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Reflective Thesis for *A Life So Far*

Memoiring the Memoir

I: Afterword

Both of my parents died early and under gruesome circumstances. Not early-adulthood early, and not serial-killer gruesome. But I suppose these kinds of things are relative.

My father was around 57 when he came down with the most recalcitrant case of the hiccups. He turned first, of course, to the reliable holding-the-breath remedy, but it soon became clear that these were no ordinary hiccups. I was living in Connecticut by this time, my parents still in Minnesota, living in the only house they would ever own. The story—as told through my mother—was mildly amusing. Moe—my father—and I, did not speak, not so much as an established rule as a matter of course. The way it was. He was a stranger.

Moe, this stranger, tried all manner of neighbors' recommendations for ousting those hiccups, except for drinking water while standing on his head. He consumed copious amounts of apple-cider vinegar, hugged his knees, drank from the opposite side of the glass, rubbed his earlobes, and even tried something called the Valsalva Maneuver. But when he quickly lost ten pounds, my mother insisted they see a doctor.

This was, she said, the day they 'walked out the door and everything changed.'

A year of radiation treatment for esophageal cancer decimated his body. It would take hours for him to eat anything ('What's the point? Everything tastes like goddamn metal,' he

would rasp out) and mostly he relied on Ensure for a modicum of nutrition. My brother Roger was in Pennsylvania, enrolled in a nursing program, but he left school to help care for Moe, for the stranger. It was a re-visiting of early shame for me: wasn't I the one who should move back to care for a dying parent? Wasn't I supposed to be the nurturer? But I had never been. When we were young, Roger and I went to work with Mom at the nursing home during the Christmas season. Our volunteer mission was to help feed the patients who couldn't eat on their own. I fumbled, hands shaking, face burning in awkward discomposure. But my older brother Roger, on the other hand, used the easy way he had with everyone, not needing to fix his personality or provide a pretense for the genuine interest he showed the patients. He was like our mother in that way. I was less suited to caring for others than my brother. The rationalization wasn't helpful, of course. It all amounted to my inability to do the right thing, be the right way.

The stranger's ravaged body lay in hospice at the end, and we were an awkward assembly. My mother had aged since the stranger's diagnosis, but I don't believe it was the impending loss of a life's partner that etched the deep wrinkles around her eyes and onto her forehead. It wasn't sadness at the prospect of empty days that shadowed the rings under her blue eyes. It was the horrible work of care.

Again, I looked to my brother for how I should act. Being at the stranger's bedside was unnerving, and Roger was forever able to act as one should, while I still needed a script. The decision was made to take my father off life support, and we settled back to wait.

I have this image of my brother with his hands on the arm of the unconscious stranger—head bent, in a reverent repose. I felt repulsed, not because I couldn't understand the action, but because I could not imitate it. My shame was diverted, however, when the hospice nurse moved toward the television and popped in a VHS tape. I watched in confusion, the only one of the

three of us to notice what she was doing. The screen lit up and the distant but indistinguishable call of Minnesota's state bird reverberated off the walls. The loon appeared on the screen, settled on the glass-still surface of a lake at dusk, its mournful wail echoing and searching. When I was little, my mother told me (as her mother had told her) that the call of the loon meant, 'I'm here. Where are you?'

My mother seemed not to notice that the nurse had, unbidden, conjured up the bird. And why had she done so? To what end? To fill the dying silence with the call of Minnesota's ornithologic wonder? I'm not sure, but it did cause Roger's head to pop up. He glanced at me, our eyes locked, and there was some scrap of understanding. I couldn't say exactly what that was, but it flashed across his face.

The stranger died about an hour later. On the way to the funeral home to make the arrangements, the radio played the B52s' 'Roam.' That night my mother slept for sixteen hours.

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My mother came down with what seemed like a case of the flu on a Monday in August 1998, about ten years after the stranger's passing. It was on that same Monday in August 1998 that I gave birth to my third child. I was still in Connecticut and something was amiss with the telephone lines at the hospital. No cell phones, of course, and I hadn't been able to call Minnesota to reach my mom or Roger, who was still living at home as he finished medical school. Like opposite sides of a revolving door, she entered the emergency room on Wednesday, the same time I was being discharged from a hospital 1,200 miles away.

The news was grim by the time I spoke to Roger over the telephone. Home in Connecticut, I cradled my three-day-old infant as my brother reported that mom's tests revealed a bacterial infection—ordinary as this bacteria was, it had entered her bloodstream, which was not ordinary. The doctors needed to intubate her in order to manage her pain. 'I explained to mom what needed to be done,' Roger said, 'and told her about the tests. She said, "That doesn't sound good." And here, my brother paused, no longer trying to control his emotion. He managed to choke out the last thing she ever told him: he should look under her bed when he got home. It was his birthday and she wanted to make sure he found his present.

When, on the Saturday, Roger said the doctors had no hope that mom would recover, I flew to Minnesota with my baby. In person, the doctor was more blunt than Roger had been. Even if the onslaught of antibiotics they were pumping into her managed to overcome the infection, he said, a condition called muscle necrosis had set in. The infection was eating away at her muscle from the inside out and her limbs would have to be amputated.

She died the next day.

I tell these stories as an Afterword to my memoir, as they are both outside its timeframe. In *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (1992), Carolyn Kay Steedman suggests that revisiting the past through writing must be seen as an act of interpretation:

We all return to memories and dreams like this, again and again; the story we tell of our own life is reshaped around them. But the point doesn't lie there, back in the past, back in the lost time at which they happened; the only point lies in interpretation.

This act—or event, if you will—of translating memory from 'back in the lost time' would have been impossible if I had attempted to write about my childhood and adolescence while my

parents were still alive. In fact, I had tried to do so many times, but it was futile. The writing felt contrived. The writing *was* contrived. Perhaps the events were too traumatic, I thought, or perhaps I wasn't a writer.

Finally, in 2015—seventeen years after my mom died—I tried again to turn a writerly eye toward my past. And this time, the landscape altered. It was like doing the same journey but on, say, foot rather than in a car. You get to the same place but see a different world. The landscape is altered. When I tried before, when my parents were alive, I was never aware that their sentient presence stood in my way. But things were very different by the time they had died. I had evolved into an academic writer, was now unfettered by the concern that my account—really, my translation—of the past could be measured against those of my parents. It no longer mattered if my account differed from theirs. While my own truth would run the risk of deviating from anyone else's recollection or version, what did it matter?

I had, though, still to ask if it mattered that my own version of things deviated, even, from artifactual truth. Jenn Ashworth's memoir, *Notes Made While Falling* (2019), touches on this in an eerie way for me. She describes a memory she has of a photograph taken of her as a 'toddler, perhaps eighteen months old. Wearing a duffel coat and sitting in a ride on Blackpool Pleasure Beach.' There are other intricate details about the ride itself, and the recollection ends with the certain image that 'I am four feet off the ground, in arm's reach of Dad who is in the photograph, holding my hand and smiling.'

This, though, is the *memory* of the photograph, not, in fact, the photograph; as Steedman would say, it is a kind of the 'interpretation.' Ashworth would go searching for the evidence of the memory when she was thirty-four years old, just as I, at thirty-eight, went looking for a photo of my three- or four-year-old self taken at Paul Bunyan Land. As Ashworth searches through the

photographs to discover the one which will match her memory, Ashworth's mother announces, 'I don't think you'll find what you're looking for here,'—it is at this point that the photo appears.

My reaction to the photo taken at the amusement park at Paul Bunyan Land mirrors Ashworth's: it was a memory gone wrong, a mad disputing of photographic evidence.

For Ashworth, the 'misremembering' is most distressing in what the photo omits: her father is not holding her hand. It is, she adds, still 'more frightening to wonder what made me imagine or invent that, and even more frightening to see that I imagined or invented without knowing I was doing it. Drawing on Roland Barthes, she goes on to say that

punctum doesn't quite cover it: this isn't a little wounding, a detail to snag the attention and bring me into contact with the image. It's a fist round my heart. If I am inventing things, I want to know about it. I am a poor writer because I am not in control of my material.

For me, the 'fist round my heart' came from the realization of a disconnet between my body and the photographic evidence of that body. My keen, visceral recollection of my mother's insistence that I ride in one of these primary-coloured boats, all strung together with thick, nautical ropes and moving in a circle of six inches of water, was one where my physical body seemed to expand, to loom over this kiddie ride like a giant. As we got closer to the front of the line, I looked at the small children getting on and off the boats, many needing a parent to hoist them out of their fun. Deep humiliation burned in my face. The sun was so hot and I felt sick. But my mother wouldn't hear of abandoning ship; we had waited so long and she wanted a picture with her new Kodak.

I half expected to be laughed out of line because of my mammoth size, but I was admitted past the now-open gate and struggled to push my clumsy hulk into the blue boat. There was a shiny bell at the bow, backed by a tiny windshield which couldn't possibly hide the bulk of me.

My mother raised her camera to frame the shot and, every time my boat potted into view, she shouted, ‘Ring the bell, Jules! Ring the bell!’

The entire thing was a nightmare. I was angry at my mother for not understanding that you don’t put a behemoth on a kiddie ride while your other child has fun at the big-kid section of the park. She was irate at my refusal to ring the bell.

It was years later that I saw the photograph for the first time. Like Ashworth, I had gone looking for it when I was home from college one weekend. I was looking for evidence of my grossly abundant self—even as a child, I had taken up too much space.

But what I saw, in black-and-white, was someone very different. For there I was—*am*, in the photo—barely peaking over the plastic windshield of the blue boat. Certainly, the scowl on my face *feels* recognizable, but the diminutive figure swallowed up by the boat is at odds with the image I had carried. From the looks of it, I doubt I could have reached the bell, even had I wanted to.

2: Everything Else, in No Particular Order

i. Pause

Think about what it is that music is trying to say.
It was something like that.
(Mary Oliver, 'Drifting,' 2014)

So many of the narratives we read end at the point where the reader is left with a sense—or at least the hope—that things can get better. For those of us who write, offering hope without becoming a Pollyanna is difficult. Happy endings have always alienated me. While they might be satisfying the moment the last page is turned, what after that? What is there to think about or ruminate over? It seems to me that loose ends tied up neatly are devoid of the very questions that actually connect us to writing or text. They eclipse a necessary space or pause—that pause created when a text invites a reader to ponder, to pay attention.

At the end of Carson McCullers' novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), resolution resides in death and disillusionment. But there is a miss-if-you-blink moment when one of the characters, Biff Brannon,

stood transfixed, lost in his meditations. Then suddenly he felt a quickening in him. His heart turned and he leaned his back against the counter for support. For in a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valor. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labor and of those who—one word—love. His soul expanded. But for a moment only. For in him he felt a warning, a shaft of terror. Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him...One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye

delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith.

It strikes me that this dichotomy—and everything in between—is the best of what a narrative must offer its readers. The trajectory Biff travels in his mind, from viewing the world with ‘faith’ to considering human struggle with ‘bitter irony,’ is vast and generous in what it opens up. It is as if the novel invites the reader to cross a threshold and see that this, quite simply, is life. McCullers packs all the messiness of experience into a very short period of reflection for Biff and, in doing so, unearths more than the understanding that our lives can be tumultuous: that is the case, but the tumult is, above all, a liminal experience. Note that Biff exists ‘[b]etween the two worlds.’ Indeed, twice, the narrative describes how Biff is ‘suspended’ between worlds, experiencing not only a sense of wonder (‘His soul expanded’ in a ‘radiance of illumination’ at the goodness of humanity) but also of devastation and havoc (his eye ‘gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin’).

I used to look for continuities in the texts I read; now, I search for the gaps—those in-between moments where possibility lies. And this, I think, is part of what we may mean by our ‘felt sense’ of a text, a concept described by Sondra Perl in her 2004 book, *Felt Sense: Writing with the Body*. Perl relies on the words generated—crafted, often painstakingly mined—by writers who engage in a process of intense awareness, right down to the ‘bodily connection...related to words.’

My own particular felt sense, my felt sense of the pauses or gaps in a text is, I suppose, a readerly version of Perl’s account of felt sense. For example, I find myself imagining Carson McCullers, in bed, propped up against many pillows in her childhood bedroom; she is only

nineteen years old and home from college to recover from a respiratory infection. And although she had been in New York (her family thought it was Julliard to study piano, but she was secretly taking creative-writing classes at Columbia University), she has returned to her birthplace in Columbia, Georgia, bedridden, and began writing *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. As I said, I imagine her there in 1934, struggling over word-choice as she completes her masterpiece. Take, for instance, the passage about Biff Brannon quoted above, describing his angsty balancing-act of witnessing both ‘love...[and] terror’ in the world. Where is McCullers’ felt sense? Is it in the phrase ‘he felt a quickening in him’? Or is it, perhaps, in what comes after, when we read that ‘His heart turned’? Either way, there is something here—for me, at least—that operates as an invitation to pay attention, to become aware, as Perl says, to ‘the physical place where we locate what the body knows.’ The difference, of course, is that I am talking about my experience as a reader. I don’t claim that whatever a writer might experience is identical to my readerly pause, but there is, I believe, some kind of physicality on both sides.

Another text in which I find, or feel, a pause, is e.e. cummings’ poem ‘maggie and milly and molly and may’ (1958) where we read:

may came home with a smooth round stone
as small as a world and as large as alone.

The way cummings takes the concepts ‘world’ and ‘alone’ and ascribes to them the qualities of ‘small’ and ‘large,’ respectively, creates, for me, a space of possibility—indeed, the very particular possibility that I too might find my world small and my aloneness large. In my memoir, I come close to this when I arrive in my neighbor’s backyard—a short-cut home from the park—only to see that my Uncle Earl must have stopped by for a visit. He works for the telephone company and I see his company truck in our driveway. I cannot go in, and so I wait.

I wait so long. Wait till the quiet is finally broken by their laughter, the two of them in the kitchen, with music wafting out through open windows, and the discord of her crystal melody dancing around his fortissimo. I wait till the clink of cup to saucer ceases. Wait till I can no longer keep the wetness from traveling down my legs. Wait till the sun moves. Till the truck rolls down the driveway.¹

The similarity I see in this passage with Cummings' is the allowance or invitation for the reader to feel through what is not said, rather than what is. Cummings creates the space for the reader to react—to interpret—that pause created by 'small as a world' and 'large as alone,' each reader needing to reconcile the paradoxes within those phrases. In my passage, I would suggest the pause is created by the repetition of sentences beginning with 'I wait' and 'Wait.' I am not telling the reader how completely terrifying my uncle's presence in my house was to me. My hope is that the power of the passage relies on the not-telling.

Another example of pause, or space, can be found in Paul Farley's poem 'A Tunnel' (2002) in which the speaker's cadence matches that of a train, rattling towards 'A tunnel, unexpected':

A tunnel, unexpected. The carriage lights
we didn't notice weren't on prove their point
and a summer's day is cancelled out, its greens
and scattered blue, forgotten in an instant

that lasts the width of a down, level to level,
a blink in *London to Brighton in Four Minutes*
that dampens mobiles—conversations end
mid-sentence, before speakers can say

'...a tunnel'—and the train fills with the sound
of itself, the rattle of rolling stock amplified,
and in the windows' flue, a tool-shed scent,
metal on metal, a points-flash photograph,

¹ All unattributed quotations come from my Creative Project, *A Life So Far: Views from the Ceiling*.

and inside all of this a thought is clattering
 inside a skull inside the train inside the tunnel
 inside great folds of time, like a cube of chalk
 in a puncture-repair tin at a roadside

on a summer day like the one we'll re-enter
 at any moment, please, at any moment.
 Voices are waiting at the other end
 to pick up where we left off. 'It was a tunnel...'

I feel a break in the rhythm midway through the poem, at the point of 'before speakers can say' when 'the train fills with the sound / of itself...' Prior to this, although the speaker has told us of the tunnel, we have yet to feel the effect of entering it; all we have before is a kind of ordinariness (it is 'a summer's day,' with 'its greens and scattered blue,' and people are connecting, via cell phone, to others outside the train). Moreover, when we enter the tunnel and the train's 'carriage lights...prove their point,' and, with internet service muted, the 'train fills with the sound / of itself,' we experience a break or pause. Observation now pivots from the outside to the internal and there is a settling (like Biff Brannon's suspension between worlds) into the moment.

Finally, Elizabeth Reeder, in her narrative non-fiction text *microbursts*, lays bare the literal pause. First, in a prologue of sorts called 'between places,' she provides an outline of what is to come. She writes,

There are words for the kind of spaces that exist between other places and many of them are about landscape like littoral, ecotone, twilight. In between places there is something solid, a traveler, passing over. The very details noticed in the midst of travel or shock or bewilderment can hold us fast; lost becomes found...

When I read this, I recognize the pause an author creates where the reader sits, surrounded by the words, but reacting in a way exclusive to the reader because not everything can be spoken, not

every emotion can be written with the language we have at our disposal. And yet. Use the words we must, search for that space to describe the ‘very details noticed in the midst of travel’ so that the reader, too, is transported to a kind of resonance. Peter Elbow, in writing the Foreword to Perl’s book, *Felt Sense*, refers to Perl’s work with Eugene Gendlin. Gendlin often uses the words ‘intricate’ and ‘precise’ when referring to ‘these meanings we build out of felt sense...The words are startling and important,’ Elbow says, ‘because they contradict how most people think about nonverbal language. They usually think of “hunches” and “intuition” as vague and fuzzy and only capable of pointing in a vague general direction—never spelling out anything with intricate precision. Work with felt sense shows otherwise...’

I’m reminded here of a passage in my memoir where I, too, work toward precision, precision of representation, through felt sense. This is the passage in which I describe the way it feels to wait for my bed to flip, the waiting compared to the change in weather upon an imminent tornado during a Minnesota summer. My language is clearly intended to be evocative, suggestive and full of felt-sense and, in that respect, indirect and vague, if you like; however, I am working, I hope, toward an extremely precise representation of how I felt:

And something is going to happen, that too, only I know. Something. Something like a nighttime shoe-dream slow-motioning in the air. A shoe with its tumbling, breezing machinations. Floating, spiraling, and somersaulting, then dipping, plummeting, against a background sky morphing from azure, then glaucous to griseous, as the shoe slues and drops, a flight gone awry. And the sky complying is, now perse, then indigo. Going from slate to sable.

If we return to Reeder’s *microbursts* we find another way in which felt-sense is achieved and that is through use of type-set, and the actual spacing of the words on the page. Her narrator—it is her, it is Reeder—uses second-person to address her father, who collapsed at home and is now in the hospital. The passage begins

What you do not remember somehow resides here in this room where you've been taken, your swollen legs are red-angry like a sky in storm at dusk with silver-coated bandages over their weeping and **you can feel but can't see the broken horizon-lines that puncture the peaceful coast of your neck** and folds of skin hang down and then retreat with the thanksgiving days and with the meds they give you...(78)

What you cannot see in this reproduction of Reeder's text is that the lines on the page in this section of her book are *less* than single-spaced, they are on top of each other, almost—but not quite—overlapping each other. Moreover, punctuation is all but absent. Details of the room and of her father are derailed by other thoughts, like an exhibition of found objects that hold something in common but you're not sure what. If you could stop and ponder, maybe you could *see* the connections better (they are there, yes), but the text isn't set up for that. Instead, it insists that you move at an almost-uncomfortable speed, replicating with precision the way our minds work when they are troubled and overwrought. Interesting, then, the reader is here not being made to pause or slow but rather to hasten or quicken. Nevertheless, the overall effect is, I think, to create a kind of retrospective pause, as and when the reader looks back, almost in alarm or bewilderment, on the sentence just read.

Later in this same section, Reeder or the narrator again works to to create a sense of bewilderment as she dwells further on her father's collapse and settles on her mother:

...back in August the streets are flooded, the power is out, and the wind explodes drops of rain into horizontal needles which pierce trees which give up their limbs and **it's just a moment of extreme force within an ongoing storm** it's an albatross, I yell during the microburst, no electricity, no lights, and the door hits dad's leg and here's the sudden jolt back into illness butted against death as the EMTs come and track rainwater and storm mud through your house, borrowing a flashlight because the lights are out and they carry him out to the ambulance and we're imprisoned in the dark house together and it's crowded with your worry **this house is a fucking albatross**, I repeat and you get angry and it's a Parkinson's anger, different, I can't explain it but I know it, know that it's altered, exaggerated from what has always been here and

you're a top that's been spinning just fine for years and then it slows wobble wobble wobble and I'm watching and you still feel the spinning and it has always worked before and why not now, why not now, my logic has always worked before, and why not now and why and why not the breaks between the words aren't steady aren't empty they're filled with the gears of your brain getting stuck, jerking forward I've always been able why not now...

Here again, the page itself—as a tangible artifact, like a photograph—is arranged and manipulated so as to *instruct us how to read it*. This time the reader is at one and the same time being caused both to quicken and to slow. S/he is caused to quicken through the absence of punctuation but she is caused to slow through the occasionally excessive spacing between the words.

It should be added that Reeder's here writing in the second-person—her 'I' becomes a 'you'—and achieves many things. Above all, I think, it enables her to strike more various poses and speak in more various voices. I too, in my memoir, often use the second person to talk of myself and I found that one of the advantages was being able to step out of the other 'persons'—'I' or 'she'—and adopt a somewhat cryptic persona, one who isn't concerned that the reader understands everything, since the text is, after all, addressing myself, not the reader at all. Moreover I feel that the 'You' sections of my memoir are a kind of release from the burden of having to remember, interpret, or imagine. They exist as an exit from the responsibility of telling a truth recognizable by all parties involved. They are a reprimand of sorts, a kind of 'Look here, this is the way it was, no matter what the fuck you, dear reader, might think.' The sections are usually short and not-so-sweet. But they are short in order to get us swiftly back to the 'story.' One of them, positioned after I discovered the joys of dieting and the experience of getting

noticed, but before my breakdown—the death of a close friend and subsequent inability to ease back into the high-school social realm—reads as follows:

If you should ever find yourself in a mirror and are caught unaware; or shuffle down the hallway at school and remember that your body used to move in an easier, unburdened kind of way; or see colours hanging in your closet that you're sure you never would have worn; or chew and chew your food but cannot quite remember how to swallow and have no idea how this will end; or find that your bed flips violently in the night but holds you to its plane like a ragdoll sewn to the sheets, then...

This is what you do: when the sun goes down, find a window good at reflecting your image. Stand in front of it and zero in on your eyes. Walk slowly—your perception is a camera lens moving toward its subject. Only watch your eyes as you come as close as you can to that reflecting pool. This is important: see inside your eyes. There is something to re-visit there.

As I say, there is, I think, a very strong sense of grabbing the reader firmly by the elbow and saying, 'Look, this is the way it is. Listen to me.' To put all this another way, passages where 'I' becomes 'you' are sometimes, as here, also passages where the 'you' shades into you-the-reader. There are, in such moments, more than one you in the house. The text has double vision, as it were.

There is then, from all four authors, a profound experience of pause. And in each case, words are inadequate to fill the pause (which does not obviate the desire to try), which is exactly why the pause materializes. It is a pause into which I am invited to sink and thus, if you like, behave as a good reader should, according to Louise Rosenblatt.

But this is all getting a bit ahead of myself. Back to narrative and my sense that a text should leave us displaced, or unmoored. And at the heart of my story is an experience of just such an unmooring: the flipping of my bed. In my story, my text, *this* is the displacement or break or pause, the place that opens up to questions.

ii. Flipped

This is how it has been, and this is how it is:
 All my life I have been able to feel happiness,
 except whatever was not happiness,
 which I also remember.
 (Oliver, 'The Pond,' 2015)

This is how it was, and I stand by it: when I was around fifteen, my bed—with me pinned to it as a 'magnet to metal'—flipped. Yes, I do stand by it, but that is not to say I advertise it. If the subject comes up with people I have known for a very long time (it rarely comes up), responses are muted. Of course they are. A change of topic usually follows close on the heels of suggesting therapy, and no one says, 'What the fuck are you talking about? Beds don't flip.' Or even, 'Really? Fascinating—tell me more.'

If, however, someone were ever to say, 'Tell me more,' I guess I would offer a précis of my memoir. It would begin something like this: between the ages of two and three I lost my hearing for at least a year, and a bout with the measles set my head aflame in fever and, for a year, I did not speak. When my language acquisition resumed, I had a speech impediment and a voice I couldn't tolerate. I clung to my mother—both the smell of her and the golden snap-shot beauty of her. Painfully shy when away from my mother, I barely spoke. And then there are memories of one of my uncles—memories of inappropriate touching, pinching, and sexual inuendo.

My story would then continue something like this: as an adolescent, I experimented successfully with dieting and witnessed a change in people's perceptions of me. However, when I was fifteen my best friend was killed when a car hit her as she was crossing the street. Initial reaction: deep shame at the superficial life I was devoted to. I broke down. And I pretty much

mean this in a literal, visceral way: I felt a break, a S N A P of some kind and this is where it all went south. Reality's downward-spiraling serpentine trajectory landed me—quite literally—in a space where I needed words to pull me through.

Unable to sleep, disorientation with time becomes (and here I would turn to present tense) a major fixation in my day-to-day, and I begin to feel that external forces (notably and at first, my mother) are conspiring to put obstacles in my way to get back to myself. Other friends are getting over the death of Lisa—why can't I? It's all I want to talk about but, when the world moves on, it's as if I am standing transfixed on a train platform, unable to board the train. No one else wants to not-move, to not-grow-up, to not-get-back-to-living. I want to (Do I? Do I *really?*), but I cannot.

One day I wake up with a gnawing hunger in my belly, and spend the day eating as much of everything I can. I feel so hungry that nothing fills me, and the only thing that replaces the hunger is sleep. Once I've eaten as much food as I can hold, I am able to sleep, and for long stretches—sometimes twelve hours, sometimes sixteen. There still is no routine, I stop going to school, and a neighbor delivers homework each day. I do it, but I have no idea how it gets back to school.

Then the bed flips.

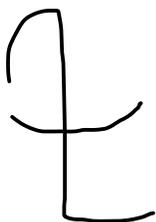
And I am now faced with another challenge. I can believe my sensed experience or I can deny it. But talking myself out of this only proves to be more exhausting. The shock of the bed-flip, and the subsequent, simultaneous hanging over the floor—gravity refusing to help me—and feeling a punch-to-the-gut glued-to-the-bed sensation never loses its sudden exigency. The decision to call this real or *truth*—if only to myself—at least provides a measure of relief and the possibility that a real solution can be found.

At this time, I find myself suddenly unable to read. I am devastated when the words in *Jane Eyre* refuse to remain where they are on the page. They jump and spin, the lines trade places with the lines above, and the beat of the novel's rhythm match my increasing heart rate. Always in my head during this time of not-reading is a kind of mantra—a word, a *word*.

A word.

At some point, trying in vain to practice re-orienting myself during the day for the night-time bed-flip, I memorize the position of the wall to my right. It's a kind of muscle-memory approach, dedicated to the presumption that the wall to my right is the path to my equilibrium. But, through trial and error, I realize that, in the dark of night, memorizing the location of the wall does nothing to keep the bed from flipping. In other words, it's more than a left-and-right conundrum: it is an upside-down-and-right-side-up puzzle.

In the bathroom, I look for something sharp—a needle, a tweezers, a scissors—I am not sure what. I find a cuticle scissors and decide that will work. In my bedroom, without a real plan, I lie on my bed to repeat the exercise of mapping my place in reference to the wall. Eyes closed, hand extended to the wall to find just the correct space for something. A figure, a line drawing, a newly-invented personal Braille to guide me to orientation in the middle of the night when I have no trust in my instincts. I come to think of it as a word—the word—in the same way I felt, as a child, I could unleash the secrets of the world (the secrets of myself) through a single word. The word is something I carve to my right side, and it looks like this:



If this seems underwhelming, dear reader, try not to be disappointed. Shabby as it is, it is my word. It was my word. It would, eventually, guide me upright.

iii. Story

There are many ways to perish, or to flourish

How old pain, for example, can stall us at the
threshold of function.

Memory: a golden bowl, or a basement without light.

For which reason the nightmare comes with its
painful story and says: *you need to know this*.
(Oliver, 'Evidence,' 2009)

My own painful story wasn't always a story I wanted to tell. It was not a story I wanted even to remember. But memory isn't always amenable to our choices. In the short memoir *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* (2015), Sarah Manguso describes much of her obsession with diary-writing as a way of holding onto memory, and—not to be confused with the same—as a way of not forgetting. 'I didn't want to lose anything,' she writes.

That was my main problem. I couldn't face the end of a day without a record of everything that had ever happened.

I wrote about myself so I wouldn't become paralyzed by rumination—so I could stop thinking about what had happened and be done with it.

For me, too, wanting to set down my story was wanting to 'be done with it.' The rumination of it had hung at the back of my mind like an old wool coat, and gained heaviness as the years moved on. I hoped, therefore, that setting it down, would be like watching my story board a train and head on down the tracks.

My first attempts, when in my late twenties, were, though, frustrating, maddening. Instead of recording a memory, I began to question the validity of my experience. Like the

therapists and psychologists who examined my bed-flipping phenomenon, I looked at myself from the outside, doubting from a distance, what had once seemed real. Recording the-events-as-they-took-place was an unsuccessful venture into explaining, and yet, I didn't want to explain because so often explaining can be editorializing. As Manguso writes, 'I tried to record each moment, but time isn't made of moments; it contains moments. There is more to it than moments' (5). In attempting to *record* my experience, I found that I was missing an essential *insideness* to the moments of that experience.

I find something of this *insideness* of experience to be achieved by Ashworth's *Notes Made While Falling*, in particular where, with present-tense immediacy, Ashworth describes reading from her novel at an arts festival. From the audience, a woman asks about Ashworth's writing process. The question, Ashworth confesses, 'is big enough...to hide in.' As she goes on at length answering the woman, '(who is becoming sorrier and sorrier that she asked),' Ashworth finally launches into

the story of a girl who bullied me for a while at primary school. I make this experience into a funny story even though at the time my hair started falling out in chunks and I developed a bit of a twitch and a squint in one eye. This isn't entirely true (my hair did fall out, but my eyes were fine—though I have to put that detail in there for the punch line of this story to work) but bear with me.

As readers here, we straddle the narrative: we are both confidantes to the truth that Ashworth doctored the story, while at the same time we maintain both perspectives of storyteller (Ashworth at the arts festival) and audience (the poor woman who asked the question). In short, we are both inside and outside the story that Ashworth struggles to tell. And, in order to do justice to trauma, it seems to me, both perspectives are necessary.

I thus attempt, in my memoir, to create a world where the reader is privy to more than one perspective. In a literal sense, my narrative takes on several points of view, depending on

whose life I wish to inhabit in the writing. The draft title for the memoir began as *We're All Living Different Versions of the Same Life*. My life has always felt to me like a *series* of lives, lived by a series of quite different people. And so, in my memoir, I sought to invoke several radically different versions of my self—hence, for example, the ‘I’ and the ‘she.’

The nexus between my depression and subsequent breakdown was the death of my friend, Lisa. In hindsight, though, it was a breakdown waiting to happen. Marking the moment of disassociation was a sound—a click or a snap is the best way I can express it—which brought me back with a vengeance to a time as a child when I felt that I had both an inside life and an outside life. In an early section of the memoir, I recall my mother reciting a Robert Louis Stevenson poem to me as I trailed her every move throughout the day. In it, the speaker unwittingly assumes his shadow is an oftentimes-companion. ‘I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,’ the speaker says, ‘And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.’ I assumed, as a small child, that this was something my mother was reciting about herself—her way of telling me we both had a troublesome inside self. As I write,

This bit of herself—trickster, nuisance, magician, and mystery—was, I thought, the look-over-your-shoulder sensation of being watched. The message was woven through the words, an unraveling of a skein of yarn which spun itself through the telling, but wound out of the page, out of telling, to wrap itself around our life, teasing me in to a secret. For I believed that she told of her own shadow, a shadow to match mine.

Here, the ‘I’ uses vocabulary I could not have known at the age of four. However, I feel justified in using a heightened word choice as well as metaphor, in describing my feelings this way, because even the I was split or double—both an ‘I’ inside my experience and an ‘I’ outside my experience.

Once my text focuses on my older self, this dual life is articulated with greater clarity, because it was something that preoccupied me—even at the age of seven. Even then, I felt that there were ‘two truths side-by-side’ in me. As I put it in the memoir, these two truths were,

like the nesting spoons in the silverware drawer [that] made me feel special. But I quickly began to sense that One Truth was the standard, that, in fact, the people around me didn’t share these mixed ideas of things—the One Truth belonging to the world, the other carefully wrapped and stowed away somewhere inside me, marked: ‘Fragile.’

It’s important to note that I, always, perceived the inside (real) me as an ugly, shameful thing. I felt therefore that I should control it, and hide it away. Indeed, by the time I started school, I experienced tremendous anxiety that I might be exposed as a bad person, or as a split or double person. In short, I was legion, not single.

Nancy Mairs considers the limitations of a single perspective in *Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer* (1994). In a wonderful twist of logic, Mairs opens her volume of essays by making the claim that her life is—and has been—perfect. Without even pausing to begin another sentence, however, she places her reader in the midst of the now, much the way Ashworth does, so that we come closer to the messiness of life.

I really did, and do, believe that my life is perfect, although I recognize that certain details of it—like my own advancing debilitation by multiple sclerosis and my husband’s metastatic melanoma—might seem from the outside to forbid it such status and even to mark me as (1) a Pollyanna, to use a quaint term, (2) in denial, as pop-psych-speak would have it, or (3), to be blunt, out of my wits.

This is all to say, from Mairs’s point of view, that ‘“The outside”...never provides a good vantage point for life study.’

I reveal, in my memoir, that separation of outside/inside lives occurred early in my life. It would dictate for many years the way I attempted to present myself to the world. At around

seven, I write, 'I was ready to lie.' And in many ways the memoir may be one long extension of this readiness to lie, to misrepresent my secret self.

I had tested both God and all adults and had slowly arrived at the realization that I alone knew my thoughts, in spite of what my mother said. This was the beginning of my secret self. The advantage? I could think whatever I wanted about Uncle Earl and I would never have to share my true birthday wish—but the ethereal, hovering Me was now locked Outside, looking on. Being a complete-and-utter secret, alone, enclosed behind the shuttered window of my soul, confirmed to me that I wasn't like other people.

iv. Slant

Even now
I remember something...

the way a flower
in a jar of water

steadies itself
remembering itself
(Oliver, 'From the Book of Time,' 2000)

'Story as the Landscape of Knowing' was the title of the annual NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) conference held in Washington, D.C. in 2014. On behalf of the Connecticut Writing Project (a chapter of the National Writing Project in Fairfield, CT), I presented with two colleagues a workshop on Textual Lineages.² Our workshop evolved from work done by Alfred Tatum, who writes extensively about young adults—particularly African-American males—and the absence of significant texts in their lives and *for* their lives. In 'Enabling Texts: Texts That Matter,' Tatum describes the deficit of 'a wide range of texts that challenge them to contextualize and examine their in-school and out-of-school lives.' As a high-school and middle-school teacher, I knew this to be true. When I started teaching twelve years ago, I didn't question the canon for students—this, in spite of my having read only one 'classic' before the age of

² Crandall, B.R., Roneson, J., & Mitchell, S. (2014). 'Advancing the Stories We Tell Ourselves: Tracing Textual, Technical, and Textured Lineages for 21st Century Success.' National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention, Washington, D.C., November 23. According to Alfred Tatum, the definition of a textual lineage is 'a visual representation of texts that have found to be significant in [students'] lives.' See Endnotes.

eighteen. Eventually, I allowed them to read non-classic texts, half-heartedly subscribing to the ‘if-it-gets-them-to-read’ philosophy. But my real understanding of the place of text in children’s lives (in *people’s* lives) didn’t fully develop until, in 2012, I started working with teachers through The Writing Project. Two years later, at the NCTE conference, a full appreciation of what ‘Story as the Landscape of Knowing’ meant effected a profound shift in my way of thinking.

Tatum’s research with adolescents found that students ‘ascribed the absence of meaningful texts in their lives to teachers’ refusal to acknowledge their day-to-day realities couched in their adolescent, cultural, and gender identities.’ All workshops at the conference dramatized this point repeatedly, and I increasingly questioned my practice. Was I *refusing* to acknowledge the realities of my students’ day-to-day lives? I hadn’t meant to. Yes, some of my most avid readers *were* able to draw connections between themselves and *Jane Eyre*, but these were students whose prior reading had provided scaffolds for getting to this level. Many more students, however, were drawn to Celie in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) and Janie in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). It made sense.

The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about her own experience of the ‘danger of the single story’ in a 2009 *TED Talk*. She continues as follows:

Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify...

Perhaps this is why I had little awareness of my students’ lack of resonance with the characters they had come across in canonical literature. But then, I had not begun my reading life with African-American characters or characters of colour at all. No, my first heroines were Laura

from Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series, Ramona from the books by Beverly Cleary, and Betsy from the Carolyn Haywood books. All white. Nonetheless, they did develop a capacity to identify with that was able to ultimately extend to non-white and non-female characters.

Adichie goes on to say that she did, however, go 'through a mental shift' in her perception of literature through reading 'writers like Chinua Achebe and Camera Laye,' at which point she 'realized the people like me, girls with skin the colour of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.' She only learned to write, that is, once she came to see literature as something *intimately* related to herself.

It was a similar process for me as, during the summer of 2015, my own story re-awakened, asked again to be told, but this time with a sense of urgency. Manguso writes about how she 'didn't want to go lurching around, half-awake, unaware of the work I owed the world, work I didn't want to live without doing'(5), and in 2015 I felt much the same. My story was not 'work I owed the world,' but it was work I felt compelled to undertake.

With fresh eyes, then, before thinking about *how* to write, I reviewed the early attempts I had made in my twenties. Why had it not worked? I knew immediately that it had to do with the expository nature of it. My 'landscape of knowing' didn't reside in facts; telling the story had to come from another place.

And there it was. I realized I was confusing facts with knowing. In my early twenties, with access to a college library, I had gone so far as trying to suss out what might be the neurological or psychological cause of my severe disorientation. But when diagnoses like 'brain tumors,' 'serious infection,' 'dementia,' and 'delusional disorders' popped off the pages, I felt nauseated. It wasn't because the words presented harrowing possibilities—no, they stood out as

bold-faced lies. I felt as if I'd betrayed myself, but I left it at that and worked to dismiss the memory.

Manguso writes:

I record these facts dutifully, as if they dignify this writing with something more real than my memories—as if they reveal.

And that is exactly how I had first approached the writing of my life. However, during that summer of 2015, I understood that there was nothing more real than my memories, not even facts. 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant,' Emily Dickinson advised. My truth, however, *was* always already slant; indeed, it was, in fact, flipped upside down.

Thus there was no need to tell it slant, all I had to do was tell it, tell it straight, which is what I attempted to do. This meant, among other things, not so much writing about the *sensation* of the bed flipping, but purely and simply about the bed flipping. In short, I simply had to convey to my reader that the bed flipped. That it fucking flipped.

v. *Roots*

For example, what the trees do
 not only in lightning storms
 or the watery dark of a summer night
 or under the white nets of winter
 but now, and now, and now—whenever
 we're not looking. Surely you can't imagine
 they just stand there looking the way they look
 when we're looking; surely you can't imagine
 they don't dance, from the root up, wishing
 to travel a little...

(Oliver, 'Can You Imagine?', 2004)

Since my early twenties, after moving to Connecticut, I have felt an affinity with trees. I have a tattoo of a leafless tree on my left arm and, when asked to explain the 'meaning,' I will reply sheepishly, 'I like trees.' This is a more nuanced response than one might think, for it reveals much more about the person asking the question. A lot of people will nod and walk away, or say 'Cool' and *then* walk away. A few curious people, though, will look baffled, being not satisfied with 'I like trees'—and, if I sense any such curiosity, I take a deep breath and say this: that I grew up in a place which was once acres and acres of potato fields, flat as far as the eye could see; that the fallowed fields settled a quarter of an inch of potato dust on every surface by day's end; that trees were planted eventually, yes, but they started so small and I forgot to pay attention to their growing; that moving east presented me with the sight of trees that dwarfed any possible thought I had of my significance in the world; and (finally) that this was an almighty relief to me.

I could go on. I could, for instance, go on to say that an old tree's crookedness or frailty reminds me of lessons our culture disallows—lessons such as: don't worry about perfection or

aging; above all, don't worry about 'slantedness' within the landscape of one's knowing, one's storytelling. This landscape is, you see, always shape-shifting, depending on where you stand in relation to it, its appearance altered by time of day, by season, by weather. There is, then, no fixity to the landscape of *knowing*, or knowledge.

Talking of knowledge, when faced with the demand that my memoir should constitute 'a contribution to knowledge,' I determined that my contribution would be woven between and around two particular questions, namely:

- (1) How does reading inform past experiences?
- (2) How are past experiences recalled, and how do they change in and through writing?

I was, though, very conscious that I could not separate out reading, writing, and experience—and, moreover, I needed a metaphor to help me think through this complexity.

One day, therefore, I Googled the word 'layering.' The word seemed at least a starting point for the kind of image I was after. I considered things with layers—lasagna, the epidermis, the earth, tiramisu—but what my mind immediately conjured up was lacking. These things had very distinct layers; whereas reading operated on and in my life as a kind of permanent 'folding-in.' It crept in, and incorporated itself into my being. Part of the etymology of 'layer' is, though, from the French *liue*, 'binding,' referring to a thickened sauce, and I did like the image of being bound to a book. Moreover, 'bind' comes from the Proto-Indo-European root, *bhendh-*, which means 'to bind,' as binding *books*.

Here, though, is the most important thing: layering is an agricultural term, a procedure, actually, by which plants are propagated. There are many descriptions of, and instructions for, layering, as well as different methods. But one common theme is that you take a healthy plant whose roots are well-formed—a plant that invariably is referred to as the *mother* plant. The idea

is this: choose a branch or stem that is low-hanging and *wound* it; the wound should be substantial without, though, cutting all the way through. One then has to submerge the wounded portion into the ground, and secure it with a wire bracket. Still attached to the mother plant, the wounded stem or branch will subsequently receive nutrients from the parent, and will grow roots of its own. Once the roots are well-established, the plant can be severed from its mother.³

The notion of creative or good wounding is also found, I think, when reflecting on the experience of reading; cue Robert Frost who, in 1925, writes that ‘The right reader of a good poem can tell the minute it strikes him that he has taken an immortal wound—that he will never get over it.’ For as long as I have remembered, reading has wounded me. The wound is sometimes recognition, sometimes desire, but is always, on some level, painful and regenerative.

In my memoir, I explore this wounding in a variety of scenes. One of these concerns one of my earliest memories of text—the Robert Louis Stevenson poem ‘My Shadow,’ which my mother used to sing: ‘I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me, and what can be the use of him is more than I can see.’ This was always already a wounding in the sense that from the very first time I heard it, (if there really was a first time) I could not get over it. Moreover, it was a wounding that was also a form of bonding, in that I always (mis) understood the poem as being about how the two of us shared a secret shadow, and were thus one and the same person. All I wanted, after all, was to *be* her.

Many writers and psychologists insist, of course, that there is a developmental stage at which a girl separates from her mother to form her own identity—normal and healthy in spite of its pain. Steedman refers to Nancy Chodorow’s text *Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, to provide an historical account—albeit flawed, according to Steedman—

³ Lerner, Rosie. ‘Layering Gives Old Plants New Life.’ *Purdue Agriculture: Purdue University: Indiana Yard and Garden – Purdue Consumer Horticulture*. Purdue University. 11 May 2006.

of the initial symbiosis between mother and daughter, and subsequent break. In a chapter called 'Reproduction and Refusal,' Steedman writes:

Chodorow's argument centres on the shared gender of mother and daughter and the difficulties mothers experience in perceiving their infant daughters as separate from themselves. This sense of 'oneness and continuity' with her mother is what the little girl carries through her oedipal crisis, the transfer of affection from mother to father, into adult life.

Writing my memoir, however, brought to light what Steedman calls the 'absences' and 'lacunae' in Chodorow's argument. For this reason, like Steedman, I sensed an opportunity 'to remake [the] system of myths' surrounding mothering.

One of the ways Steedman does this is by looking more closely at the social and economic status of any individual family or community. Of course, she, like myself, is looking for those interstices in theory where, perhaps, her own story will emerge. I have never felt an affinity with the old 'transfer of affection from the mother to the father,' or what is sometimes called the Electra Complex, but I do recognize what Steedman describes as 'the drama of ambivalence' for the late-nineteenth century bourgeois child. The result, Steedman says, is 'the child's being able to internalize a rule-system which was represented by its authority/love relationship with its parents.' She continues:

...there is another drama of ambivalence that nineteenth-century middle-class childhood reveals, which is the child's recognition that whilst she is wanted, she is also resented: that it is economic and social circumstances that make a burden out of her, that make her a difficult item of expenditure.

This ambivalence relates in some ways to my childhood, and my reading of it. For although I was, as a child, unaware of our working-class status—we were no different from our

neighbors, as far as I could see—my mom’s constant hard work is central to my vision of her in the memoir. See, for example, this:

We are two people, but she says the things I cannot say, she moves the way I imagine myself to move one day— her long alabaster arms extending to fling the sheets to the breeze before clipping them to the clothesline. I smell clean laundry, the fragrance of detergent offered to the summer air, delivered by my mother who makes everything clean, everything right and straight.

I would not say that I ever quite felt, or understood, myself to be an economic ‘burden’ on my mother when I was very small; nevertheless, she comes to me in memories of perpetual motion, just out of my reach. I felt I couldn’t keep up with her, and she didn’t seem to be able to afford to slow down.

As for Chodorow’s claim that the mother struggles to see herself apart from her daughter, my experience (and interpretation of that experience) would seem to suggest quite the opposite. I see no evidence that my mother had difficulty perceiving me apart from herself. The only, and perhaps glaring, exception to this rule would, though, be that I do now believe that when my mother sang of Stevenson’s ‘shadow,’ the little shadow that went everywhere with her, she had in mind myself.

As far as transferring my affections to my father? No. Never. Perhaps this not taking the Electra path was the result of my development, as a child, being interrupted. It was, of course, first interrupted by my infant deafness, which hindered my language development, its effects lingering long after the actual period of deafness. The consequent speech impediment inevitably lent itself to my perception that I was intellectually inferior and somehow compromised in a way

other children were not. My interpretation of these memories of the struggle to speak feels one-and-the-same with my sense of possessing a monstrous body that was wildly out of control.

vi. Transaction

And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
(Oliver, 'Swan,' 2010)

Both my reading and writing lives are informed by Louise Rosenblatt. She resists the label of Reader Response Theory since it is so often understood to favour the reader's interpretation at the expense of everything else. For Rosenblatt, words-in-themselves also matter, and so I am drawn to her use of the word 'transactional' to describe the reader's relationship with the text. We respond to a text and, in a sense, it also responds to us, thus producing a dynamic, reciprocal relationship, or what Rosenblatt calls 'a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text.' She writes,

The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience... This becomes part of the ongoing stream of his life experience, to be reflected on from any angle important to him as a human being.

This 'ongoing stream,' I suggest, allows 'the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling' to take on a certain fluidity. To put this another way: all the texts I have ever read, or rather *really* read, are part of the 'ongoing stream' of my experience of life. And this is played out, or laid bare in my memoir in various ways. There is the 'Shadow' poem, of course, and Charlotte Zolotow's *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present*, both of which I understood (interpreted and *reinterpreted*) in various ways in this ongoing stream (more on *Mr Rabbit* below). It's as if these texts were

planted—like the agricultural layering of plants to propagate new plants—in order to ‘wound’ a prior understanding. My mother was not *my* troubling shadow: *I* was the troubling shadow. On the other hand, Mr Rabbit does not offer the little girl a poor substitute when he helps her gather colours for her mother’s birthday gift. These are interpretations, however, which have evolved over time. ‘Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text,’ Rosenblatt says, ‘[the reader] marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order.’ As my experiences change, I change. Books have been, for me, a way to define myself, a kind of excavation into myself, as it were. And, like the wounding of a plant in order to propagate, the new growth continues. Re-reading, revising interpretation, re-visiting memories through writing—it is all part of the tangled, beautiful story-thread of a reading life.⁴

⁴ For (much) more on the thread of storytelling, see J. Hillis Miller’s *Ariadne’s Thread: Story Lines* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP; 1992). ‘Linear terminology describing narrative tends to organize itself into links, chains, strands, figures, configurations,’ Miller writes, ‘each covering one of the topographical regions...basic to the problematic of realist fiction: time, character, the narrator, and so on. To identify line terminology used for stories, bit of string by bit of string, will be to cover the whole ground, according to the paradox of Ariadne’s thread. That thread maps the whole labyrinth, rather than providing a single track to its center and back out. The thread is the labyrinth, and at the same time it is a repetition of the labyrinth.’ (19)

vii. Colour

I picked her up
and carried her
into the field
where she rippled
half of her gray
half of her red
while the cars kept coming.
Gray fox and gray fox.
Red, red, red.
(Oliver, 'Red,' 2008)

One of the first books I remember my mother reading to me was Charlotte Zolotow's *Mr Rabbit and the Lovely Present* (1962). The story is about a little girl who wants to give her mother a birthday present. Through a series of exchanges with Mr. Rabbit (more human than animal with his upright posture and thoughtful facial expressions), they ponder possibilities, each revolving around colour. "She likes red," the little girl offers.

'Red,' Mr. Rabbit repeats, 'But you can't give her red.'

'Something red, maybe?'

'Oh, something red,' said Mr. Rabbit.

'What is red?' said the little girl.

'Well,' said Mr. Rabbit, 'There's red underwear.'

'No,' said the little girl, 'I can't give her that.'

'There are red roofs,' said Mr. Rabbit.'

'No, we have a roof,' said the little girl. 'I don't want to give her that.'

'There are red birds,' said Mr. Rabbit, 'Red cardinals.'

'No,' said the little girl, 'She likes birds in trees.'

'There are red fire engines,' said Mr. Rabbit.

'No,' said the little girl, 'She doesn't like fire engines.'

‘Well,’ said Mr. Rabbit, ‘There are red apples.’

It is decided then, that apples are placed in a basket; *they* will represent red, as it were. And the colours yellow, blue, and green are also represented by a fruit. Each time, with the presentation of each colour that the little girl’s mother likes, Mr. Rabbit’s initial response remains the same. ‘Yellow,’ he says (or blue or green), ‘But you can’t *give* her *yellow*’ (or *blue* or *green*)—and that’s what has always bewildered me. I didn’t, of course, verbalize this at the age of four or five but inchoate knowledge (instinct? suspicion?) determined, in a deep part of me, that what is collected in the basket *is* colour.

This idea somehow stayed with me, even up to the time I went off to college. It was 1980, and I declared my first of many majors to be Art. In my first semester, I discovered and felt altered by the works of American painters Morris Louis and Mark Rothko. In particular, Louis’s *Breaking Hue* (1953) mesmerized me; for, like the story of *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present*, I felt there was something in it that could not be paraphrased or translated into words. So, when the professor asked for initial responses to Louis’s work (I can still smell the heat from the old Kodak Carousel slide projector, the whirls of dust lit by the cone of light.), I blurted, ‘I just love it.’ Laughter.

But Professor Murray smirked in a good way. ‘Say more, Julie.’

And so I did. Our conversation, as I recall, went something like this:

I said, ‘The colour Louis uses isn’t trying to be anything else.’

‘Good, good,’ Professor Murray encouraged. ‘Go on. Explain.’

‘Well, say you see something—a chair, for example. It’s orange. But it’s not orange itself—it’s only *painted* orange. So, now it feels to me that it’s wearing orange, even *pretending*

to be orange. What Louis does, I think, is to give us orange—orange itself.’ As usual, the words coming out of my mouth, catch-as-catch-can, felt inadequate, but it was a start. A beginning. *In the beginning, there was colour*, as it were.

To put this another way: something about *Breaking Hue* sent me back to my childhood—at first, I thought it was the shade of orange, which seemed to produce a joy in me at a time when colours were the texts I read, when the visual spoke to me in a time of silence. This observation and subsequent memory brought back *Mr. Rabbit*, though at the time I couldn’t exactly recall the title (I would later visit the public library near my parents’ house and scout out the book in the children’s section). When I was able to re-read this lost treasure, I felt the secret of the story was revealed. *The colour was—is—the thing*. There is no representation of the colour, only the colour itself. It was the same way with many of Louis’s paintings—an overlap or layering of colours, but so infused as to be a single thing. And somehow not colour on canvas, but the colour.

When I started on *A Life So Far*, I soon found myself writing about Louis, and so decided to research the particular painting to which I was so drawn. In an essay on Louis by Klaus Kertess called ‘Beauty’s Stain’ (2006), Kertess not only talks about experiencing *colour-as-the-*



Breaking Hue Morris Louis (1954)

thing as it were, but also writes that Louis ‘[transformed] canvas and paint into pneumatic vessels effusing paradisiacal mists—transparently clear in process but deeply mysterious, wafting illusion while flat and totally abstract, utterly natural yet completely artificial.’ I wouldn’t use the word ‘artificial’ in relation to my own experience of Louis’s painting, however, I would use the word ‘paradisiacal.’ For to experience colour-as-the-thing is, I believe, to access a kind of Eden, or at least a before-the-world space or time. This before-world was, I believe, part of my childhood, which is why I begin there in the memoir.

I hadn’t any notion to write about my childhood initially—it was so ordinary. But when I faced the question, *How to begin?*—I kept needing to reach farther into the past. It was Frost’s ‘way leads on to way’ in reverse, as the excavation of one memory opened into another, leading, ultimately, to a pre-verbal moment. The memories were there; that wasn’t the surprising part. It was discovering that, in the case of the earliest memories, colour was *all*, serving where words could not.

Interesting in this connection is Manguso’s *Ongoingness*, where she chronicles her revelations after she gives birth to her son:

As I watched the baby play with his toys I remembered an orange plastic panel fixed to the rails of my own crib. A round red rubber air bladder the size of my fingertip. A bell. A black-and-white crank that clicked. [And a blue-and-red sphere that spun fast in its housing and looked purple.

Again then, in the beginning is colour—before even words. And this was dramatically, or exaggeratedly, the case for me because measles and a high fever left me deaf when I was a little older than two. In the ensuing silence, my world was dominated by the technicolour tones of everything around me: a cream-corn chaise lounge, our glossy black mailbox, and my mother’s deep gold ashtray, orange creamsicle lipstick, and crimson fingernails holding a clean white,

brown-tipped cigarette. In the silence that accompanied all these colours, nothing interfered with seeing. The snapshots in my mind were unfettered by description, explanation, or importuning.

Ultimately, I did not utilize Louis's *Breaking Hue* in my memoir, though his depiction, or suggestion of a world of pure and wordless colour very much influenced the way I represented my experience as a child. The irony, of course, is that my objective in the memoir was to put into words what I did not, as a child, have words *for*.

How, then, was I, when writing my memoir, to interpret the intense and heightened memory I have of colour, particularly during the period of time in which I couldn't hear? The first thing I needed to do was to reconcile myself to using the very tool—*language*—that I didn't have at the time. Next, I had to work out how to use language from a distance of more than fifty years to even come close to the 'right' interpretation. I decided, therefore, that I would seek to *crowd* my sentence with objects and colours, as if they were being seen without mediation of language. Note how my narrator speaks at the beginning of the memoir clearly and from a distance, but after the high fever from the measles and the subsequent hearing loss, all the distance disappears:

My world was colour-consuming objects, each and every. No matter the thing—chaise lounge, kitchen chair, ashtray, dandelion—it was stamped into my brain as an intense colour wash: golden rod, lemon chiffon, amber, and sunglow.

Colour again presses upon the page in a section called 'Bed,' where I'm sixteen, and I write about a recurring dream after I overhear a conversation on the school bus. Two boys were talking about my friend's death, how they heard that the impact of the car caused her sneaker to catapult off her body—and this is how I render the ensuing dream:

Her shoe with its lovely—at first lovely—machinations of tumbling and breezing. Of floating, spiraling, and somersaulting. Then of dipping,

plummeting; a background sky morphing from azure, then glaucous; to griseous, as the shoe slues and drops, a flight gone awry. And the sky complying, now perse, then indigo. Slate to sable.

Here I choose obscure colour-words, in order to underscore a sense elsewhere of losing control. Emphasizing this further are the words of motion—indeed, the *changes* in colour seem to mirror this sense of unpredictable motion.

In a section called ‘Tornado,’ colour-words operate to heighten the climax of a severe disorientation I experienced. Although this disorientation manifested itself in other ways—losing a sense of time and direction—the most frightening was my inability to keep my bed from flipping over, with me pinned to the mattress much in the way one’s back feels glued to the surface in certain carnival rides. The experience, when it happened for the first time, reminded me of the way a tornado evolves in a Minnesota summer:

...a baleful, achromatic stillness pressing down in the absence of air. Grey sky darkens. The leaves of trees begin to shiver, the empyreal grey overhead begins to move as well, turning a deep viridian green.

Here again, colour-words are entwined with movement. This time, though, the colour-words serve, in fact, to slow or even *calm* the movement—I used colour to quell the panic that often gripped me during the day when I would try to uncover rational explanations for the bed flipping. This is mirrored in the scene in which I think myself through a vision of a setting sun:

See the soft edge of the sun going down...behind the mountains. Make the sun any colour you want, any colour is fine, since the mountain will change the colour of the sun, just as that glowing orb descends to touch the mountain. That the sun is a purple haze, then tangerine to an iridescent pink and fading, is the thing that will urge a beating heart to slow, to slow.

A close neighbour to pink is, of course, red, a colour that is integral to two later sections of the memoir, the one called simply 'Red,' and the one following it called 'Period.' As I said earlier, I didn't include Morris Louis's *Breaking Hue* painting, as much as it made an important impression on me; but I did include a Mark Rothko painting called *No. 36: Black Stripe* (1958), and the reason is that in spite of its title, red is the predominant palette in *No. 36: Black Stripe*. In the memoir, the sight of my mother's blood spattered on the walls in my parents' bedroom reminds me of the Mark Rothko painting:

[The Rothko painting] hangs in the school library and these walls remind me of the layers and layers of red. In the painting, there are three thick bars of colour: red, black, and red-orange. But each is outlined, hazily, in red. The deepness of the colours feels as if they each borrowed themselves *from* red. As if everything is from red.

Red is everything, where it begins, where it ends; blood and birth and death. The earth. Apples on a yellow plate. Fire engines, fire hydrants, and blaring noises and civil-service warnings on a Wednesday afternoon. An uncle's orotund laugh.

Here, at the end of the passage, colour begins to cross over into sound ('blaring noises,' etc.) in a synaesthetic manoeuvre. These noises are, indeed, noises that are close to tellings ('warnings'), and in this sense they mirror Rothko's belief that 'art was a profound form of communication.'⁵

In *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (2010), Guy Deutscher examines the question 'Is [language] an artifact of culture or a bequest of nature?' Colour, according to Deutscher, is

an ideal test case for adjudicating over nature's and culture's conflicting claims on the concepts of language. Or, put another way: the seemingly narrow strip of color can serve as a litmus test for nothing less than the question of how deep the communalities are between the ways human

⁵ Karen Kedmey, 'Mark Rothko: American, Born Russia (Now Latvia) 1903-1970' (The Museum of Modern Art: *MoMA Highlights*; 2017).

beings express themselves, and how superficial the differences—or vice versa!

Deutscher relies predominantly on analyzing the work of William Gladstone (1809-1898), who, in 1858 London, served as a member of Parliament for Oxford University. Gladstone's voluminous work, *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age* (1858), culminates with the hypothesis that, because colour is a concept rather than an object ('an abstraction'), people in Homer's time largely recognized qualities of light and dark rather than 'a particular prismatic color' (38). In order for the eye to discern the nuances of prismatic colour in everyday life, Gladstone figured, it would have to be 'exposed to artificial paints and dyes.' As Deutscher writes,

The appreciation of color as a property independent of a particular material may thus have developed only hand in hand with the capacity to manipulate colors artificially. And that capacity, [Gladstone] notes, barely existed in Homer's day: the art of dying was only in its infancy, cultivation of flowers was not practiced, and almost all the brightly colored objects that we take for granted were entirely absent.

In contrast, of course, for me growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, the world was packed full of colours. There were not only the primary colours of my toys, but also a host of shades of those primaries: the cross-stitched hues of a chaise lounge, the subtle gradations of orange in my mother's lipsticks, the variegated greens of the grass, the terrible transmutation in the colour-cycle of the sky before a tornado, and the waxy oil-pastel colours of the rhubarb patch. Some, then, of the colours of my childhood are primary and man-made, but many are complex, subtle, and natural. However, I do believe that my sensitivity to the latter was produced by the former. In short, Gladstone was right: my experience of colour *was* cultural.

Much later in *Through the Language Glass*, Deutscher talks of ‘the shattering [teenage] realization that one can never know how other people *really* see colors.’ This question is, as Deutscher explains, addressed by various scientific studies of colour perception which suggest that ‘color sensation itself is formed not in the retina but in the brain.’ As Deutscher writes,

[B]etween the [three types of cones in the retina], and our actual sensation of color there is a whirl of extraordinarily subtle and sophisticated computation: normalization, compensation, stabilization, regularization, even plain wishful seeing.

In my memoir I attempt to mirror this ‘whirl’ of language in order to capture a ‘colour sensation,’ brushing against the grain of conventional orthography, as in this passage:

Dream images of pock-marked black, of aphotic space everywhere I look, eyes closed...Sirens during the day caused a panic and concocted with the ink visions of nighttime...Something bad had begun with me, had caused the grotesque burning, bubbling alive-thing—I couldn’t name it—charred and smoldering.

Relying on the connotations of verbal language, rather than the specificity of colour-words, I want the reader to make a connection that arouses the ‘colour sensation’ Deutscher writes about. The single concrete colour in the above passage is black, and yet, the modifiers surrounding black (‘pock-marked,’ ‘bubbling alive-thing,’ etc.) are what evoke a mood of despair.

viii. Voice(s)

...Impatience puts
 a halter on my face and I run away over
 the green fields wanting your voice...
 When I first found you I was
 filled with light, now the darkness grows
 and it is filled with crooked things, bitter
 and weak, each one bearing my name.
 (Oliver, 'Six Recognitions of the Lord,' 2006)

My mother
 was the blue wisteria,
 my mother
 ...did not always love her life,
 heavier than iron it was
 ...

My father was a demon of frustrated dreams,
 was a breaker of trust
 (Oliver, 'Flare,' 2000)

Attempting to mimic or echo the voice of a real person can be a thorny thing indeed. In *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*, Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz write, 'Creative nonfiction writers, intent on being creative *and* truthful, walk a thin line that other writers do not.' They go on:

Journalists and scholars, with their allegiance to fact, tend to avoid the ambiguities of memory and imagination. Fiction writers with their allegiance to story have no qualms about inventing interesting worlds. But creative nonfiction writers, with the intent to write good stories *that are true*, must grapple with the boundary between ethical and artistic clarity.

I set out to write only *my* truth, to voice only *my* voice, but the voices of family and friends as well as others from my past, soon began to infiltrate my narrative. How could they not? Despite (or perhaps because of) my tendency to self-isolate or refuse to speak, I believe I was an intense observer of everything around me. People, colours, the tone of a person's voice, the movement in a face addressing me—so much felt stored away, resurfacing continuously as I wrote. Whether I resurrected these in an accurate way or not is impossible to know objectively. Two people viewing a photograph may arrive at similar observations, but their 'reading' will not be identical.

Beyond, though, my interpretations, I confess that I invented. I put thoughts into my mother's head which I only *imagine* were there—thoughts I could never have known, and thoughts she certainly would not have shared *had* they been there. While there is a part of me that acknowledges the space for an ethical dilemma here, I will say that my imagination felt faithfully aligned with the person I knew my mother to be. For instance, while I followed her around as a toddler and little girl, I soaked in more than sunshine and the smell of laundry. I knew, on some level, that this was her work. She took her early years as a housewife seriously. There was a place on our kitchen counter for a book-sized daily calendar. Each day's entries consisted primarily of a list of chores: from the once- or twice-a-week 'Scrub kitchen floor & basement stairs, Laundry (white) or Laundry (dark),' to the less-frequent-but-no-less-important tasks that one would have to record meticulously in order to maintain a schedule: 'Moth balls in cedar closets, Defrost fridge, Window screens out and wash.' My mother once told me—in a self-acknowledged confessional tone—'When you kids were little, I followed that list, Jules, I kid you not, until every item was crossed out. More than once I was up at midnight scrubbing those darn basement stairs.'

The section in my memoir where my mother realizes I am not hearing ('Chesterfields') is told in third-person. It is initially limited to my point of view, but soon shifts to tell the story from my mother's point of view:

Arlis watches her daughter's tiny muscles tense, the little face contorting as she swallows the apple juice. Some of it drips out the side of those fevered lips, and Arlis pleads silently to God that enough of the chalky children's aspirin make it down her throat. She had stirred the crushed tablet with fervor, willing it to dissolve, fast, fast, to get it quick-quick into baby's body, burning with fever, and those glassy blue eyes seeming to ask Why, why? And she holds baby close, allowing the tears to travel down and down, making a path from her cool cheeks to baby's head, heat radiating even without direct contact, like the wisps of steam from the distant road. Her lips are buried in the fine hair, baby-shampooed: 'I'm sorry, Jules, I'm sorry... Little rosebud, I'm sorry... Mommy's here, Mommy's sorry.'

Finally, the gasping for air gives way to quivering exhalations. And the rigid muscles relax, tense, relax, relax. Relent.

Surrender.

Sleep. As suddenly as the storm had emerged, it deliquesces. The ticking of the clock meters peace. And the breathing of the baby keeps in time.

Arlis counts to sixty and breathes deeply. Needs coffee. Cigarette. Now Gently placing Julie on the sofa next to her, she separates herself, damp from tears and perspiration. She watches with gratitude the still-damp hair and the rising and falling of her chest. Rising and falling: such a small, fine thing, really, and all we could ever hope for, all we really have a right to ask God for.

God for.

Two hours later, Julie still sleeps. Arlis has made the most of the early morning hours: the beds are made, dishes washed, and two loads of laundry—washed, dried, folded. And yet. There is this space.

She lights the cigarette and, as one would choose shoes to match a bag, she tries to give a name to what might fill the space. Is it to love deeply, some One or some Thing? No, that's not it, not exactly, not entirely.

Each day had its own proper work. Ma used to say:

'Wash on Monday,
Iron on Tuesday,

Mend on Wednesday,
 Churn on Thursday,
 Clean on Friday,
 Bake on Saturday,
 Rest on Sunday.'
 (Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*)

Arlis shakes her head, laughs a sudden, rueful laugh. *Back to work*, she thinks. She puts out the cigarette and checks the list again. Vacuum. Nothing else.

I include this rather lengthy section because it provides a snapshot of these almost-opposing forces of motivation: my mother loved me, but she needed to get the work of the day crossed off her list.

The last person I expected to write *about* (never mind the writing *from*) was Moe, my father. Even as I write this, I am disappointed in my lack of compassion for him. My mother told me often that Moe was not the father of the family sitcoms I watched in the evening; he would never be Andy Griffith or the dad from the *Brady Bunch*—or, of course, I would think to myself, my beloved fiddling-playing Pa from *Little House*; however, she always added that he loved us. He simply had a different way of showing love. It seemed a paltry excuse to me.

I also never intended to read my father's letters—all but one addressed to his parents ('Dear Folks')—but finally felt I must, although only *as* I was nearing the end of the first draft of my memoir. The reading I present in the book is an imaginative addition which, to me, feels authentic enough, I think. I put myself back into my memory of my 17-year-old self and found that my reactions to his letters—his daily comments on the lousy weather in France, the idiocy of anyone who is not American, and his older-brother directives to his siblings, etc—resembles my youthful reactions to the man himself.

My hope is that neither of my parents come across as unreal in way, but my own 'reading' of them is skewed somehow, I'm sure.

3. Meanwhile

Much happens when you write a book, especially when it takes six years. During this time, two of my frequent readers, Professors John Schad and Jenn Ashworth, provided the same advice and I pulled it out of my pocket on a weekly basis. To my melodramatic, monthly emails to John, where I proclaimed all was lost on the writing front, that I hadn't had a coherent thing to say that anyone would want to read, his response would be something like, 'Okay, very good, no worries, then. The PhD should write itself. When you feel you can't write, read.'

And, in Ashworth's heart-gripping memoir mentioned above, she talks about advising her students who are having trouble writing. 'I tell them to remember,' she says, 'even when they are stuck—especially when they are stuck—that writing is like breathing out. But to do it well, to do it fully, to do it at all, they have to breathe in, and this part of it, the inhalation, is called reading. You take in, then you give out. Your heart gives out.'

In spite of my immediate sense that this PhD has consumed me, I have been enthralled by many inhalations, many events of reading, always reinforcing my firmest belief, that writers are readers. If I never write again, I will always be a reader. This is a profound statement coming from someone who is so indecisive that people in my life know they should never consult me when it comes to making plans. They tell me where to show up. But reading? I will always accept the wounding of a good book. It is essential, which is one of things I wished to convey in my memoir.

There is, of course, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series of books—nine in all—which sit on my beautiful bookshelves watching me as I type this. The books have comforted me throughout my life, as I've said, and in that layering way of agricultural propagation, continues beyond the memoir to create offshoots of new growth when my experience intersects with them.

In the midst of completing my master's degree in 1994, for instance, I miscarried two consecutive pregnancies, both in their second trimesters. The grief was something which had to compete not only with graduate school, but with the child I already had. She was two, and I have always wondered what effect my despair had on her. My routine during this time was to spend Saturdays in the library—research back in the 20th century—and as I sat in my familiar cubicle, the words in front of me began to move. Just as they had way-back-when, during the bed-flipping time. In my memoir, I explain it this way:

I stare at pages once as familiar to me as my hands—neither are familiar now—and the words, the letters, pass through each other, inchoate, like words thrown from a paper bag and scattered to the wind. I cannot command their stillness. I try to focus on a line, a single line. I blink, squeeze shut my eyes, and open them with fierce concentration. No use. Each side of the line of text moves, weaving towards the other side, moieties of rank and file. They glide, elide, skirr, slide, words moving into and over and through. Catching a solitary word is like stopping rain in its tracks.

All I can think, is *Please-oh-fucking-god, oh fuck fuck fuck, no*. And I am terrified. Again. From that goddamn ceiling in Minnesota, to this hallowed old library in Connecticut, my lunacy has followed me. Like the little shadow from the Stevenson poem.

I remember sitting there for hours. It was winter and I felt the sun begin to disappear from the window behind me. I finally stood, stiff from having been so still. I walked down to the lower level where the children's section was and inhaled that booky, reading scent that instantly provided relief. I scouted out the *Little House* books, easy as if they, too, were looking for *me*. I checked them out and spent the next few days inviting them to teach me to read again.

&&&&

I felt obligated to read Caroline Fraser's biography of Wilder, *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder* (2017), but only after I finished my memoir. I knew about the removal of Wilder's name on a literary medal by the US Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) in 2018. Her children's novels, it was said, were 'criticised for language that dehumanises indigenous peoples and people of colour.' Naturally, this stung. I don't think it's justified and perhaps I'm showing my age here. The children's books reflect, in part, the very warped notion that the Midwest frontier was uninhabited; that settlers like the Ingalls family ventured into uncharted land. Fraser points to this very early in her biography. She explains that one of the lasting impressions Wilder would hold as her very first memory was the view of the prairie through the cinched canvas roof of the covered wagon as the family traveled from Missouri to Kansas.

Late in life, she would conjure it again and again, trying to recapture the stark beauty and isolation of that vista, seen through the eyes of her not-quite-three-year-old self. In her memory, the prairies represented a tabula rasa—wilderness as purity, free from human stain and experience...As with her portrayal of the Big Woods as a place where 'there were no people,' there was a significant omission here. People did live in Kansas. And they fought over it, too.

Context matters a great deal, and Fraser's text supplies this. But, as a reader, I struggle with combining the historical context of the time with the characters of the books—and they *are* characters—when it means holding them entirely culpable for their views. These are issues so current in our own time: the controversies over Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* are two examples. It seems to me that the core question becomes this: do we disregard a text when, from a modern lens, we see behavior, language, and attitudes that belie evolved perspectives?

Perhaps a simpler, more relevant way to say this is that, for me, I did not read Wilder's *Little House* series with an eye toward evidence of the egregious actions taken upon Native Americans by the United States and its early settlers. I feel painfully aware of this now, of course, re-reading the books as an adult, but the first 'wound,' if you will, that came from reading them when I was nine- or ten-years old, was the perspicacity of family.

In my memoir, I chose to rely on Wilder's texts verbatim, much more than attempting to interpret them as my younger self. Like so much of recalling my past, words of my own often fall short in capturing the sensibilities of the time. I use Wilder's words to both reflect my feelings in a particular scene, as well as to provide the tension I felt in comparison. In one section, for instance, I describe what is my earliest memory:

In a crib, on her side. The blanket is worn, soft. Has silky tendrils from frayed edges, gentle fingers to brush against her nose, her cheek. The blanket has a powerful smell: sunshined dandelions and the hot tar of the street, her mother's White Shoulders perfume, green leaves tugging at warm wind.

The scene is meant to evoke warmth and comfort, but it doesn't last. My Uncle Earl becomes an important figure in the memoir, and I believe—but don't know for certain—that the comfort and security of waking in my crib is quickly supplanted by fear. And it had something to do with him, perhaps hearing his voice. I write about seeing 'Through vertical pieces of brown wood'—the bars of my crib—'a shaft of light, a parallelogram of dusty sun.' But, to create the sense of foreboding, that light 'creeps under the door.'

In contrast, then, is the passage from *Little House on the Prairie* which introduces this—for me—terrifying moment:

Laura couldn't wait to see the inside of the house. As soon as the tall hole was cut, she ran inside. Everything was striped there. Stripes of sunshine

came through the cracks in the west wall, and stripes of shadow came down from the poles overhead. The stripes of shade and sunshine were all across Laura's hands and her arms and her bare feet. And through the cracks between the logs she could see stripes of prairie. The sweet smell of the prairie mixed with the sweet smell of cut wood.

There are overlapping sensory details: the 'vertical pieces of brown wood' that make up the bars of my crib are echoed in Wilder's 'sweet smell of cut wood.' I see a 'parallelogram of dusty sun,' while Laura notices 'stripes of shade and sunshine' and 'stripes of prairie.' And, of course, a sense of looking through shapes and finding an altered world through this looking. For Laura, it is a world which welcomes; for me, it is one which threatens.

Reading *Prairie Fires* confirmed my trepidation that a different truth, apart from the one I clung to as a child—indeed, as an adolescent and an adult—would surface in Fraser's research. Although there is less about Wilder's treatment of Native Americans or people of colour, the author certainly devotes the time to provide necessary historical context. The biography clearly shows that it was Charles and Caroline Ingalls—Laura's parents—who impacted the sense that Wilder disregarded the presence of Indigenous people. Our parents provide at least one of our earliest contexts.

'Wilder was not a historian,' Fraser writes. 'Instead, her novels would be created from a complex tangle of subjective sources: family lore and letters, old hymnals and songbooks, treasured artifacts of her youth, and her own recollections. Her depictions of the West was drawn less from newspapers or encyclopedias than from her inner life. It was a work of pure folk art.' I, too, have similar source material in my father's letters, legal documents pertaining to my mother and both her adoptive and biological mother, and photographs. But it is that 'inner life' which informs my reading of these documents, these artifacts.

Using such artifacts with ‘a kind of collagist principle’ is something John Schad, Professor of English and Creative Writing at Lancaster University in the UK, speaks of in reference to his book *Paris Bride: A Modernist Life* (2020). In an interview on the podcast *Writing Lives: Biography and Beyond*, Schad describes the method by which he created the real-life central figure of *Paris Bride*, Marie Schad. *Real*, since she existed, but more accurately *created* because so few historical details exist about her life. ‘In one sense,’ Schad says, ‘it’s driven by reading.’ He continues,

I like to imagine I’m not a writer; I like to imagine that I’m a reader. So, in each case, throughout the text, I’m attempting to read a life back into existence, not to write one back into existence... In other words, to piece together a life through literary texts of the period. So the figure Marie lives in and around the first half of the 20th century, and so I seek to locate her, to find her, in various texts of and around the places and the times of her life.

While Schad utilizes literary texts of the time (Woolf, Mansfield, and Wilde, for instance) to provide context to his distant relative’s life, I attempt something similar in my memoir. Like Wilder and Schad, I have certain tangible artifacts to ‘read a life back into existence,’ and, like Wilder, my inner lives, for there seem to be so many, informs my interpretation of memories.

In Wilder’s time, of course, there was no designated ‘creative non-fiction’ genre. Fraser emphasizes the question of truth when it comes to the *Little House* books—an issue during the time Wilder was writing the series, as well as for critics today. Readers wrote letters to Wilder for the rest of her life with questions about authenticity, and bookstore clerks discussed which section of the store to place the series. For the most part, however, the books were viewed as drawn from Wilder’s memories. The *New York Times Book Review* saw the eighth book (at the time intended to be the last) ‘as a fitting finale to “an invaluable addition to our list of genuinely

American stories [with their] authentic background, sensitive characterization...fine integrity and spirit of sturdy independence.”” As works of fiction, reviewers were able to endorse the books’ fine writing without, it seems, a preoccupation with some of the liberties Wilder took as a storyteller.

I appreciate Fraser’s detailed research in her *Prairie Fires*—indeed, the book provides one of the pleasures, for me, in reading a good biography: the window is opened wider to this life. I am pleased that Wilder realized, and was able to reap the benefits of, her own writing success. I knew the books were published and selling during her life, but Fraser magnifies Wilder’s singular talent by including the biography of another ‘character’ in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s life: her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane.

Wilder describes the birth of Rose in her last *Little House* book, *The First Four Years*. I use the passage, an unusually dark description, to underscore a section in my memoir where my mother responds to my question, ‘But does it hurt to have a baby?’

‘It’s only a little uncomfortable, and then it’s over,’ she says. All matters of sex, including menstruation, love, marriage, and childbirth, were best spoken of in the briefest way possible, if it were necessary to speak of them at all. In Wilder’s book, Laura’s experience seems to be a more accurate account of what I imagine my mother to have gone through:

She was being borne away on a wave of pain. A gust of cold, fresh air brought her back and she saw a tall man drop his snowy overcoat by the door and come toward her in the lamplight.

She vaguely felt a cloth touch her face and smelled a keen odor. Then she drifted away into a blessed darkness where there was no pain.

When Laura opened her eyes, the lamp was still shining brightly over the room, and Ma was bending over her with the doctor standing beside her. And in the bed by her side was a little warm bundle.

In a different conversation with my mom, I recall overhearing a conversation she had with her best friend, Jean, who figures prominently into my memoir as a vehicle through which ‘adult things’ could be stored away in my brain, saved for a time in the future when I might gain a bit of knowledge. It had to do with the trend for ‘natural childbirth,’ and Jean said something about how it was much better with a ‘magical cocktail.’ They both laughed. In writing a section called ‘Paul Bunyan Land,’ I utilized Google—an essential resource for a memoir spanning the 1930s through the 1970s—to discover what this cocktail was. Of course, I know as much as most of us about the historic use of drugs, when they were available, given to women in labor. Like the evolution of so many practices, from drugs to eating habits, present knowledge has us wondering at what used to be standard practice. In this part of the memoir, I write my mother’s story in third-person limited, taking the great liberty to occupy her thoughts—as I imagine them. She is finally succumbing to my father’s insistence, when my brother is six and I am four, that we take a family vacation. Destination: Paul Bunyan Land in Brainard, Minnesota. At the beginning of this section, my mother (Arlis) is recalling the first time her husband suggested a ‘family’ vacation to Paul Bunyan Land: absurdly, she thinks, it was just after their first-born, Roger, was born. ‘Who, in this heat,’ she wonders, ‘would want to go to Paul Bunyan Land? And with a newborn? The boy was barely three weeks old.’ She continues with her thoughts and recognizes that ‘the Twilight-Sleep cocktail of morphine and scopolamine administered some time during labor seemed to linger through the ten days in the hospital.’

Wilder’s description of the birth of Rose had been my only reference to the Wilders’ only child. I didn’t pay much attention to the occasional headline I might see, as an adult, that there were questions surfacing about who, really, had authored the *Little House* books. Fraser addresses the dynamic between Wilder and her daughter regarding the writing and editing of the

series, and does so at great length. For me, the sad story of Rose's disturbing mental imbalance and her treatment of her mother has become a separate biography, one I choose not to reconcile with the *Little House* books themselves. Indeed, the books are—and I suspect they always will be—a world I once believed myself capable of joining. I felt that, through force of will, Pa, Ma, Laura, and her sisters could be my family. I knew this was unlikely, but it was at a time when I still believed in Santa Claus. Not much later, of course, I knew Pa, Ma, and Laura *could* not be my family. this was not, *could* not, be my family. Nevertheless, I still knew that they were what love looked like.

4. Postscript

I think I mentioned earlier in this thesis that my fortune with therapists in general has been abysmal. If I neglected to do so, I say it now: my experience with therapists and therapy has been abysmal. However, very recently there has been an exception to this rule.

This was in early 2021, soon after I had finished writing my memoir, and when, I experienced an old-but-familiar sadness—a deep, deep sadness, like a loss or an absence. I was unhappy in my job and, of course, there was the pandemic—both reasons enough for my sadness but I felt there might be other and deeper factors. And so, a few months ago, I sought out Neta, a therapist in my city. Small in frame, with an accent I cannot quite place, and eyes that refuse to move away, locked onto mine—not in a way that interrogates or intimidates—she has helped me enormously. In the first couple of sessions she helped me unpack many of the details of my recent life, and then one day I said something about always feeling too large, as if looming over everything around me. She looked troubled, asked for a more concrete example, and I proceeded to tell her about the little boat at Paul Bunyan Land. She said, ‘This is so odd—it feels as if you might have Complex PTSD. Do you know what that is?’ I shook my head. She explained that it was strange for someone to experience body dysmorphia at such an early age. Had I been sexually abused?

No, I assured her I hadn’t. My uncle Earl, I explained, was a creepy man—more than creepy, I admitted—in fact, I explained, I had written about him for my PhD, thus:

‘God hears everything you feel,’ my mother would say at times when I was convinced that she, too, could read my mind. If so, could she not hear me pleading with her when my uncle, his hands rough and grabbing, sweeps me up for a sandpaper embrace and insists I sit on his lap?

Make him stop, Mommy, please make him stop.

And then it is not his lap exactly, as he suddenly positions me so as to straddle one beefy leg which he spastically bounces up and down. Again, always the same. He yanks my skirt up from the back, settling me unsteadily to his drumming leg and I am one piece of material closer to his other intruding limb, which now jabs at my lower back. His laughter is not the gentle sustained note of a flute as my mother's is; it is the truncated bombastic blare of a trombone, as he shouts, 'Ride the pony, Jules! Yee haw!!'

My face fires shame at the heat building between my legs from the friction of the drum-drumming, the up-and-downing, the blaring blasts, and the pulling on my skirt as if yanking the leash on a lunging dog. Tears well, my mother's face a blur as she tries to smooth the ugly wrinkles of the scene. 'Jules, honey, what's the matter?' but it is a dead fish of a comfort. Finally, I think, she hears me. But as our arms begin their journey toward each other, Uncle Earl's leg jolts, his trombone guffaw jilts gestures, and he booms, 'Oh, hell, she's okay—you're gonna love this when your older, Jules!' Trombone blast. 'Won't she, Arlis?' Before he releases me he pinches my nipples, hard. 'Hah! Make 'em grow, now, dontcha know.'

I related this memory to Neta, albeit in an abbreviated form -- just the facts, without the telling (slant or otherwise). She looked a little stunned and asked, 'How did it feel to write that?'

I started sobbing.

Endnotes

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