruised, and bloody. He stopped for help at the Boy Scout camp my father directs, asking for the phone and a drink of water. When my father asked about the ride, Nick said there wasn't a trail. He had carried the bike more than he'd ridden it, even before the frame bent.

Brooke met Nick at an engineering camp at Utah State University when they were juniors in high school. During the winter he happened to be in our neighborhood when his temperamental van died. He didn't have shoes on, but walked to our house to use the phone, then set out to walk eight miles home. Brooke had to beg him to let her give him a ride.

Nick anecdotes are endless in my house. They seem to lack linear time. I

19 According to Brooke this really happened, but hers is second-hand testimony.

20 I have talked to three eyewitnesses to Nick's presence in camp after this ride. The most shocking testimony is that of Shauna, the camp cook, who saw him lying on the floor in the office and thought he was dead.
can’t imagine Nick owning a day-planner. And I sometimes wish I could throw mine away.

I met Nick in mid-August. I hadn’t been living at home for more than a year and had never heard about Nick. He called the camp one afternoon, and I answered the phone. His voice was deep, but sounded awkward, like a child’s. “Hi, uuh, could I speak to your aquatics director?”

“He’s out on the ski-boat right now. What can I help you with?”

“Well, I wondered if you guys wanted a sailboat.”

This was an exciting topic for me. “We do want a sailboat. What can you tell me about it?”

“It’s a Hobie 16 and one hull is busted, but all the other parts are in perfect shape.” We talked further about if it had this, and in what condition was that, and I asked if I could take down his name and phone number. “What do you want to call me for?”

I was a bit taken aback by his question. “Well, usually when people donate to the camp, we make out some kind of receipt for their tax records.”

“Oh, that’d be good. This is Nick Knighting. Can I bring the boat over any weekday?” I said that was fine and we hung up.21

Forty-five minutes later I was telling my dad that a Nick Knighting had called and wanted to donate a boat when Nick pulled in with a trailer and catamaran. My dad looked out and said, “I watched him wreck that last summer. He was flying in a really heavy wind when it capsized and he couldn’t right it. We sent one of our boats to pull him in.”22

Nick came in the lodge and I introduced myself. He said, “I know you! You

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21 This is our conversation exactly as I remember it.

22 I exaggerated; it may have taken him an hour to get there. And it may not have been at the very moment when he saw the boat pull in that my father told me about the accident, but it could have been. And it is convenient to suppose it was, as it fills in missing details for the reader. . . This is my artistic license.
taught me lifesaving when I was a scout here.” I think I did remember having taught him about five years earlier, but not vividly. My father offered him some ice-cream, and we went out to look at the boat. It had been heavily used, but taken care of. The damaged hull was really smashed-up though, like a car hit head-on. I was glad he didn’t say I’d taught him sailing.

Nick pulled out some papers and grinned, “I’m gunna sell it to my dad, then he’s gunna donate it.” Then, looking at the lodge, Nick asked, “Do you guys ever paint that?”

“Yeah, we’d like to paint it this year if we get some paint donated,” said my dad. The lodge is huge and such a project would require a tremendous amount of paint and labor, even using specialized machinery.

“Oh. I’d like to do it.”

“You’d like to paint the lodge?” I was incredulous.

“Well, yeah. I mean, it would have to be before summer’s over.” Nick was being sincere.

All I could say was, “O.K., Nick. We’ll remember you.”

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23 This tax break allusion particularly concerned me before I changed Nick’s name. It was a detail I felt was important to the true portrait I was writing, and yet it compelled me to cover up Nick’s and his father’s identity.
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Artistic Truth


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