

D O C U M E N T



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THE GRADUATE JOURNAL OF THE  
SCAD WRITING PROGRAM

**EDITORS**

Lee Griffith and Catherine Ramsdell

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SCAD: THE UNIVERSITY FOR CREATIVE CAREERS.

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## **THE SAVANNAH COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN IS THE UNIVERSITY FOR CREATIVE CAREERS.**

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One of those careers is writing.

## **WRITING**

*B.F.A., M.F.A.*

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People skilled in the art of written communication are in demand. The writing program at SCAD emphasizes passion and practicality, and offers instruction in a variety of areas:

- Business (proposals, white papers, business correspondence, reports)
- Creative nonfiction (memoirs, personal essays)
- Fiction
- Journalism (news/feature stories, personality profiles, literary journalism)
- Nonprofit (newsletters, brochures, and grant proposals)
- Web and new media (blogs, interactive media)

Visiting authors explain the practical aspects of writing, share their work, and offer feedback to student writers. Guests include:

- Augusten Burroughs
- Chris Abani
- Chuck Klosterman
- David Sheff
- David Shields
- Jamaica Kincaid
- Jami Attenberg
- Margaret Atwood
- Nic Sheff
- Stanley Fish
- Tama Janowitz
- Tom Wolfe

## WHY STUDY WRITING AT AN ART AND DESIGN UNIVERSITY?

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Because writing is an art.

## CAREERS

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At both undergraduate and graduate levels, the program focuses on producing professional writers who are prepared for careers in a broad range of fields. Careers for SCAD graduates include:

- Copywriter
- Critic
- Editor
- Grant writer
- Magazine journalist
- News reporter
- Novelist
- Publicist
- Science and medical writer
- Social media marketer
- Technical writer
- Travel writer

SCAD students intern at companies such as:

- Black Entertainment Television
- Cartoon Network
- Connect
- Elle
- Frederic C. Beil Publisher
- Georgia Public Broadcasting
- Marvel Comics
- Savannah Magazine
- Savannah Morning News
- skirt!
- Telfair Museum
- The Atlantic
- The Moth
- The South
- Vanity Fair
- W
- Waterside News
- WTOC-TV

## PUBLISHING OPPORTUNITIES

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Students also gain real-world experience through in-house publishing opportunities such as Artemis and Document—the literary journals—and SCAD Student Media, which includes District, The Connector, SCAD Radio, SCAD Atlanta Radio, SCAN, and District Quarterly.

## OFF-CAMPUS PROGRAMS

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The writing program at SCAD also offers off-campus programs that feature Writing About Place and other classes in locations such as Mexico, Lacoste, France, and New York City.

## STUDY WRITING IN THE CREATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT OF SCAD.

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## INK MAPS

*Jenny Dunn*

*The old sailor sits at the dock  
and he curses and spits in the sea  
there's a cigarette pack in his sock  
and his pants rolled up over his knee  
there's a girl's face tattooed on his arm  
and the blue faded lips seemed to cry  
tattoos that you get when you're young  
stay on your arm till you die*

*—from "Tattoos" by Shel Silverstein*

The name of this tattoo parlor is The Black Orchid, a flower that nature manufactures dark purple, never black. The tattoo artist's name is Marcus Dove. He is the fourth person to leave ink traces under my skin. The name Marcus means "dedicated to Mars," the god of war and fertility. Doves are symbols of peace, dating back to Noah, olive branches, and when God flooded the world.

Doves are actually rock pigeons.

About his name, Marcus Dove pauses. "It's functional," he says.

\*

Sailor Jerry Collins, one of the artists who elevated skin art out of the gutter in the 1960s, says, "Wear your dreams." People generally think "flash" and "Americana" when they think of Sailor Jerry. His designs are panthers and roses, pinup girls and dragons etched in bright colors with lines of "Asian sensibility."

Today, Sailor Jerry is also a brand of very strong rum.

\*

I don't remember the names of the other three people who put ink on me. I only remember the dates and reasons. Tattoo #1: September 29, 1998. A girl looked at me wrong so I skipped school, stole my sister's ID and got a lizard/flower design on top of my right foot. It's pretty ugly. People always ask, "Is that a flower?" with crinkled noses.

\*

In the lobby of The Black Orchid, poster racks on the walls are full of copy sheets, mostly selling the resurgence of Americana and folk designs reintroduced by icons like Bert Grimm, Sailor Jerry, and Ed Hardy. I flip through them, listening to the whooshes and the soft clacks of the poster rack until someone who works there is ready to mark me.

Three girls leave with pierced belly buttons, giggling at Marcus Dove, but he ignores that, taking their money.

When they leave, he nods at me without speaking.

*You.*

He shows me his portfolio, a thick photo album with a metal cover. He looks like a total badass in the picture on the front cover—a hulk of a man in denim coveralls with a crazed expression on his face.

You don't mess with people who hold needles. But they can mess with you.

\*

Wearing your dreams is part of the reason people get inked, but it hasn't always been that way. Dreamless black swirls and dots were found under Otzi the Iceman's skin from circa 3300 BCE. No one knows for sure, but archaeologists believe skin art has existed since before the Egyptians were hooking cold brains out of noses and embalming cats.

In the era before Christ lived, tattoos were less about wearing your dreams and more about tribal rank, membership, achievement, rites of passage, and spiritual tests of endurance. The origins of tattoos are primitive and archaic, and accounts of the process are primitive and archaic as well. The word tattoo comes from "tatau" which means "mark" in Polynesian.

The ink was hammered, chiseled, carved, or cut into flesh

with sharpened shells or bones with many points, like a toothbrush fitted into handles with rawhide or tendon. The handle was for striking, and it drew blood with every stroke.

\*

When I ask Marcus Dove what he thinks about traditional tattoos, he pauses to wipe my blood away, and I exhale.

"You mean like using a chicken bone? That doesn't sound very hygienic."

He uses the outside of his black-gloved palm to wipe away the inky blood, like someone would brush tiny remnants of pink eraser from a sheet of paper.

"Why use a chicken bone when you could just use a needle?" he reasons.

As if to prove his point, the needle in his hand moves back to my torso and I try not to wince, biting the inside of my cheek.

\*

It was dark on a Friday night in winter when I went to get tattooed at The Black Orchid. A friend had recommended the place, and from the outside, it looked scuffed up. It was a grayish-white house with red gothic letters spelling T-A-T-T-O-O across six street-side windows.

Inside was a stark contrast to the outside. The walls were freshly painted in dark earthy colors—burnt sienna, sage green, and spiced brick—Savannah historic district-approved colors, and the twenty-foot ceilings were colored haint blue.

When I ask Marcus Dove if he knows why they chose those colors, he shakes his head from left to right, slowly.

"The blue is for spirits, right?"

"Yeah. They can't cross over water." Another artist peeks in the room, and I blush, shifting my arms above my head to grip the edges of the leather chair.

"And wasps."

"Why wasps?" He wants to know.

"Wasps think the blue is the sky and won't make nests there."

"I didn't know that shit." The needle buzzes; I hear it buzz, and a moment later I feel its hot noise.

\*

There haven't been many advances in the technology of tattooing in the past century or so. Contemporary tattoos are

applied with a needle that jiggles up and down, vibrating up to three thousand times per minute. Each down-stroke punctures the skin about a millimeter with each up-stroke leaving behind a single dot of pigment. Thomas Edison's engraving machine worked the same way.

The needle sounds like a torture device, something from nightmares, horror films and back rooms at crackpot dentists' offices. It is impossible to remember the way it feels between sessions. The sound it makes is unremarkable until you feel it jabbing at you. Until your body reacts to the needle.

When it starts, you remember. The nerves under your agitated skin send distress signals up to your brain. Tissue is damaged; your body tingles with adrenaline and endorphins.

When it is over, the chemicals twisting up and down through your spinal cord pump you up and set you down hard.

The needle whines like a dental drill.

It is all hot bloody skin and efforts to exhale evenly.

\*

Marcus Dove hands me the consent form, and I start to sign it without reading.

"Not on the portfolio!" He slides the photo album from underneath, glaring at me.

"On the counter?" I suggest after pausing, cringing at the antique wood.

Silence.

"On this." He hands me a clipboard.

I breathe again once he leaves to design what I want. Each time he tweaks the design and comes back, he gets impatient because I keep flipping the paper design over—it is mirrored and I can't read it.

"Alright," he calls for me from outside the waiting room, but not by name. He calls me by the tattoo I'm getting, and disappears down the hall.

I follow, my sneakers silent on the polished wood floors, passing a long wooden church pew.

"First, I have to shave your chest." Marcus Dove peeks up at my eyes.

I chuckle but it sounds nervous and weak.

"Guess you never had a man do that to you on a Friday

night, huh?" he laughs.

*And the junkie he sits at his side  
saying, tell me some tales of the deep  
and is there a wave I can ride  
that'll take me to where I can sleep  
But he's feeling that five o'clock hunger  
and it's time he was making a buy  
'cause tattoos that you get when you're young  
stay on your arm till you die*

\*

Tattoo #2: September 29, 2001. My friends and I smoked some pot and thought it would be funny to get one of our guy friends, Chris Abel, to pierce his nipples. He turned greenish yellow and passed out. While he was recovering on the couch, I got a tattoo on my hip, the Buddhist symbol Ohm.

I show it to Marcus Dove, and he laughs.

"Yeah, look at this one," he says, pointing at a tribal armband almost concealed within the sleeve of ink on his right arm.

"So dumb," I say.

\*

I don't know if tattoos are completely accepted today, but they are definitely becoming commercialized and mainstream.

The famous tattooist Ed Hardy, who started drawing on his friends at age ten with eyeliner, now has signature cologne and a designer clothing line.

It's not that surprising, really, considering how much we inflict on our skin these days. Our skin protects us—it is the largest organ in the human body. It is a casing, a fragile coat of armor. It is responsible for keeping our guts from falling out. It dictates our physical appearance. We nip it, tuck it, suck fat out of it, inject silicone into it, bleach it, starve it, tone it, shave it, wear clothes to flatter or conceal it.

It seems only natural that tattoos would fall into the widening category of acceptable options.

\*

It's not actually my chest that Marcus Dove runs a disposable razor over—it's my ribs, under my heart. I am nervous about lifting up my shirt. A strange man who just yelled at me can



see my red bra.

I knew he would see it, which is why I wore the red one. White cotton doesn't seem like the kind of bra you wear to a tattoo parlor.

He doesn't tell me to sit or lay or do anything. I stand there, watching him prepare the needle, his hands, the ink.

\*

Tattoo #3: May 15, 2005. I skipped a day of work because the old guy who was teaching me to wire a house was complaining I wasn't strong enough to handle the drill above my head. Thing is, he hadn't shown me how to brace it so I wouldn't break my arm. He was a prick. I got "IN AETERNUM" across my upper back in Times New Roman, a line from a John Irving book.

\*

Assimilated into Western culture via circus attractions in the 1800s, tattoos spread like syphilis and bad news to criminals, farm animals, and other fringe elements of society. An outcast stench lingered on the tattooed—the freaks, the outsiders, the felons.

More recently, tattoos began to slowly crawl above these lower associations.

\*

Marcus Dove sizes me up without speaking. I lay down finally, for something to do, and he immediately begins cleaning my skin.

Something drawn on paper doesn't translate to skin. A brushstroke on flat canvas is not a needle on breathing, tensing flesh.

Transformation. Change. New beginnings. I tell myself that I need these things, and I tell myself that the pain of the needle will be less severe than the pain of heartbreak, but before he turns the needle on, I can't be sure.

"You ready?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say.

\*

Tattoos are mottos, mantras, and pieces of the person you want to be. They are something that cannot be taken away from you. They transform you—afterward, you are forever altered. They are living art—art that lives on you until you die.

Tattoos are hobbies for art collectors. They are dreams and identities that mark the passage of pain. They are family crests, lover's names, poems, psalms, portraits, or grave markings of the newly dead.

\*

The tattooed used to be a subculture thriving on rebellion. These days, if we are still rebelling, I don't think we even know it.

\*

Marcus Dove has been tattooing people for thirteen years. When I ask him how many people he has inked since then, he laughs.

"Thousands, probably."

When I ask him if he has done bad ones, he says, "Oh yeah. My first ones. My ex-wife has a coupla cherries on her flabby ass. They're pretty shitty."

We laugh.

"My daughter, with my ex, wants to be a tattoo artist when she's older."

I think for a few minutes, until the sounds of buzzing ring too sharp in my ears and I ask him another question.

"That your wife?" I jerk my chin at a framed picture on the wall. He looks up and nods. I breathe. Slow.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I lie. "She's beautiful. How did you meet her?"

"At a bar." He glances at me.

"Sorry I'm asking so many questions. Just trying to distract myself from the pain." My smile feels like a grimace.

"It's cool," he says, not pausing anymore.

"How did you propose?"

"The ring was on top of a cupcake. Not inside it. I didn't want her to break her teeth on it or anything."

I tell myself again that tattoos are a map of where you are going, and a map of where you've been.

Marcus Dove and his needle chart ink maps.

But this red Victoria's Secret bra won't hold up my breasts forever. Over time, they will sag down to conceal the tattoo.

Someday, all of Marcus Dove's walking art will fade, sag, wrinkle and die. When the last person he ever marks up dies, it all goes underground forever.

I don't ask Marcus Dove about that.

\*

Tattoo #4: January 16, 2010. My lover of five years moved on, smashing hopes of happily-ever-after and prompting a thirty-six-hour

bender. Clad in a dirty, pink bathrobe, bottle in hand, I cried pieces of eyeball away. Once the blind spots in my vision cleared, I got the words “Know Thyself” tattooed under my heart with the hope that someday, I actually will.

Wear your dreams. No one can take them away from you.

\*

Psychiatrists in the 1920s used to rant about the sexual connection between tattooist and tattooed. The aspect of pain as pleasure.

“I don’t know why people get ink on their ribs,” Marcus Dove says once my tattoo is bandaged—once I proved to him that I take pain gracefully.

We smoke cigarettes behind the building, and it feels like someone just kicked me in the ribs. It also feels a little bit like drifting off to sleep after rough sex.

“I have tattoos everywhere except my ribs, head, cock, and butt. I hate getting tattoos. It fucking hurts,” he says, flicking ash from his cigarette.

“Yeah,” I say, trying not to hunch over, watching my hands shake, hoping Marcus doesn’t see the jiggling end of my lit cigarette.

*And the waves make a suffering sound  
on the gray creakin’ pier where we stand  
and we’re watchin’ the sun as it drowns  
talking of faraway lands  
but my true song won’t ever be sung  
and the words that you hear are a lie  
cause tattoos that you get when you’re young  
stay in your mind till you die*



## MEMOIRS OF A BAD MARRIAGE

*Tammie Green*

It is 5:02 a.m. I instinctually take inventory. First, I look left; then I go to look out the window. I creep downstairs, in case he's bold enough to sneak somebody in my house or talk dirty on the phone to some disrespectful ho he picked up while out painting the town. Done. My husband is not home; neither is Doug's car. Doug: the neighbor across the street and the most recent installment in my failing marriage. The biggest difference between me and his also-neglected wife is that her coping vice clearly isn't food. I just add that to the *long* list of 'why I hate Doug,' because she's too nice to blame for her ability to be fit, despite it all.

Only one weekend stands between this and the last time the alarm clock beat them home. Back upstairs, I am pissed. I doze off.

The slightly increased volume of a car engine's purr—either a diesel or a car that will soon need a new muffler—wakes me up. *I bet that's they ass now.* My churning stomach forces a quick leap to the window. I see an alien car just beyond the corner, facing the wrong direction on a one-way. We enter a staring contest. The lights cut off, so I win. My eyes are wide and fixed. His ass still isn't in the bed and Doug's car is now tucked in for the night—well, for the morning. *Hmmm. Why isn't anyone coming out of the car?* I feel my temperature rising, one hundredth of a degree at a time. I allow only a whiplash worthy turn to check the time before returning to my stare. 5:56.

I'm not sure if I've blinked since I got to the windowsill. I wonder about the lead in the chipped paint that is painfully

tattooing my propped elbows. *Will the kids chew on this mess?* They better not. I want to approach the car, but movement isn't an option. What if I go downstairs just as the suspects bid their adieu? *Get out of the fucking car!* Eyes squinted and dry, I wait.

What's so peculiar to me is that most people think it's cute or normal for opposites to attract and for women to marry someone like their father. I have finally figured out what really happens. A lot of times we become unlike our fathers because men are nuts, and we don't *want* to be like them. Then, lo and behold, we meet someone who has similar characteristics and somehow the vibe feels warm. We feel like, *this guy is cool and I understand him*. Of course you do! He is your father reincarnated, and the only reason it feels like you know him so well is because you do. You know his type. It is...*mi familia*. The screwed dichotomy that you are faced with is: one, your dad was probably an admirable father, and two, he was definitely a shitty husband. What do you do?

Admittedly, my husband is no slouch. His résumé and looks could start a multi-class, multi-ethnic catfight. When I met my to-be, I was in desperate need of a relationship. I was vulnerable to love, and his swagger claimed me. I serenely gave in to my weak heart. Plus, he is so good with *I'm sorry*. Way better than I am. When he came home on our third anniversary with a beautiful Coach purse—the day after that “issue” he had with my brother—I cried. I cried both because I hadn't even picked him up a card, and because I love Coach bags—they're so sturdy and reliable, just like the *him* I fell in love with. Problem is, now, my husband purposely seeks my jugular, armed with his verbal dagger, so his apologies fail to mend the knifed trust between us. The fence I straddle is starting to feel like a rapist, my dangling legs tugged by anger and forgiveness. The pain overwhelms me. Yet I truly believe this guy would be one of the best people alive if he weren't so damn evil.

*That's it! I'm going out there.* I leave my perch.

Now, I know that it is nearly a cardinal sin to look raggedy when confronting a woman who is dealing with your man. But rage leads me to grab the nearest thing to clothe myself, a sheet, and to leave on my caked facial masque. *I have to get down there before she leaves.*

Running...*don't wake up the kids.* Running...*don't fall.* Running...*don't cry.*

I get to the door, and the car is pulling away. My heart and stomach feel like the targets of a basketball's dribble. *I knew I should have stayed at the window!* Defeated, I close the door. I think: *my damn husband must have run into Doug's house when he saw me disappear from the pane*—until I turn around and see he is asleep on the couch. I guess I didn't hear the front door as well as I'd heard the stranger's car, which convinces me of more angles of trickery. I'm losing my mind.

I check to see if he is faking. He's not. I'm certain once I see that his second phallus, the cell phone, is detached from his grasp. I look at the screen to see the last number dialed. Only four digits—he must have fallen asleep calling somebody. Then it hits me. Like a take-two, I emotionally replay the moment I realized he had changed his voicemail code. It used to be only one digit off from mine. It was an accidental discovery because I'd never worried about *those* things; we had enough else to tend to. *His new code?* Yes, this is my redemption—and Alcatraz—at once.

But I find no messages.

I take a power nap before work. In a state of half-sleep, I recognize that once my dreams got really bad, so did our union. They would be so vivid that I would wake up fuming, sweating, and looking for clues to validate my “premonitions.” Then came Doug. Abbot and Costello would hang out all day and then go out at night too, take showers and get all debonair before going to “the store.” That was the cover: the store. Creative. In my twisted and vulnerable state of mind, I started to think they were enjoying each other's company too much, possibly joining the ranks of switch-hitters.

In what feels like three minutes the alarm hollers at me to open the lids covering my sandpaper eyeballs. I have a whole rack of shit on my agenda: take my daughter to her doctor and dentist appointments, go to my dentist appointment, teach two blocks of algebra, and complete lesson plans for the afternoon substitute. Now the Doppler Team says snow, and I am waking twenty minutes after I'd planned. I still take a minute to smell my sleeping babies-at-peace before getting them up. Their dimpled cheeks and tiny lips are so soft, even my tall six-year-old daughter's. My son is still a chubby three so, unless he's pooped in his long-outdated pull-ups, he's biteable.

My husband, the jerk, is now *acting* asleep, which is fine with me.

*I'm so tired!* The migraines have been more frequent, making me extremely temperamental. Sometimes I look in my kids' eyes after yelling at them at the top of my lungs in the mighty name of Minutia, and then want to go hug them; I want to say I'm sorry right then. I want to remember their morning smell. In the back of my mind, my Catholic and Baptist upbringing screams, "Spare the rod, spoil the child!" I step back, stopping myself from sending the message that mommy is truly going bonkers. At least if I hold firm, they'll just disagree with me. The moments seemingly stretch out for an eternity as my offspring look for some glimpse of desire from their mother to console them. I don't. I can't. *We'll work the rest out on a couch in ten years.* My private sanctuary then calls me, so I do an about-face and confirm that everything is in place—tissues, snack, bottle of beer, and the Bible. I flip through the Concordance and look up 'in times of difficulty,' while trying not to defile the holy instructions with my tears or my daily preference of intoxicant. I almost *want* to be diagnosed with something, anything that will make my mental state comprehensible.

\*

Traffic. It takes one and a half hours to make the thirty-minute trip to work. My lesson plans were actually supposed to be finished *before* I got to work so I can teach now. I juggle the two tasks, planning and teaching, but in neither am I truly successful. I make two of the three appointments my daughter and I have before returning to all-day bottleneck on the beltway. *I'm so sleepy.* I can't remember ever driving this tired. It is worse than any time in college that I ever could have been pulled over for a D.U.I. Babygirl is knocked out in the back so I can't talk to or sing with her. Way too much traffic to talk on the phone. My exit comes into view, and my heart happily speeds up. It feels like a troll has been yanking on my lids. *Good, a yellow light.* As I come off of the exit, I slow for a one-minute opportunity to rest. Bam!

*What happened?*

**MOMMY!**

*Where's the yellow light? Oh my God, that was a turn signal! I just ran into someone. My insurance lapsed two days ago.*

**MOMMMMMYYYY!**

*We have to get the baby in the next ten minutes! I can SEE the daycare! Shit, shit. SHIT!*

I am relieved by the reaction of my victim. I jump out, apologizing, and he is calm and understanding. He hadn't even honked his horn. I call the father of my children, and he is calm and understanding as well. Too calm. Especially as he encourages me to go home and rest; he'd be there after a co-worker's going away party. *What the fuck did he just say?* I feel as if I've been dropped down the rabbit hole. Yes, the wreck ranked only slightly above a fender bender, but I just told my husband that his wife and first-born were in a car accident, that the car insurance hadn't been paid—and he said go take a nap, he'll be at a party? I imagine the barrels of Harriet Tubman's rifle rising to my eyes, urging me that my time to go was now. *"Freedom or death!"* she proclaimed.

I sit still after ending the call in shock, and with newfound certainty. I take a moment to eliminate my last physiological reaction to my predicament. One more breath and I dial. An eternity passes; my car's hazards are still on; my daughter's questions frantically continue as I wait to hear, "Please enter your four-digit code." The woman's voice on message number three, confirming her meeting place for the night with my husband, is the first lantern-holding lawn jockey leading me out of captivity.

I back into the parking spot at the insurance agency. With both children in tow—forced into silence—I present my agent with an Oscar-worthy performance of *I've had such a long day, I need coffee*, and write him a bad check. I return thirty minutes later with a story of *who knew I would leave here and hit someone?* He is sympathetic to the neighborhood teacher, overworked and juggling young children. The things women manage *in times of trouble...*

Of all the times I thought, knew, wanted to but didn't threaten it, I can no longer treat our problems as simply our marital cross to bear. Whether it was my failure to launch or his verbal assaults, I'd always hoped for growth to heal us. But these months of assumed infidelity have stolen from me the ability to pray for my marriage. I am losing me.

At home, after I carry my sleeping babies in from the car and lay them down in their respective beds, I have my own party: me, Cap'n Morgan, Mr. Goodbar, and God. I look up 'divorce' in the Concordance.

*This is the last day of my marriage.*



## THE FABULOUS BESTIARY OF ALTON'S CREEK

*Harrison Scott Key*

"It's Doe Day tomorrow, boy," Dad said, holding up my gun for inspection. "You best get ready to kill something."

"You better believe it," I said.

I lied. I was ten years old and roughly the size of an overweight squirrel. I did not look capable of killing anything except a box of Twinkies. And I was especially ill-equipped to kill things with fur, which, unlike Hostess products, can become enraged and violent when attacked.

On the eve of the hunt, Bird and I laid out our clothes and gear for Dad's review, as we did every Friday night between the airing of *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving* and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. While our nation celebrated all things holy and bright during the holiday season, my brother and I were forced to wake up before dawn, dress up like shrubbery, and hide in the woods until we lost all feeling in our extremities, at which time we were instructed to start shooting things.

Dad inspected the blade of my small knife, my box of shotgun shells, everything. He plunged his hands into the bulging pockets of my coat, and felt something deep inside.

"What's this?" he said, pulling out a handful of candy.

I always took candy. It helped the time pass, and seemed like it might be used to extort my wellbeing from woodland creatures wishing me harm. The woods, before dawn, were a terrifying place.

“Those are Jolly Ranchers, sir,” I said.

“Jolly *what?*” he said. He did not like the idea of things being jolly, which implied that those things might be gay.

I explained that it was a delicious fruit-flavored candy.

“Gimme one,” he said. I did. “These wrappers here make too much noise,” he said, fingering the clear plastic wrapping. “Out there tomorrow, you just need to open it in your pants. So you don’t cause a racket. Can’t kill nothing with a racket.”

I did not understand how to open candy in my pants. It seemed like it would take more dexterity than I then possessed and possibly a third hand located in the crotch area. Right there in front of him, I practiced. It did not go well. The pockets of my camouflage britches had been lined with dried blood and feathers since late summer, when I had been forced to suffocate a dove by shoving it in my pocket. It had not been properly shot and was not dead yet. And so, two months later, when I pulled the unwrapped Jolly Rancher out of my pocket, it was covered with flecks of down and straw.

“Son, don’t eat that,” he said. “Wash it off first.”

I did not like wounding animals. When they’re not all the way dead, they look at you, they judge you. Nobody wants to be judged by a game animal. It’s uncomfortable. And suffocating the dove had been about as fun as trying to drown Mickey Mouse.

“You best shoot good tomorrow,” Dad said. “Can’t asphyxiate no deer in your pockets.”

\*

In my family, every little boy used to dream about Doe Day, the one day a year the state legislature invited children under the age of sixteen to shoot females of the cagey and elusive whitetail deer. As such, Doe Day had religious import for the rural youth of Mississippi, affording as it did a sort of swinging door into the halls of manhood. It was a provincial rite, like the Poy Sang Long of Myanmar, the Vision Quest of the Lakota Sioux, the Bar Mitzvah of Long Island. Like the Quinceañera, Doe Day involved colorful costumes and a great deal of shooting. Like the deb balls taking place that same month in Jackson and Biloxi, it might involve robust pageantry and a great deal of blood and weeping.

It was explained to us, as children, that it was not generally chivalrous to kill female deer, but that it was required once a year as a

population management tool. There was simply not enough food for all the deer, our fathers explained. They painted horrid pictures of maddened whitetail hordes—hungry, desperate, overrunning villages, stealing and eating children like Bavarian gypsies. It would not be pretty. As such, it was left up to the children of Mississippi to thin out the growing herds in a single day, lest our state suffer a catastrophe of Malthusian dimension.

Why females, you ask. They are easier to kill than males of the species, and the sooner a boy kills a large animal, the closer he gets to taking on all the glorious accoutrement of rural manhood, which includes joining the volunteer fire department, fathering bastard children with sexually precocious Baptist cheerleaders, and eventually graduating from high school. It was a lot to live up to.

Also, females are easier to kill. Unlike bucks—who are fractious beasts, skittish, and prone towards obsessive-compulsive behavior—does are relaxed. They don’t hide. They’re out there in the open, grazing, holding frozen margaritas. When they see you, they don’t run. They just stare, and sometimes even walk toward you, possibly mistaking you for an angel, or the bartender. This is the perfect time to shoot them.

“If I can just shoot one of these does,” I thought to myself, “I will be a hero.”

This ambition, though, was complicated by fear. Of the woods. And the monsters that lived there.

\*

Dad woke us at approximately 4:30 a.m. These were the unhappiest moments of my happy childhood. The hour seemed excessive for a year as progressive as 1985. We did not live in a developing nation, where rebel armies and tribal carnage might necessitate getting up so early—say, to keep your sister from getting raped. My sister did not even live with us. She lived in Memphis, which no longer had a rebel army.

We dressed and drove a few miles to borrowed land on which we’d been given special dispensation to hunt, a dark and forgotten corner of the legendary Alton’s Creek Hunting Club. We did not belong to a hunting club because Dad considered it emasculating to pay for hunting rights. He had grown up shooting animals on land that belonged to the government, and he would not start paying for it now.

All of us had heard stories of the monster bucks on Alton's Creek land. It was run by a syndicate of farming brothers. These brothers had several manly sons, and also several manly daughters. All of their children were tall, muscular, thick-necked, burly, built, as they say, like a family of brick shithouses. This impressive musculature was of great benefit to the sons, who excelled in football and breeding, but less so for the daughters, who excelled in being mistaken for livestock. The deer of Alton's Creek Hunting Club, like the hunters themselves, were monstrous. Dad had seen this for himself on slow drives down silty and cool dirt roads that ran quietly through Alton's Creek property like seams on an old, fine coat. We'd stepped out of the truck and seen the tracks of more than one large buck, the loveliest impression a man can find in the earth, in the shape of an inverted heart, cloven in two:



These tracks had a phantasmal quality, as though you had seen the trail of a ghost, had heard the sibilance of some forest secret. Dad saw enough tracks to convince him that we should make friends with the family of farming brothers, and we did, and the farmers allotted us hunting rights on a small tract on the northernmost edge of their club. We suspected this was not the best hunting parcel in the Alton's Creek portfolio, but at the very least, Dad was sure there'd be females there, something for his boys to shoot on Doe Day.

We pulled off the blacktop onto a sunken dirt track and set out on foot. We walked through the cold November dark until our heads steamed in the ray of Dad's old chrome flashlight, and then we stopped.

"Here," Dad said.

This was where Bird would be hunting. Dad led him into the trees and showed him where to sit. We would have to sit on the ground. We'd not had permission to construct deer stands in the trees. I was worried about sitting on the ground, where I'd be more prone to assaults from creatures real and imaginary.

Woods as dark and old as those could be full of all kinds of

violence: cougars, wild hogs, oversized weasels. Oh, I knew it was possible. I knew *Bulfinch's Mythology* and Edith Hamilton's *oeuvre* like the books of the Bible, and still believed in St. Nicholas and leprechauns. I had begun to suspect the unicorn to be a lie, but was holding out for confirmation of tooth fairies and other imps who might bring joy into my life. When St. Paul said the Lord would come like a thief in the night, I believed him. When St. Peter said the Devil prowled like a lion, seeking whom he may devour, I believed him, too. And now, I was in the woods, dark and wild, triangulated between Jesus the cat burglar and Satan the jungle cat and any other feral thing that might come ambling along. This corner of Rankin County was not heavily populated. We had only moved here a year before, and who knew what creatures called this place home? It might be a goblin, or a basilisk, or some kind of temperate leviathan, or simply a cabin-dwelling libertarian who refuses to see a dentist. That's why tree stands were so important. If you were in a tree, you felt like you were improving your chances of not being disemboweled and eaten alive.

I waited, in supreme blackness and cold, for Dad to get Bird settled and come back to me. The canopy of trees disallowed moonlight and stars, and it was just me and my gun. Something up the trail caterwauled. An owl hooted. The woods were a gaping maw, and I was already swallowed.

Dad emerged without Bird from the dark palisade of trees, his flashlight revealing no immediate monstrosities, and we walked on. After a time, we came to a westerly bend in the trail and Dad led me off the path and down a thickly wooded hill. "Right here," he said. "Clear them leaves, sit up against this tree, and don't get up till I come for you."

"When?"

"Later."

*Later*, of course, meant *lunch*. We would eat bologna and cheddar cut with our hunting knives and sit on the side of the road for an hour or so, then come right back out here until dark. I would be out here all day, like always, sitting, waiting, vegetating, turning numb with cold and losing the higher faculties of language, doing my best to imitate the world's most apathetic tree fungus. The sitting was bad enough, but the thought of eating bologna was enough to stick the barrel of the gun in my mouth. It was a hellish meat, the



flesh of Satan's horses, a sausage infused with alien gases and the tears of abandoned children.

Dad walked away, and I turned to see the cold firefly of his flashlight bounce up the hill, through the trees, and into the black hole of woods. I was alone, in the dark, so small, so young, and carrying a firearm. This did not seem wise. According to my mother, I could barely keep my penis from urinating all over the toilet seat. It troubled her, and she complained to Dad.

"You got bad aim, boy," Dad said. "Piss goes in the commode."

"If he can't hit the toilet," she said, "Lord knows he won't know where to point a gun."

"It's different," Dad said.

"He'll shoot himself in the head," she said.

"Maybe so, but it's different."

\*

I cannot explain my general fear of the woods. I was easily frightened. I couldn't watch promos for *Miami Vice* without clutching a pillow, and was so disturbed by the title sequence of *The Golden Girls* that I had nightmares about confronting Bea Arthur deep in a shadowy backcountry hollow. When you sit there, in the dark, you hear things. The distant crack of twig and trunk, body and bone. The fluttering of unseen wings. The nasty lamentations of bipedal creatures that defy taxonomy. A couple of years before, my Uncle Mike had fooled me into staying up with him one night to watch *American Werewolf in London*. I was not happy about it.

"Why aren't you laughing?" he said.

"Because I'm over here pooping on myself," I wanted to say.

For a young boy sitting in an empty deciduous vale as old as myth and cloaked in nothing but gray moonlight, werewolves did not seem out of the question.

Also, sasquatches.

When I was four, my Aunt Paula had forced me to sit on her lap while listening to the soundtrack of *Sasquatch, the Legend of Bigfoot* on a Sears record player. This classic seventies film was groundbreaking in its portrayal of the inner lives of large, West Coast-based primates, but I was not a fan. Bigfoot's personal soundtrack was a symphonic blend of a rehashed *Jaws* theme admixed

with the terrifying call of the Sasquatch himself, which sounded like a tornado siren mating with a box fan. It was terror amplified.

"Do you hear the Bigfoot?" Aunt Paula would say.

"That's the sound of my urine pooling on the floor," I thought.

These and related torments made me skittish in the woods and liable to shoot anything. Every distant caterwaul was a werewolf. Every thud was a lumbering Sasquatch, on his way to disembowel me before his next recording session. Every dead and spiraling vine coiled around these naked white oaks was a reticulated python, frozen and waiting for the morning sun to warm him up enough to drop down into the leaves and eat me whole.

Finally, the void of Genesis divided itself into the black of the trees and the chrome of a clear dawn. I could finally see the gun in my lap, my only defense against the creeping things of the earth. It was a .410 single-shot, called a *four-ten* and technically the weakest shotgun in the history of gunpowder. The largest thing it could kill was an adult field mouse, and only if the mouse was very close and very still: duct-taped, for example, to a nearby tree. The gun's only real purpose was to give mothers of very young boys something to pray about on the weekends. Which is to say, if handled with care, a four-ten could blow just enough brains out one side of your head to prevent you graduating from high school. If that happened, they'd never let me leave Rankin County.

To satiate Mom, Dad took me out for target practice in a great big, sandy ravine. I proved a bad shot.

The night before Doe Day, he'd shown me photographs of deer, taken broadside, and pointed out where to shoot. "Behind and above the shoulder," he said, pointing with a finger as thick as the barrel of a man's gun.

"There," Dad said.

"I say shoot it in the head," Bird said.

"Shut up, boy," Dad said.

I liked Bird's idea. In movies about Vietnam and cocaine, which were the only kinds of movies Dad would let us watch, people were always getting shot in the head.

"The head seems pretty good," I said.

"No, dummy," he said. "Looka here. Shoot the heart. Behind the shoulder, and above."

"But the head seems good, too."

“That’s where the brains is,” Bird said.

“The head ain’t no count,” he said. “It’s too small. What kinda picture would that make, anyhow? A deer with its head all blowed to pieces. Can’t send no picture like that to a magazine.”

“You could send it to *Ripley’s Believe It or Not*,” Bird said.

“It’s true,” I said.

“How about *Ripley’s Believe It or Shut the Hell Up*,” Dad said.

“But I could shoot it in the head if it was right up in my face, right?” I asked. I leaned over into Dad’s face, real close. “Like this.”

He stared back, disenchanted by the queer fruit that his loins had produced, and sent us to bed.

“The head is where the brains is,” Bird said, as though it were a revelation, a bit of news.

\*

I sat in my little dirt nest like a timid ovenbird, protected by a weak berm of leaves I’d built up around my immediate perimeter, the gun athwart my lap and the candy on my tongue. I was hidden from view by even the most proximate Arcadian horrors, but still terrified, still vacillating between apathy and terror, even though it was already midmorning. The sky was bright, but the woods were still woods, still full of Minotaurs—and me, forced to wait on Dad, without even a bit of string to get back to the truck. All morning, I heard the distant, deep POWWW of rifle and shotgun, miles away in every direction. These were the men of Alton’s Creek, harvesting their game.

The first growl I heard was not from the foul gullet of a Cyclops or a Mothman. The low, visceral gurgling sounded like the rooting of some giant Calydonian Boar up the hill, behind me, the horrid scourge of Artemis, come to eat me. But it was just my stomach. Clearly, I was hungry. It was time to go. The only way to make that happen was to fake a shooting—into the trees, perhaps—and send Dad running. I would say I missed. We would poke around in the leaves, dry as tinder, loud as fire, for blood. We would not find it, and given the lateness of the morning, we would leave the woods early. But as soon as I cocked the hammer of the world’s smallest shotgun, I realized I was not the only large mammal in the immediate vicinity. Something was just to my left and behind me, a haloed mass of fur on the edge of my vision. I stiffened like a cat. It was Sasquatch, come at last.

\*

The beast came into view, without my having to turn. It was a very small doe, smaller than some dogs I’d seen in *The World Book Encyclopedia*. Strangest of all, she was so close—almost, it seemed, near enough to touch with my gun—and did not see me. My visible parts had become of a piece with tree and earth, and my smells admixed with the detritus of the decaying understory. I was invisible.

Her head was down, looking for acorns. She was a pretty animal, her features as delicate and lithe as a woman’s. Her legs were elegant, thin as saplings. Her face, demure as a lady cutting pansies. The coat, as blonde and sheen as the walnut stock of my gun. She rose up and stamped her hooves back down again into the earth as she inched forward, from the corner of my eye into full view.

Naïve minds unschooled in the carnage of hunting—certain kinds of graduate students in the humanities, for example—might want to feel a great deal of pathos for such a beautiful creature. They might conflate alkaline pity with saccharine sentiment and think of Bambi, the name conjuring unsullied youth, bucolic glens peopled by colorful and congenial creatures who’ve been sucking on helium balloons all day. But Bambi was a spindly idiot. This deer was regal, poised, more like Clarice, the claymation doe of *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. Clarice was literate, lovely, an ingénue, the Mia Farrow of stop-motion wildlife. I loved Rudolph, loved Clarice, experienced the deepest kinship with them and Hermey, the orb-headed elf who wanted to be a dentist. Like Rudolph and Hermey, I was a great disappointment to all those around me and preferred to spend my time with toys and books.

The doe looked up and saw me.

“Hello,” I said.

She arrested herself and would have disappeared into the sylvan drapery had I not been so close. I saw her, and she saw me see her.

I could think of nothing else to say. I moved my gun a little, just to get it out of the way, so this natural communion might flower into something deeper, more memorable, and she saw that I was holding not an olive branch, but a machine designed for her destruction. In this story, I realized I was not playing the role of friend. I was not Rudolph. If anything, I was the Abominable Snowman, the enemy, because my breeding suggested I was about

to send Clarice way past the Island of Misfit Toys and on toward the Archipelago of Dead Animals.

Still, she did not move, did not run, just lifted her head to look at the gun. She was comely enough to have stepped right out of Bulfinch's prose. I knew this mythic wood was full of monsters, but it had never occurred to me that creatures of such precise symmetry, such unexpected grace and beneficence, might also be out here. What other Apollonian charms peopled this country, I could not guess. Fairies and wood nymphs, perhaps. Creekbound mermaids. Junior high cheerleaders.

I raised my gun and cocked the heavy steel hammer without even remembering I'd done it. I knew: if I missed this deer, so close, so available, an offering from the gods, I would have to live the life of a girl, would have to go ahead and join the drill team and get a vagina. I brought the gun up to my face, set my eye down square with the barrel, like I'd been shown, looked down the polished blue-black steel of it to the end, to the bead, and through that to the animal itself. She looked right at me. Never before in the history of modern hunting had a game animal been so deserving of mercy and a happier life in a petting zoo. Years later, I would think of this deer when reading of Lulu, the young bushbuck antelope in *Out of Africa*. The Baroness Blixen loved Lulu, fed her, made her a member of the household.

"You would be a lovely pet," I thought.

And then I aimed where the brains is, and pulled the trigger.

\*

The smoke and fire of sound inside my skull dissipated into the thin, dry air of November, and I opened my eyes. The doe was gone. The last thing I'd seen on the other side of the gun's bead was her ear, like the petal of some candied perennial flower.

I'd been taught to wait. If the deer was dead, she'd be twenty or thirty yards down the hollow. They can run a hundred yards or more when shot, a hole in their heads or hearts or lungs. After five minutes, I stood and looked. I stepped where she'd been, looked for blood, possibly an ear.

Here came Dad, down the hill, to help me track the animal. I could not get rid of the nagging possibility that I might have actually vaporized the deer's entire head.

"You get him?" he said.

"It was a her."

"Was she a big one?"

"Just kind of a normal size one," I said. "Actually, real small."

"How small?"

"Pretty small."

"Was it a yearling?"

"You mean, a baby?"

"I mean did it have spots," he said.

"Maybe."

"Shit, son."

"Oh, no," I said. "I've killed a baby deer."

"Where was you when you shot it?"

"I was there and it was here," I said, pointing to two spots on the side of the hill, embarrassingly close. Dad studied the area. We enlarged our radius of ground. We came back together, quiet.

"Boy," Dad said. "I think you missed it."

I was embarrassed, terribly, and relieved, terribly.

"You aim for the heart like I said to?" he said.

"It was kind of more the head area," I said. "She was up in my face."

"Shitfire," he said. "It don't get no easier than that."

I didn't tell Dad what I knew. That the deer *was* dead, that it had been close enough to suffocate with a plastic grocery sack, that I did not miss, could never have missed. I got on my hands and knees and looked for blood that might have dried into the colors of the canopied hillside. The deer had vanished—a ghost, something alive only in the forest of my imagination.

"What if it was a baby?" I said.

Dad stopped for a second and looked up. "Then I reckon it'd be like veal," he said.

"What's veal?" I said.

"It's delicious," he said.

I found a few pieces of short, stiff white hair, the kind you might find around a deer's eyes, in its ears.

"I think I shot off its ear," I said.

"Son, do you see an ear around here?"

Finally, we stopped looking for blood. It was almost lunch. The door into manhood had swung wide, and I had not gone through it.

“Let’s go,” Dad said.

On our way to the truck, the woods were a different place. The old ancient terror was gone now, as dissipated into the ether as the sound of a gunshot two counties over. It was just trees and hollows and leaves and mud. It no longer seemed appropriate to be afraid. After all, I had a gun. If anything, the werewolves and Sasquatches and deer should be afraid of me. Hell, I was shooting off their ears. With enough practice, I could eventually shoot them somewhere more vital, like the legs, so they couldn’t run, or the face, so they can’t see where they’re going.

It was time to grow up, to see the woods not as the setting for some terrific malevolence, but home. And it was time to stop thinking of deer as plasticine pets and to accept them for what they really were: dinner.

We fetched Bird and slogged to the truck. On our way to Styron’s General Store, to purchase ungodly amounts of bologna, we came to a knot of trucks on the side of the road, and Dad pulled over. It was the broad-shouldered brothers and sons of Alton’s Creek Hunting Club. They were gathered around a pickup, looking down at something that lay hidden there. From my seat, I saw it: a buck of such heft, such immensity, with a rack of antlers as thick and tangled as briarroot. They held it up for us to see.

“I told you they was monsters in here,” Dad said.



## ST. FRANCIS OF SAVANNAH

*Amy Paige Condon*

A folk singer named Kathy Waters sits on the steps of the porch and strums her guitar. She plays an original tune, though the lyrics ring familiar. The crowd gathers on the front lawn to listen—some hold empty wine glasses, others hold hands.

Despite an autumn chill that has settled across Savannah this first week in October, the mosquitoes are not quite ready to let the summer go. They still draw blood. A breeze rustles the first falling leaves, brown and crisp. A neighbor, anxious for a new season, has lit a fire. Its scent fills the air like incense while Kathy's voice—a voice that hits the sweet spot between an alto and a soprano—lifts and warms the flock.

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace...  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.  
Where there is injury, let me pardon...*

As her last note reverberates, the host for this gathering, Bill Peterson, steps onto the stage. Bill thanks his guests for coming to his party with a purpose. Each year, he explains, he holds a potluck dinner for the Feast of St. Francis, the patron saint of ecology and animals. This is the first one he's fashioned as a fundraiser. He offers an invitation to others to come forward to share stories of their pets and testimonies of their affection for nature.

A local author of historical fiction, Jan Durham, offers a prayer for the planet. Margaret Clay, a life coach, reads from the writings of that great defender of the sequoia, John Muir: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.”

Indeed.

Another woman hands out postcard-sized business cards for anyone wanting her to paint their pets’ portraits. She talks about how Bill, as her pet pastor, helped her navigate the grief she endured when her dog died.

After the last guest departs, Bill tallies the alms: almost \$250 and 14 lbs. of pet food for Save-A-Life. The non-profit animal welfare organization is Bill’s charity. They help lower the cost of spaying and neutering and support a network of folks who foster dogs, cats, and the occasional pot-bellied pig until a permanent home is found.

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In his back yard, Bill has placed a statue of St. Francis of Assisi holding a bird in the palm of his hand. Just like the paintings and mosaics from the old masters, Francis appears serene. A glance from Bill to the saint reveals striking resemblances: light brown hair, fair and medium in length, a thinning spot on the crown, a trim beard and moustache. It’s a good bet that St. Francis had dark eyes, though. Bill’s are bright and blue, and he is tall—much taller than the slight monk. At fifty-nine, Bill has already lived fifteen years longer than St. Francis.

Bill’s shelves are lined with the books of a spiritual seeker—Thomas Merton’s *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, *A Course in Miracles*, *Conversations with God*, Buddhist meditation. Alabaster white, marble, and porcelain sculptures and statues are displayed on columns and shelves against walls painted shades influenced by the palette of Louis Comfort Tiffany—peacock blue, robin’s egg, and cinnamon. They represent religious iconography, mythology, and the everyday life of peasants. They stand amid Matisse prints, Dutch Art Nouveau lithographs, framed world maps, antique advertisements, and vintage car parts. His original paintings and mixed-media collages cover the walls of the room that operates as his studio. Two vibrantly hued and talkative parakeets nest in a cage in the corner of his bedroom.

Blake, Bill’s fifteen-year-old yellow lab mix, enjoys free rein of the house. He walks with his head cocked a bit to the side as he moves from room to room, then settles on the sofa. His black eyes zero in on people’s shoes, especially men’s, and without warning he can strike, gnawing with his aged teeth on the soles and toes.

“Blake, stop it,” says Bill. “Go lay down.” Blake moves back to his perch on the couch, fixated on Bill’s right loafer.

\*

Bill and his brother were raised in San Francisco during its heyday as a counterculture mecca that sparked the hippie movement, political protest, gay rights, and experimental art. His mother, a devout Roman Catholic, took them to church every Sunday and served fish every Friday.

He obediently followed until, as an early teen, he hit a speed bump during catechism classes. “They were lame,” he says and chuckles, not wanting to offend. “These were essay questions they were asking, not yes or no. I knew it was much more complicated than what we were led to believe.”

His mother brought him along to the adult classes she attended. He seemed more engaged, asking questions and participating in discussions with the priests who taught the class. One Sunday, though, the priest said something that sparked a theological debate about whether or not animals possessed souls.

“The animal thing for me has always been obvious,” says Bill. The exchange grew heated, he recalls, though he doesn’t remember the details of the argument. He does remember, though, how the room grew silent and the adults stared at him.

“Billy,” said his mother afterward, “maybe church isn’t for you.”

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The debate about whether or not animals have souls goes back, well, to the beginning. Judeo-Christian theologians, citing Genesis 1:26, have long held that man was created in God’s image and, therefore, has dominion over all living things. But wasn’t it a serpent that seduced Eve to partake from the Tree of Knowledge? Didn’t God command Adam to name all living creatures? Noah didn’t march people two-by-two into the ark. Never mind that the prophet Isaiah envisioned a new heaven and earth where the lamb and the wolf would feed together, and the apocalyptic poet and apostle John saw Jesus and the armies of heaven riding white

stallions. Whatever happened to considering the lilies of the field and the creatures of the air?

The life of St. Francis provides illumination. The son of a wealthy Italian merchant, Giovanni “Francesco” di Bernardone enjoyed a privileged thirteenth-century life in Assisi. He bounced around from the marketplace, the arts, and the military until a mystical vision of Christ ordered him to “go and repair my house.” Francis renounced his father, assumed a life of poverty, and lived as a beggar while he restored churches in the Umbrian region. He later founded the order of Franciscan monks.

Folklore about Francis and his connection to the natural world spread and eventually were collected in the *Fioretti*, or “Little Flowers.” In the book, a story recounts Francis preaching to the birds. Another legend explains how Francis tamed an evil wolf who terrorized the city of Gubbio by drawing out the better nature of both the beast and the villagers. Francis often preached on the 104<sup>th</sup> Psalm, the one that speaks of man’s duty to protect and enjoy creation not only as its steward but also as a creature within it.

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After the verbal spar with the priest, Bill stopped going to church altogether and went on to college to study printmaking and lithography. During freshman year, Bill was invited by friends to attend a Bible study. He went with the intention of disrupting “the Jesus movement.”

“It’s not that I didn’t believe in God,” he recalls. “They were just too heavenly minded to do any earthly good, if you know what I mean.”

At the beginning of the meeting, the leader asked everyone to bow his head and pray. Bill did and he was never the same again. As he sat in silence with his eyes closed, a vision appeared. He saw a side view of Jesus on the cross against a dark sky and thunderous landscape.

“I felt I was in the presence of it,” he says, searching for words today to describe the revelation that came to him then. “It was beautiful, tangible. It was the first time I understood Jesus’s death for me.”

People began to tell him, “Bill, you look different.” When he looked in the mirror, he didn’t notice any physical changes, but he felt a shift on the inside. He carried himself differently, walked with

purpose, and sensed a light within.

“There was no way for me to pretend it never happened. I needed something cataclysmic, humbling. But it wasn’t punitive. My faith was either going to grow or diminish.”

A whole new era of life opened up for him. Bill began to devour the Gospels, returning to them time and again with an open mind. He discovered the writings of Henry Drummond, the nineteenth-century Scottish evangelist, whose book, *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*, attempted to reconcile faith and science. It was a bestseller in the late 1800s.

After graduation, Bill enrolled in Christian Studies at the Regent School in Vancouver, British Columbia. He also began seeing a therapist.

Still, he remained frustrated by the systematic teaching that sought to place order and rules to the workings of God.

“Jesus hung with all the wrong people,” Bill says. “Here he is, the Son of God, and His story is so scandalous in so many ways. Look at his birth! The shepherds were the lowliest of people, the magi were astrologers. If you wrote it, none of that would have happened that way.”

St. Francis is recognized as the first person to celebrate Christmas with a living nativity scene outside a church in Greccio. Vintage nativities—wooden, chalkware, and porcelain—adorn the fireplace mantel, a coffee table, and a shelf. They are among Bill’s latest collections on display in his home, which sits on a large corner lot in a close-knit neighborhood just a block south of Daffin Park. From his backyard, he and Blake can see the fireworks display after the Sand Gnats baseball games. He has lived here for almost a decade, and his neighbors have become like an extended family.

A tragedy among two of those neighbors led him to pet pastoring. The woman who lives across the street had a small dog that was killed by another neighbor’s much larger dog. Many in the neighborhood, including the owner of the offending dog, were caught reeling with no place to put their grief.

“There she was, just gone. I was surprised, too,” Bill says, “by how many people found it socially unacceptable to mourn a pet.”

This bothered him. “You watch children, and they have no qualms about ceremony, burying a bird in a shoebox in the back yard.”

Bill turned to books and spoke with his own pastor at Asbury Memorial United Methodist Church to find healing. In the process, he

heard a calling. "I saw this as an important way to honor memory...to minister."

Bill is not alone. Pet ministry is a growing business. A Google search yields almost four million results. Some denominations are organizing certification programs to ordain pet pastors. Humane societies are beginning grief groups.

By nature, though, Bill is not a commercial or ritualistic person. "No bells and smells," he says. And, no money for his services.

Bill officiated his third service just a few weeks ago. His friend Debra asked Bill to go with her to pick up her cat, Teacup, from the veterinarian's office where she had taken him earlier that day. When they arrived, they learned that Teacup needed to be put down. They buried him beneath an oak in a neighbor's back yard and said a prayer. The next day, Bill led a service of Debra's friends, who all placed flowers on Teacup's grave. Each one shared a story about a pet they had loved and missed.

"It let Debbie know she was not alone in her grief," says Bill. "And it helped the others with their own healing."

Bill read from Psalm 104, which is bookmarked in the small Bible he carries in his shirt pocket. Pasted inside the front cover is the Prayer of St. Francis. They recited it together:

*Oh, Divine Master,  
Grant that I may not  
So much seek to be consoled  
As to console  
To be understood as to understand.  
To be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned  
And it is in the dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Beside the computer at the antique shop where Bill works lays a copy of Gary Kowalski's book, *The Souls of Animals*. The author, a Unitarian Universalist minister who also wrote a guide to working through the loss of a pet, argues that animals exhibit a moral sense, an appreciation for beauty, creativity, and a spirituality that is rooted in the biological order.

"We are the youngest siblings in life's family," Kowalski

writes, "the perpetual neonates of the animal world."

In his book, Kowalski shares the story of the late lowland gorilla, Koko, who communicated through sign language. For him, Koko showed more than intelligence, but also empathy, artistry, and imagination. When the kitten Koko cares for is killed by a car, the gorilla mourns, weeps, and signs to her caretakers about her loss.

As Mark Twain quipped, "People have a lot to learn from Higher Animals."

Bill expresses disappointment with the book's lack of depth, but he is glad someone is exploring a topic so near to his heart. He is interested in reading Temple Grandin's *Animals in Translation*, primarily because the autism activist and animal behaviorist asks the question, where do animals go when they die?

"The veil between this life and the other," Bill says, shaking his head, "is pretty thin. I don't know how it works."

He remembers a day when Blake was still a pup and lay on the floor unable to move for no apparent reason. Bill lit two candles, one for his father and one for his friend, Chris, both of whom had recently died. He prayed, speaking to his father, who always asked about Blake and shared a special connection with dogs. A presence filled the house, and Blake rose for the first time in three days.

Bill knows that Blake's time will come sooner rather than later. At the equivalent of ninety human years, Blake finds it harder to jump onto the sofa, and he needs steps now to climb up on Bill's bed to sleep at night. He's less patient, requires frequent trips outside, and has grown harder of hearing. His foot fetish has become more apparent. Yet, Blake is afforded days when he feels young again. A brief spurt of energy gives him enough will to make it down the porch steps into the back yard where he finds a shady place to rest on the cool grass in the shadow of St. Francis holding a bird in the palm of his hand.

For Bill, sitting in the chair beside Blake, this is enough.





## IN THE STEEPLE'S LIGHT

*Amber Fricke*

*July, 1999. The United States Food and Drug Administration approves Plan B, the morning-after pill, calling it safe and effective as a prescribed drug for women of all ages. The drug is 89% effective in preventing pregnancy up to 72 hours after unprotected sex.*

*Plan B is a .75mg dose of levonorgestrel, a synthetic combination of the hormones estrogen and progesterone. It is similar to the active ingredient found in most oral birth controls. Once ingested, the pill stops the ovaries from releasing an egg, prevents the sperm from reaching an already released egg, and keeps an already fertilized egg from attaching to the uterus.*

*Duramed, the creators of Plan B, market the drug as the "accident pill" because the "unexpected happens." They are insistent that while Plan B can prevent pregnancy, it does not have the capability of terminating an existing one.*

*Plan B is not the abortion pill.*

In sixth grade, my class takes a trip to the hospital. We walk down a hall with red-carpeted walls, boys and girls together, most of us running our grubby, eleven-year-old hands along the wall's fuzz. The red wall is lined with rubber binoculars attached to shadowboxes—a lot like a reptile exhibit at the zoo.

An hour ago we heard a lecture from a woman named Dr. Debbie who said we shouldn't be afraid to explore our bodies. She sent the boys out of the room and answered questions about tampon application. I don't know much about tampons because I

am eleven and haven't gotten my period yet. Mostly I play with my hands, try not to make eye contact, and think about the picnic our teachers planned for after the field trip.

That was an hour ago and now we are pressing our oily foreheads into rubber boxes so we can stare eye-to-eye at half-made babies that look like tadpoles with giant eyes and thin, alien arms.

Sex education, the school board calls it.

Sixth grade is also the year my church takes the youth group on a trip to the Pregnancy Crisis Center. There I watch videos of abortions filmed with tiny cameras inserted into a woman's uterus. At first, the movies look like black shadows crinkling against each other, but beyond the static I can make out a lima bean fetus curling and squirming away from a sucking tube as it jabs closer and closer to the bean.

After that trip, I receive a fake silver ring and take a vow of abstinence in front of the congregation.

Purity education, the church calls it.

*February, 2001. The Center for Reproductive Rights, backed by seventy other medical organizations, files a petition for the review of Plan B's eligibility to receive over-the-counter status. The FDA denies the request, citing a lack of information about the effects of the pill on young women.*

There are girls on birth control in high school, but I'm not one of them. Mostly because I'm not cool enough to need that sort of thing. The closest I come to birth control is in gym class when boys blow up condoms like balloons and shoot them around the bleachers.

But some of the girls in the locker room talk about it. Jackie is one of them. She's a cheerleader who bounces a lot. Her buoyancy annoys me, but that doesn't stop her from babbling about car-sex while we run mile after mile during cross-country.

"Last night was the first time I tried facing Drew while we screwed. It was so uncomfortable turning around in the passenger seat—" I stop running, hunch with my elbows on my knees, and tell her I'm tired and to go on without me.

I've had a crush on Drew for three years.

*December, 2003. Two years of additional research has been conducted on the lasting effects of the Plan B on young women. Members of the Nonprescription Drugs Advisory Committee and the Advisory Committee for Reproductive Health meet jointly to once again consider the possibility of making Plan B available as an over-the-counter drug.*

*The committee returns a 23-4 vote in favor of the FDA granting Plan B over-the-counter status. By all accounts, Plan B has passed every requirement laid out by the FDA. However, Dr. Steven Galson, the director of the Center for Drug Evaluation and Research was one of the voters who stood against the move towards making Plan B an over-the-counter option. Against all professional and scientific recommendations, Galson personally vetoes the committee's decision, and Plan B remains a prescription-only drug.*

*It is suspected that Dr. Galson succumbed to political pressure.*

It's election year. On TV, old men in suits debate abortion, so my senior English teacher thinks we should, too.

"Take a position," she says. Pro-choice on one side of the room, pro-life on the other. Most of us stay seated on whichever side our desk happens to sit. A few of the vocal students approach the masking tape line in the center of the room and throw phrases like "life at conception" and "a woman's right to choose" across the linoleum floor.

I don't know where I am. I think I stand on the right, but my desk is on the left and it's hard to tell because I can't hear over the noise from the liberals and conservatives. I can't focus with Jesus and my Momma's morals swarming in my mind.

In senior English class everything comes down to either killing babies or keeping them alive.

*August, 2006. Plan B finally gains approval to be sold over-the-counter to women eighteen or older. This decision comes after two and a half years of Congressional hearings, after the resignation of one FDA commissioner and the appointment of another, after a highly criticized presidential election and after President Bush announces his belief that "Plan B ought to be a required prescription for minors."*

Medical News Today publishes an article written by its chief editor, Christian Nordqvist, in which Nordqvist accuses the FDA “of sitting on its hands for all these years because of pressure from politicians.” He says, “The FDA should base its decisions on scientific evidence, not political pressure.”

Backlash from the religious right includes Dr. Richard Land, president of The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. “It’s a sad day for America,” he comments, following the FDA’s announcement. “Allowing drugs with such powerful physiological and emotional effects to be sold over-the-counter to adults without a prescription will have significant consequences, none of them good. I am fearful that many adult men will purchase Plan B and use it in the seduction of girls who are not yet eighteen and who cannot purchase the drug for themselves. It will become part of the sexual predator’s seduction kit.”

After high school, I move eighty-three miles north of my hometown so I can “go away” for college. At first, I come home on weekends, but eventually I settle into a new city and a new way of life. I find a small church on the west side of town where elderly women bless my soul and send me encouragement cards when I miss Sunday school.

Joe is a boy I meet during my second year of college. Our first date ends in the church’s parking lot where we met for coffee after a Wednesday night Bible study. We are making out in my car as the steeple’s holy light shines down on us, illuminating our skin.

First we are in his seat, then we roll into mine and finally end up in the back, on the seat where my mom always told me to never end up with boys.

We are sitting like Jackie and Drew, but this is nothing like them because there is no way Drew’s hands could ever feel this good on her thighs, around her hips. His fingers are tangled in my hair and I can’t breathe, can’t think through the blood that pounds so hard in so many places.

“We’re going too fast,” he says with wet words in my ear. I nod and clench my legs hard around his. *Too fast, but don’t stop.* He pulls my forehead against his, our eyes are close this way and we are staring into each other, panting.

“Let’s slow down,” he says. “I don’t want to make you into the kind of girl who loses her virginity in the backseat of a car.”

January, 2007. The U.S. Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 goes into effect. In addition to many other budget-cutting reductions, the act prevents college health centers from providing the drug pricing discount program to students. The program formerly allowed female students to purchase birth control for a reduced cost at college clinics.

Junior and senior years of college I spend my days in classes where I study African Literature and advocate for feminist values in the Sub Saharan. Most evenings I work behind a bar and bat my eyes at lonely men for an extra dollar or two on a three-beer tab.

Nights are boring blankets of darkness speckled with the occasional male body here and there. One naked boy in a sleeping bag. A mean man who presses too hard on a couch in Key West. A virgin I rob in the back of his own car after a late night ice cream at Denny’s, and then the night on the beach because we were bored and yes, the stars really did look that good.

I know I should be on birth control, but my friends should be, too, and none of them take anything regularly. Instead we pop pills when we can afford the \$30-a-month price, and we share the prescriptions because most of us don’t have insurance, and the ones who do don’t want their parents to see the surcharge on the insurance bill.

April, 2009. Plan B is made available to seventeen-year-olds without a prescription. It is the first time in the history of the United States that birth control is offered to minors without a doctor’s note. The change was made in compliance to U.S. district judge Edward Korman’s ruling that the original decision to limit access of Plan B to women eighteen and older was “politically motivated” and “invalid.”

Wendy Wright, on behalf of Concerned Women for America urged conservative American parents to “Be furious at the FDA’s complete disregard of parental rights and the safety of minors.”

I am always on top of his bed but never in it. The comforter is pulled up to the pillows, covering the sheets the same way my bra covers my breasts during sex. And here we are, the two of us on top of it all. The only thing we have in common is loneliness. I am

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twenty-one, living with my parents after a failed attempt at growing up. He is a man with kids and an ex-wife, and he likes to frequent the bar where I work. And then we are here, on his bed.

We have to be quiet because his kids are in the next room. It takes focus to keep my head on the pillow and my mind on his tongue as it traces circles on my stomach. I grab the headboard with my hands, not out of passion, but because his kids are in the next room and because no matter how hard I try to stop, the thumping of the wood against the wall makes me think of Sunday school. It makes me think of that song where we banged our fists into our hands and sang, *"The solid man builds his house upon the rock; the solid man builds his house upon the rock."*

But this man has his head cradled into my neck and we rock silently, and that's good because I don't have to see his eyes. Instead I stare at the ceiling and ask myself how I became this girl.

*When Plan B was approved for over-the-counter purchase, sales increased. The United States has not yet realized the full impact of easily accessible emergency contraceptives on unintended pregnancy rates.*

At the pharmacy a few days later, I stand at a counter that comes up to my collar bone. I am in a bathing suit and a cover-up I stole from my little sister. An hour earlier I was lying on the beach, and now I'm here because everyone knows you can't lie on a beach and think of nothing—not after seventeen or eighteen. Not after bills and double shifts at work. Not after boys become men who say the wrong things as you sit on top their beds.

I stand on my tiptoes at the counter, the same way I stand in front of a mirror when I try on jeans in dressing rooms. I fall flat on the balls of my feet, and then rise up again. The world is better when I'm on my toes.

The man in his white coat looks up at me, punches keys on the computer screen. He has one of those distinguished silver streaks in the front of his hair. Looking at it, I imagine he probably has a couple of daughters in college, probably law school, or med school but definitely not art school.

Definitely nothing like me.

He asks to see my license before he hands me the box. *Why is the box so big?* For a second, I worry that my name will be

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entered in some sort of registry, like a database of girls who fucked up. But there is no database. The pharmacist glances at my birth date and returns the small, rectangular piece of plastic.

I fumble with my keys on the counter—keys to the truck my parents still pay for—and wonder why I feel like such a child when I am trying so hard to be a good grown up. There is elevator music playing. The air is drug-store cold on my damp skin, and the drying saltwater starts to burn a little. I itch. Little bumps of raised skin speckle my shoulders, and I remind myself that it is okay to be here, that I am responsible for having come.

*You will do this, I coach myself.*

*You will not be that girl.*



## TRUTH IN QUOTATIONS: “TRUTH” IN CREATIVE NONFICTION

*J. Austin Floyd*

Misunderstandings and disagreements over the definitions and roles of creativity in nonfiction writing have ruined careers, lead to televised reprimands from Oprah, and—America loves controversy—spiked sales. Stanley Fish summed up the literary marketplace’s predilection for sensationalism over truth by writing, “Now I no longer have to be right; all I have to be is interesting.” He is being wry, but there are a lot of ways to defend “interesting” interpretations of truth, primarily by turning to the idea of subjective individual experience. It is a legitimate contention that one person’s truth may not be another’s. After all, the creative nonfiction genre was born partly out of frustration with the flatness of traditional journalism’s objectivity. But one of the quickest ways for a writer to turn critical and professional disagreements into lawsuits, is to start toying with dialogue and quotations, because that is where the words are no longer the writer’s—at least ideally.

To defend themselves against legal action or public castigation, many memoirists place caveats at the beginnings of their books. In the preface to *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Dave Eggers offers a suggestion to the doubtful: “Pretend it’s fiction.” Then he offers, for a small charge, to send a digital version of the book to readers who wish to replace the names and places in his memoir as they see fit. But writers not willing to chock it up to fiction—writers like Rigoberta Menchú—fall back on the idea

of subjective truth. Memory and perception are considered just as or more important than reality, because they affect the subject as if they are reality. In a press meeting, Nobel Peace Prize-winner Menchú defended her significant altering of events in *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, by saying that “[I have] a right to my own memories” and, when asked about her version of the events, said, “That is my truth.”

When it comes to truth, Eggers writes that he attempts to find “essential truth” in his characters through dialogue, although he skirts defining the phrase. The desire to find a truth that is not implicit in hard data is a large part of what led early pioneers of the new journalism movement to abandon traditional methods and tools in favor of devices traditionally found in fiction. In the anthology *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism*, Ben Yagoda and Kevin Kerrane write that traditional “journalism has been an object of mass production, turned out according to codified standards and in agreed-upon shapes.” This formula does not allow room for narrative or emotion, so writers like Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, and Hunter S. Thompson abandoned the conventions of the traditional form and all but gave up on the idea of objective reporting. That said, these writers did not adopt the idea that truth was *entirely* subjective, and neither do the majority of today’s respected practitioners of the genre. While Kerrane and Yagoda admit that literary journalism is “a profoundly fuzzy term,” when they began compiling their anthology they determined that the “definition begins with the second half of the formulation, that is, with ‘journalism,’” and decided that for a work to appear in their anthology, “it must first of all be factual.”

But how do you define “factual” in literary journalism or in any creative nonfiction? In the review “Fact, Fiction, and ‘Reality,’” Barbara Foley writes that “[t]he frontier between the fictive and the real remains an elusive one.” According to Doug Hesse in “The Place of Creative Nonfiction,” the “reality is mediated and narrativized” by the author. In many cases, it is this mediation and subjectivity that the writer brings to his writing and that creates the distinctive world and allure of the narrative. For example, the biological exposition in “Consider the Lobster” would be excruciatingly boring to most audiences without David Foster Wallace’s presence. Doug Hesse also suggests that the “subjectivities of [creative nonfiction]

authors are crucial and should be textually embodied rather than effaced.” The way that Joan Didion or Joseph Mitchell would have described the same place would have been almost impossibly different because of subjectivity, but that does not necessarily make either account any less true. This subjectivity of truth is crucial to a great deal, if not all, of literary journalistic writing.

But where does the ability to deliver a version of your truth give way to the obligation to deliver at least someone else’s truth, if not concrete truth? The decision is often made with practicality in mind over ethics. Lynn Bloom writes in “Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction” that books on the subject tend to “conflate ethics with evading legal issues.” This is not necessarily problematic if the viewpoint is determining laws based on ethics, but it is very bothersome when a writer determines their ethics based on laws. The creative license should not apply to quotations and dialogue. The reasoning is a simple extension of the political idea of “my rights stop where yours begin.” The writer’s right to tell or spin a story his or her way ends when the voices (and actions) of others come in, and these voices often make their appearances in quotation marks. The use of quotation marks is (or should be) simple: when used, they (should) represent a direct repetition of someone else’s words. If the quote does not fit, it can be paraphrased, but not altered. This lesson is taught across the country in ninth-grade English classrooms, yet we still face problems with writers rewriting or inventing quotes.

The implication of a writer misusing quotation marks is huge: when Dr. Jeffrey Masson sued *The New Yorker* over the publication of Janet Malcolm’s work, much of the case hinged on the meaning and use of quotations marks. Malcolm was accused of a range of trespasses, from completely fabricating quotations to combining conversations that took place months apart. The Supreme Court wrote that “[a]s the Court recognizes, the use of quotation marks in reporting what a person said asserts that the person spoke the words as quoted.” The lack of proof of intended maleficence and also lack of proof that Masson’s actual words were significantly different from what *The New Yorker* published eventually meant that a jury—or at least the most recent jury—ruled in favor of Malcolm. But the court went on to clarify that when “a reasonable reader would conclude that the quotation purports to

be a verbatim repetition of a statement by the speaker, the quotation marks indicate that the author is not involved in an interpretation of the speaker's ambiguous statement but is attempting to convey what the speaker said."

The idea that a "reasonable reader" must be able to tell whether or not dialogue and quotations are being presented as truth or used as an imaginative device for another purpose is not one unique to the Supreme Court. The reader needs to be able to delineate between fact and perception. Hesse proposes that in creative nonfiction it is essential "that language and form must have a surface and texture that remind readers the work is artficial." Also, on the concept of a "reasonable reader," Hesse adds that "even though some readers are considerably more adept and enculturated, [creative nonfiction] is not reserved for a narrow specialist audience." The relationship between writer and reader should never be taken for granted—if a writer does not write with anyone in mind other than him- or herself, a journal would be a more suitable medium than a manuscript—and the way that the dialogue or quotations are handled within the text can easily and effectively signal the reasonable reader how to read them. Yet the definition of "reasonable" can be almost as problematic as the definition of "truth." So, as with many things in writing, the decision as to whether or not something will be understood will often be made on gut instinct and then reevaluated during the editing process.

When in doubt, the writer can very easily let the reader know whether or not an exchange is literal, exaggerated, or metaphorical. In a lengthy exchange between himself and an interviewer in *A Heartbreaking Work*, Eggers comes right out and exposes his device with the question, "So tell me something: This isn't really a transcript of the interview, is it?" Whether directing the reader between truth and imagination is handled directly or more subtly, the "Truth" of a text and its dialogue can be "negotiated by both author and reader [rather] than derived from some empirical standard of truth" according to Daniel Lehman in "Mining a Rough Terrain: Weighing the Implications of Nonfiction." But for the sake of the integrity of the work and the credibility of the author, the writer has to play fair. What the writer can get away with in the text might be up to the reader, but all cards must be on the table for a fair deal. One of the first points of this negotiation is the category

that the writing falls into. With most memoirs, it would be naïve to assume that every word is literal truth, because the bulk of the text is coming from the writer's perspective and is often recalled from memory, or at times, if we are lucky, recreated from journal entries. There are hardly any memoir pieces that do not include some sort of dialogue or direct quotation, but you do not usually find people carrying tape recorders or notepads to record conversations verbatim so that they can later write their very own memoirs.

So the practice of using dialogue and quotations and "keeping with their essential truth" as Eggers does, is generally accepted by readers and publishers of memoirs and personal essays, even though that truth is viewed through the writer's lens. What must be kept in mind, though, is that when the writer brings in other characters and dialogue with those characters, the writer's subjective truth is imposed on the other people. And for the sake of integrity, as the narrative moves from the internal of the writer to the external, the truth must become more objective. The ethical writer can (and possibly should) present and then interpret something to be what she wants to argue it is, but should not completely fabricate something without the reader's knowledge—again, play fair. Hemingway's saying that "writing is rewriting" refers to text, not reality. Creative license in creative nonfiction is not the absolute reign of artistic license, and it should not apply to the meaning of the words of the nonfiction writer's characters.

Whether for the sake of ethics or legalities or just at the request of nervous editors, most creative nonfiction writers working on journalistic pieces record their conversations, whether by notes or tape or digital recorder. But even though an actual audio recording of an interview or conversation is the most reliable source from which to recreate the dialogue in the narrative and, should the need arise, to build a defense in a libel suit, not all writers are happy about adopting recorders, despite the devices' complete lack of bias. Oddly, one of the tape recorder's most vehement critics is Gay Talese, a writer characterized by his seeming lack of subjectivity. Talese says, "Technology I think has had a ruinous effect. It started with the tape recorder: that was number one the worst thing that ever happened to serious nonfiction writing, was the tape recorder." His reasoning is that the tape recorder promotes a "once-over-lightly dialogue that—while

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perhaps symptomatic of a society permeated by fast-food computerized impersonalized workmanship—too frequently reduces the once-artful craft of magazine writing to the level of talk radio on paper.”

Talese’s point is not completely off-kilter—with everything archived on a device that can replay on demand, the type of attention and diligence that Talese had to give to his experiences with Joe DiMaggio and Frank Sinatra become less important. “The tape recorder,” Talese says, “allows the reporter to go to a hotel room, for example, and interview a movie star, and within a matter of about an hour, we’ll get enough for an article and then go back writing it using a lot of direct quotes.” The shortcomings of the human memory in some ways enhanced Talese’s work because he was forced to devote more than “about an hour” to his subjects in order to gather enough information to craft his pieces. Had Talese not spent weeks in Los Angeles and San Francisco, he would not have ended up with quotes he felt “mean what people have in their heads” as opposed to just “what’s coming out of their mouths—extended sound bites.”

Still, not every writer is granted the expense accounts and time that allowed Talese to do his fieldwork. And certainly not every writer can claim to match Truman Capote’s supposed memory retention. In *Creating Nonfiction: A Guide and Anthology*, Becky Bradway and Doug Hesse warn that whether the writer chooses to rely on memory, notes, or recordings, the accuracy of the transcript is less important than how the quotes appear in the writing because “[t]he reality is that no one is ever quoted completely, even when their words are taped. Readers would not want to read page after page of unedited tape transcripts.” Editing transcripts down to pieces that are suitable for a piece might mean cutting out extraneous conversation or offshoots, but it does not mean reinterpreting or redefining the quotations, even if the subject would be fine with it or even prefer it. A press secretary for a Chicago mayor once said to reporters, “Don’t say what he says, say what he means.” Ultimately, the quotations and dialogue that end up on the page in published creative nonfiction are the tools for delivering the message of the writer, editor, and publisher, not the interviewee. By selecting what to include—and just as importantly, what *not* to include—the writer crafts this message. Whether or not

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the interviewee agrees with that vision is secondary to whether or not the writer can prove that the quotations are accurate and not purposely slanted to damage the reputation of the speaker. Libel cases are based on intention, not agreement.

Even for the writer who tries to stay as objective as possible with dialogue, Bradway and Hesse warn that the “editing of information is a creative act in itself—there is no way to avoid this, no matter how ‘accurate’ you want to be.” The challenge to the ethical writer of creative nonfiction who is incorporating someone else’s words into his narrative is not one of building, but of interpreting and implementing. Bradway and Hesse recognize the level of finesse required because “dialogue is not simply an accurate transcription,” and to use it, the writer has to take on the task of “finding, imposing, [and] making sense of the cacophony.”

Even if dialogue is not reworded, though, entire stories can be told, slanted, or reversed by the editing—this is true in all mediums and styles of nonfiction, whether written or not. Quote mining is not a problem exclusive to creative nonfiction. But in creative nonfiction, in addition to delivering the dialogue, the writer sets it up within the piece and creates the scene that it appears in for the reader. Regardless of how it happened in the real world, the context and atmosphere where the reader finds the quotations is constructed completely by the writer. Here the relationship between subjectivity and ethical dialogue gets even trickier. Can a writer be faulted for the way she perceives the interviewee’s tone? Solving the argument that starts “it’s not what you said, it’s how you said it” rarely happens by figuring out exactly how something was said. Even a writer like Talese (and maybe even especially Talese), who tries to limit his presence in a work, assumes the role of the interpreter. So when a subject pauses in a moment of dialogue and takes a breath before speaking, is that a pause of thoughtfulness or hesitation? Does speaking quickly mean excitement or anxiety? We can hope that the writer spent enough time with his subject to learn the subtleties of her speech, but we cannot be sure. The subjective truth can seem very objective to the reader. Dialogue tags significantly alter the interpretation of a line, and while too many adverbs can send up red flags, it is possible to twist the meaning of an entire conversation with just a handful of words or a strategically placed punctuation mark.



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Adverbs, tags, and punctuation are not the only ways that dialogue is colored. The type of in-the-moment energy found in Tom Wolfe's writing is not just from his use of the present tense. It is because in his narrative he captures his experience through word choice, pacing, voice, punctuation (or lack thereof), and dialogue. In "The Girl of the Year," he brings the reader along for the ride—*his* ride—and on the occasions when he does tag his dialogue, it is almost always with "says." There are only a few descriptive phrases accompanying the dialogue, and while they are extremely vivid ("the words seem to spring from her lungs like some kind of wonderful lavender-yellow Charles Kingsley bubbles"), it is mostly Wolfe's description of the setting, hair, Mick Jagger, and his slang that creates the atmosphere and tone of not just the writing and place, but the character's voices. Had Norman Mailer written "The Girl of the Year," the concertgoers would not be presented the same at all, and because of this, their "voices" would have been different. While one version of these voices would not necessarily be more "true" than the other, when a writer creates a narrative using ethical methods, the reader can assume that they are discovering *valid* types of truths. And if the reader is not interested in these subjective truths, we have to ask: why read creative nonfiction and not traditional journalism?

Is dialogue worth all of this trouble? Should creative nonfiction writers bother themselves with the responsibility of accurately recreating it from either memory or recordings, or should paraphrase and narrative take over? Tom Wolfe suggests that "[r]ealistic dialogue involves the reader more completely than any other single device." Creative nonfiction and literary journalism were born out of the desire to engage the reader as much as possible in a narrative, to immerse them in a world that the inverted pyramid model cannot portray. Lynn Bloom suggests that "[i]n contrast to the official story, creative nonfiction presents the unauthorized version, tales of personal and public life that are very likely subversive of the records and thus of the authority of the sanctioned tellers." The writers of this genre "have a perennial ethical obligation to question authority, to look deep beneath the surface, and an aesthetic obligation to render their versions of reality with sufficient power to compel readers' belief." Dialogue is one of many tools available to help the writer meet this obligation,

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but if the device cannot be used ethically, it should not be used at all.

The entire genre of creative nonfiction seeks to dig deeper than the initial, apparent truth, and the writer who writes in order to discover what lies beneath serves his readers and the art well. Since it is a craft that centers on humanity, it only makes sense that the writer of creative nonfiction will find layers of varying and even sometimes paradoxical truths in the people that he observes and interviews. But if it seems that those truths can only be presented to the reader by altering the words that people speak, either the writer has not done enough work, or the truths are not truths at all.

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