

MAKING IT REAL
Forays into the Art of Creative Nonfiction

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Making it Real: Forays into the Art of Creative Nonfiction

Matters of Actuality

One Sunday morning, about a decade ago, I ran into a colleague in a dusty attic of a stranger's home in south Minneapolis. We were both, independently, estate sale shopping—digging through artifacts of lives recently left behind. The reasons for the departure—death, migration to Florida, exile to a nursing home—we couldn't know. As is often the case in an estate sale, the attic featured the dregs of household living—old spools of wrapping paper, books with cracked bindings, fabric scraps, board games in bent boxes.

My colleague, another professor of creative nonfiction in the MFA program where I teach, was pawing through a box of pens or postcards or trinket parts. He shouted out when he saw me, "Barrie! A Creative Nonfiction Moment!" He was exactly right to name the moment so. The items each of us would take away from this sale would be very different, our personal obsessions and collections as dissimilar as our interpretations of these objects, our writing styles, and our personalities in and beyond faculty meetings. Yet the impulse that brought us to that attic was related—our nonfiction writers' attraction to these curious and concrete found objects as well as the implicit knowledge that each old bottle opener, key ring and souvenir coaster shadowed human life not only as it might have been but also as it actually had been lived.

The shadow of actuality—an interpretive realm reliant on, and distinct from, actuality itself—is the territory of the creative nonfiction writer. I have, many times, told

this estate-sale-attic story to my students, to help explain to them the ways creative nonfiction differs from the other literary genres, in an attempt to impress upon them that actuality not only matters when it comes to figuring out the parameters of our writing projects, but that the work we do to render and elucidate actuality is also the point of this kind of literary work.

To this end, I sometimes instruct students to consider their lives metaphorically as part and parcel of a citywide rummage mart. Our job as a nonfiction writers seeking to artistically represent and explicate the feel of our own experience, as well as that of the times in which we live, is not to fabricate plots and situations, but rather to select from the breadth of memory, research, and observation already set out for sale. Creative selection, more so than invention, is the province of creative nonfiction. Which of these pre-existing artifacts best leads us to the story I mean to not just relate but also explore? The Elvis clock? The ceramic panther? The red boots that once belonged to a semi-famous singer? We may not know what we are writing or why, we may be reporting or remembering or questioning, but we begin the process by interrogating the meaning of those relics that already exist.

The first and most obvious thing to say about creative nonfiction is that it is nonfictional—about facts, real people and events, the "true story." The second, less obvious to anyone new to the creative nonfiction discussion, but undeniably essential to the process of transforming actuality to art, is British memoir and fiction writer V. S. Pritchett's off-quoted phrase: "It's all in the art. You get no credit for living" (qtd. in Barrington 72). Every fiction writer I've ever met is quick to say that they too write "the truth," that in fact they make things up in order to better render the real-yet-slippery truth

that facts might prevent us from seeing clearly. The line between the prose genres can't be merely that of "truth." All literature is about some aspect of human life, and seeks to reveal the truth of human living. It's for this reason that I avoid using the word "truth" when introducing students to the creative nonfiction genre and instead stress the word "actuality."

Bearing witness to actuality is in fact the only thing that holds together an immensely diverse category of writing that represents, interprets, and creates impressions of bona fide lives, factual events, and mappable locations. Some claim the genre goes back as far as early Egyptian tomb autobiographies, and includes: the confessions of the early Catholics; the pillow scribblings of Japanese ladies-in-waiting; the personal ruminations of French Renaissance noblemen; the exposés of the muckraking journalists; the personal treatises of historians and politicians; the testimony of former slaves; the autobiographical meditations of renegade intellectuals; the reform agendas of the documentarians; the quests of the travel writers; the activism of the environmentalists. Others argue that creative nonfiction as a literary form emerged, a new genre, in the late 1970s and 1980s, rising like Godzilla out of the murky sea of American identity movements and political change. I tell my students that the genre includes all of this and more.

The formal strategies and containers of creative nonfiction are, too, at least as diverse as the panoply of items available at an estate sale, and the definition of the form changes according to the writer doing the defining. Shall we call this fact-and-memory-based literature Creative Nonfiction? Literary Nonfiction? Narrative Nonfiction? Lyric Nonfiction? Does a name pin down the mercurial qualities of prose made out of the

narrative, lyric, ruminative, interpretive and investigative strategies of fiction, poetry, memoir, journalism, essay, criticism, and drama? And once we decide on the moniker, can we agree on the forms this umbrella genre contains? The Memoir? The Report? The Essay? The Lyric Essay? Hybrid Forms that defy the notions of genre itself?

But all this focus on what the genre is called, how it is shaped, and what sort of chord the work sounds neglects a subtler and less-explored point regarding what marks the genre as something other than what the other genres claim to be. The complex and varied debates concerning how often, if ever, nonfiction writers might fictionalize will never end, nor will the unsolvable arguments regarding particular reader preferences for work that reads more like a story, or argument, or poem, or prayer or song. What doesn't change is the baseline intention of the genre, which is to use language as a way of artistically seeing, interrogating, interpreting, and representing some aspect or version of what really does, or did once, exist in factual time and space.

What this means is that literary nonfiction work may be as much like a documentary photograph as it is like a poem or a short story. We all understand that a photograph of a person, place, or thing is not the same as an actual person, place, or thing. We know that to freeze time changes time, opening the suspended moment to interpretations that are as much about the human mind creating meaning as they are about the person, place or thing itself. We see now, in the age of digital photography more than ever, that photographs are not "realistic," and provide no proof of the real. We comprehend that art photographs are made by human artists who, passively or actively, manipulate time in the service of art. And yet, the photograph could not exist without that

which is photographed, which means that actuality and the photographic art object are symbiotic twins. In *Camera Lucida*, the critic Roland Barthes writes:

A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents) [...] as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures; or even like those pairs of fish (sharks, I think, according to Michelet) which navigate in convoy, as though united by an eternal coitus. The Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape, and why not: Good and Evil, desire and its object: dualities we can conceive but not perceive [...] In short, the referent adheres. (5-6)

Nonfiction literature is not precisely analogous to documentary photography, and yet something of the essence of nonfiction form echoes between the photograph and nonfiction page. Language cannot recreate a photographic representation of the actual, but a symbiotic relationship exists and is part of what the nonfiction writer attempts in the writing and what the reader who pays attention to literary context ingests from reading. In *On Photography* the critic Susan Sontag writes:

A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture. [...] A photograph—any photograph—seems to have a more innocent, and

therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects. Virtuosi of the noble image like Alfred Steiglitz and Paul Strand, composing mighty, unforgettable photographs decade after decade, still want, first of all, to show something "out there"[...]. While a painting or a prose description can never be other than a narrowly selective interpretation, a photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency. (5-6)

Sontag goes on to discuss the ways the creative process of the photo artist influences the images s/he creates, which means human attachment to the apparent veracity of the photograph is an imaginary or unreal relationship to the past (9), but also unavoidable in her analysis is an awareness of the photograph's link to both the actuality and the technology that made the image possible.

When applying such theorizing to creative nonfiction I come to my notion of creative nonfiction as a shadow form. If fiction, poetry, and paintings are themselves mimetic interpretations, an imitation of life, and photography offers the distorted accuracy of the mirror, creative nonfiction literature is somewhere in the middle—both reflection and interpretation, reliant on, but mechanistically distinct from, the actuality the form represents. A shadow cannot exist without the body that casts the shadow, and one might experience the shadow without too experiencing the body, but denying the body is tantamount to an imaginary experience of the shadow.

And yet the shadow is a difficult image, hard to comprehend because it is only partially concrete. This is why the oft-quoted maxim that the nonfiction writer or memoirist has a "contract" with the reader, and therefore must always adhere to the literal

truth, may be, in too many cases, an overstatement which avoids the invention and shadowy manipulation inherent to even the most faithfully reportorial creative processes. On the other hand, the phrase "emotional truth," the usual first defense against challenges of over-fabrication, may be too willfully vague to provide much guidance.

More useful may be an awareness of the ways every scene, rumination and inscription shadows the inherent actuality of the nonfiction writer's subjects—the literary work, if not a twin or reflection of the actual, is then at least a shadow without which our pages lose the relationship to the original mass that allows the art form to exist. This symbiosis is not machine made, as in a photograph, so therefore, as an art object, the essay or memoir is not mechanically dependent on its referent, but still requires the existence of that referent to complete its meaning.

The shadow is what concerns me here. Whether a nonfiction work is made of literal facts or the more diffuse shades of impression, emotion, and interpretation will depend on the subject and the artist's approach to the subject, as long as something of the referent itself retains presence and integrity within the work. Fiction and poetry may too possess an actual referent, but are not dependent upon that referent. The other genres are not, by definition, an attempt to render both the experience of the referent itself and the actuality—the this-really-happened-ness of that referent—but such is the case in well-executed literary nonfiction. The author may spin, speculate, even sometimes invent in the service of greater understanding, but if our subjects cast no non-fictional shadow they can no longer claim the body of actuality, and thus have lost their non-fictional substance.

This is a determination that often leads my students—particularly those who have not, or have not yet, fallen in love with the possibilities of creative nonfiction—to cry out

against genre labels. Why not stop worrying about the lines between the genres and just refer to all prose as "story," or "narrative," or the even more imprecise "work?" Such is a fair question, considering all the ways nonfiction appears, by virtue of its name, to be merely NOT fiction. And genre ambiguity is a fair maneuver for any literary artist seeking to create a work critical of, or unbound by, category. Then again, humans have always been drawn to category and artists have long thrived on the opportunity to take part in the evolution of a burgeoning creative identity. As in the case of human life, categorization limits, but also, because of the reinvention that comes of naming, can lead to deeper varieties of identity. Once we are aware of the ways that creative nonfiction is this-but-not-that, we have opportunity to focus, to make the work of any genre category more resonant.

Furthermore, mere fictitiousness does not transform sentences into the genre of fiction. That which makes a work fiction or poetry is dependent on the qualities that fiction writers and poets use to define fiction and poetry and thus becomes a matter for those genres to decide, but I will suggest here that the purpose and intention of each genre is what defines that genre, not a work's non-status in some other realm.

To go back then to that estate sale attic, the purpose of nonfiction literature is to make use of the verb form of the word "essay," which is to attempt or try—by which I mean to artfully document, to bear witness, to employ language in the service of memory, to interpret and illuminate the lyric of actuality—those suspended creative nonfiction moments, where the times of human lives are both coated with the dust of history and beating forward into the minutes to come.

Traumatic Recall

She's one of those therapists with a plush blond face. She leans over where you sit, on that sofa where the pillows are a little too squishy, in that faux living room where neither of you live, yet spend countless hours recounting living. You sink into those pillows. You get real, get intimate, get wound up in the breaking details of your story, perhaps for the first time. Before this moment you may not have realized you had a story. The narrative you make in this room is not literary, not yet, but it is a plotted reconstruction of living, emphasizing certain action points, obscuring others. All storytelling resembles writing, but one difference between therapy and art making is that in the therapist's presence, you have, from the first draft, a solicitous audience. The therapist meets your eyes and you cry; you always cry, and she always hands you tissue and you always wish this discreetly graying lady in khaki pants and comfortable shoes would love you as much if you weren't paying her to care. As she coos:

Oh. Dear. That must have been so hard for you.

Any of us might, when lost in crisis, benefit from such gentle witness. Through compassion our experience becomes story and without such attention we might never uncover our own turning points. But literary nonfiction writers learn early that mere recollection is not art. An honest, non-withholding authorial voice appeals on and off the page, but the last thing any serious literary writer wants in response to literary work is the kindly caretaking nod. Palpable human hurt, confusion, passion, and cross-examination

are the stuff of compelling literature, but to be literary, we presume, and rightly so, is to expand beyond common trauma and sentiment. Practiced nonfiction writers are, by now, all well-schooled in the hazards of confessional modes, understanding that if we allow the simple exhale of compassion to gauge whether or not we are doing our job we cap-off our capacities as artists, dumb down the genre, and doom our projects to the short shelf life of the sensational.

But any nonfiction writer entering the realm of the personal—whether chasing an essay's digression or immersed in a full-blown revelatory memoir—sooner or later runs into a don't-throw-the-baby-out-with-the-bathwater conundrum. We know our job as literary writers is to move beyond the cachet of emotion into the harder-to-locate lyric lining of experience. All literature, of course, requires movement, change, opening— but what are nonfiction writers to do with the problem of achieving these qualities within the limits of the actual? Every nonfiction writer who takes seriously that we write within a genre of fact must grapple with one foundational, if seemingly contradictory, tenet. *It matters that our stories really happened, but their actuality is not the point.* The energy and difficulty of the literary nonfiction writer's work resides in the shadow *between* life as it is lived and the writer's rendering of that life.

At this juncture in the contemporary evolution of our genre we've already heard plenty about the shortcomings of the therapeutic. Emotion without theme is a cheap thrill; readers who feel sorry for a narrator will soon enough want to slip away from that speaker's pitiful company; a reader needs to respond with more than just sympathy to undergo the physical and intellectual re-calibration the best literature has to offer. When we fail to understand that nonfiction writing is as much a project of making as any other

genre or discipline then we have not fully transformed actuality into art, leaving readers and writers both stuck on that cushy therapist's couch.

But if creative nonfiction literature really means to excavate the slippery ground of actuality we might also need to reconsider some bit of the tender territory we have learned, as "serious writers," to eschew. Does our nice, sighing counselor have something to offer us as artists after all? The draft of story we release from her couch may not yet have the shade and shape of crafted narrative, but might contain something else both story and essay need, which is an identification of the critical plot points of human experience.

The compassionate sigh is not an editor's critique, but can, if we let it, lead us to important questions. What do the sigh points mean to the literary remaking of any human life? How do we explain our unrelenting obsession with pressing moments, those autobiographical fragments we tell again and again in the cloister of therapy—or for that matter in our coffee chats, email missives, pillow talks and dreams—until we finally find the best strategy with which to write them down? What are we trying to understand? Creative nonfiction is a form that seeks to bridge the ineffable mess of actual living—those found moments and mad happenings of our day-to-day—with the writer-made shadow, sound, meaning, and resonant light of the literary page.

Note my focus here on the shadow bridge *between*. Literary nonfiction is neither just experience itself nor just the imaginative practice of language. Each of these facets implicates the other in the service of the genre's purpose, which is the artful symbiosis of life and representation. Much literary nonfiction, if it is more than well-written exposé, and even when it reads like narrative fiction, has a charge closer to that of lyric poetry.

The aim of much literary nonfiction is to get at, through words, those qualities of actual living that language is not fully equipped to convey. Language itself is no more than clusters of scratchings and sounds humans assign as placeholders for embodied comprehension. Language cannot be a body and sentences cannot be sentient, therefore our every utterance is at best a gesture.

Yet we nonfiction writers devote our lives to this impossible dream—seeking out the best language to represent actual happening, even as we understand that happening does not hold meaning until we find the words to explicate both the full body of experience itself and how that experience resounds. When we say, for instance, that literary memoir both shows and tells we mean that the lyric discovery of the telling is as much the arc of the composition as the drama of the story itself. The bridge between our worlds and our sentences is what causes these oppositions to become one made literary thing.

We might then begin to write from whatever retrospection causes our sweet counselor to sigh, knowing we aren't making literature until we send the therapist away, step back from the temptation to feel sorry for ourselves or our subjects, go temporarily cold, in order to think as well as feel. Once we've undertaken the hard and self-critical questioning the too-comfortable couch prevents, then we can invite that good-listening lady to return, to help us double back over the bridge to our triggering groundswell. Our job as writers of nonfiction prose that stands up beyond the first compassionate reading is to build a shadow bridge of language, image, and sound, between the therapist and the theorist. That suspension of sighs, suggestion, sensory detail, and sense is finally where the nonfiction art resides.

On Truthiness and Memoir Fraud

I had my moment of explanatory insight about the so-called memoir work of James Frey while watching a DVD of a contemporary Hollywood thriller. The movie had all the requisite elements of big box office hit. A contained setting. A life-and-death emergency. A power struggle involving members of the Mafia. Male triumph over adversity by virtue of unrelenting toughness and ability to bear excruciating pain. Plot advancement built on stylized violence. Female virtue as exemplified by a beleaguered-yet-sweet victim whose nature is essentially unimpaired by drug addiction, prostitution, and brutality. A male hero who seems to be a monster but turns out to be the taciturn knight-in-shining-armor who rescues women while relinquishing personal gain.

I was thinking about the American fascination—in cinema and in politics—with this variety of hero narrative, a style of mythmaking so compelling, and yet so false when applied to actual human life. That's when I remembered that James Frey was an unsuccessful screenwriter before he was a "memoirist."

When the James Frey/Oprah controversy hit the media in 2006 I was as riveted as any other contemporary nonfiction writer by the unfolding extra-textual drama. How would our beleaguered and chronically misunderstood genre play out on the small screen, in the realms of Larry King and Oprah Winfrey?

I was, perhaps inevitably, disappointed. I felt bad for Frey; who would want to be yelled at on TV by Oprah, the same Oprah who had been so recently such a good and

gushing friend? But aside from the media spectacle—whether an unfair set-up or deserved comeuppance—I found the discussion too literal, too focused on did-you-lie-about-this+this+this—as if memory itself were a form of newspaper journalism. I will admit to raving, at the TV screen, words something like the list that follows:

Why wasn't anyone—the author, the publisher, the national book club maven—talking about the potential of literary nonfiction to do more than, as Oprah first introduced Frey's book, keep us up all night turning the pages?

Why doesn't someone speak to the shadow location of memoir—between the landscapes of the novel and the documentary—making the form therefore capable of both translating experience into story and leading people, readers, to look, without turning away, at aspects of actual human experience previously hidden to them?

Why wasn't anyone bringing up the ways asking questions, in narrative and lyric forms, about human experience might contribute to the kind of world we make for ourselves? Oprah loves to talk about human redemption—so why not lead us into a conversation of the ways memory is political, the ways making meaning of our memories might help us make better ways to live?

Of course, at that point, I hadn't yet read the book.

Since reading *A Million Little Pieces*, I do see why many readers find gripping the present-tense voice, the passages of linguistically terse scene, and the forward movement of dramatic action—though the book could have been edited down to significantly less than its 400-plus pages without compromising these aspects. Yet with the text in hand my questions became more pointed—such as why didn't Oprah, not to mention the rest of the American reading public who bought this book, many of whom claimed it saved their

lives, notice its obvious and mundane fabrications? Have we so lost hold of the line between entertainment and our real lives that as a people we confuse the mythical plots of Hollywood adventure thrillers with actuality?

I have myself spent going-on twenty years in AA, and have heard, in those rooms, every kind of drunk-a-log imaginable. The stories real-people-without-book-contracts tell in order to save themselves are tragic, funny, violent, extreme, embarrassing, ugly, disgusting, brave, and sometimes even kind of holy. Many people involved in 12-Step recovery modes—like Frey’s narrator—have trouble with or even out-and-out reject, conventional notions of "god," and therefore turn to the group, to human community, as their "higher power." (Replacing "the group" with God is standard operating advice for the atheist AA member.)

One of the primary narrative lines of *A Million Little Pieces* is the narrator's apparently uncompromising refusal of the 12-Step modality. When Frey's publishers described the book as a "different" sort of rehab story, this refusal is, in part, what they referred to. But even this aspect of the story is not what it appears to be.

Plenty of smart, earnest thinkers and writers inside and outside of AA communities have asked hard questions of the stock AA template, and "rational recovery" models that eschew the Christian foundations of AA are not hard to find. Frey is far from the first, and hardly the most eloquent or in-depth critic of AA, despite his narrator's repeated protestations to the contrary, so it's hard not to critique the hubris of this aspect of the book. Furthermore, when I say that even the oft-reported "difference" of *A Million Little Pieces* may not be what it seems, what I mean is this: close attention to the narrative arc of this book reveals the narrator does in fact walk a fairly conventional AA

path—except that he replaces the 12-steps with the Tao and replaces a formal notion of god with his community of rehab compadres. That James Frey was really a drunk and really did sober up using the AA model may be the only actuality of his so-called new-kind-of-recovery-memoir.

I share my personal lens on this story here because I wish to point out that what disturbs me most about *A Million Little Pieces* are not the out-and-out falsities first documented by *The Smoking Gun* (Million Little Lies), but rather the more pernicious fiction of the project, which is the author's portrayal of himself as a one-of-kind-Hollywood-esque maverick hero, knight, rescuer, tough-guy angel who triumphs over adversity through sheer strength of will. Perhaps humans need some version of the gritty convention-snubbing hero's journey to serve as metaphorical template for living; perhaps these explanatory myths are the reason action thrillers are such box office windfalls; perhaps humans need the simplified arc and narrative release of all the Hollywood formulas, from old Humphrey Bogart flicks to superhero animation. But we are bound to run into trouble if we proceed to claim these stories are actual, or that our lives really operate in this manner.

Even when we acknowledge that memoir is an impressionistic form, too influenced by the skewed lens of memory and the unreliability of self-knowledge to ever possess the precision of journalistic or scholarly fact, readers deserve work that calls itself nonfiction to at least attempt to render life as it's actually lived. Or if the story can't be told that way, the author might at least comment, on the page, on both the necessity and difficulty of mapping the route between living and living-to-tell-the-tale, particularly when a book's subject is how-I-stopped-lying-to-myself-and-others-and-got-sober.

It may be that there is a role for mythmaking on the pages of creative nonfiction, but if such is the case then doesn't the author need to tell us, or at least cue us, that the act of fabrication is part of the point of his story? Frey said—after the media blow-up—that he was not interested in the conventions of genre (Peretz), but it's hard to see the value in work that defies convention without also intelligently engaging in what that transgression means in a postmodern world. Frey's free-the-genre claims are disingenuous, considering how well he cashed in on his now-abandoned claims that his story really did happen this way. Where is the line between witty genre play and a con?

I read *A Million Little Pieces* as a not very good book by a writer showing signs of being capable of more, and a commercial project that made its mark through several profitable ethics violations. First, Frey violated the ethics of recovery, proffering a false path to redemption, promising, particularly in his public appearances outside the fourth wall of his book, that his own recovery really happened the way he wrote the story. Second, he violated the ethics of genre transgression by stating, repeatedly and publicly that he had written the literal truth, only playing the genre-busting card late in the game, after his lies had been exposed, and never in the text of the book itself, where as a literary strategy the challenge to genre could have been interesting. I can't say whether Frey is a con artist or just an arrogant and intellectually lazy writer who went along with a goldmine publishing debut most unknown writers would, admittedly, have a hard time turning down. But the book itself received much more ballyhoo than any publication of such low quality deserves.

Eight years before the Frey debacle another incident of memoir fraud made the news. When reports first broke exposing the critically acclaimed Holocaust memoir

Fragments as a fake—revealing the author Binjamin Wilkomirski (né Bruno Grosjean) to be not Jewish and not a Holocaust survivor but an adopted Christian who never left Switzerland during WWII—journalists pegged the so-called Wilkomirski as an unscrupulous con artist.

Further investigation reveals that Wilkomirski's one and only book—apparently the product, in part, of inaccurate, therapy-induced "recovered memories"—may speak to much larger questions of contemporary literature and publishing, such as: what is memory? What is literary art-making? What is creative suggestion? How much do we value art making compared to what we imagine to be the inherent "bravery" of the historically significant victim? And what is the lure—personally and culturally—of the "victim identity"? How might these questions be related to decisions and critical judgments both publishers and readers make in regard to all memoirs of crisis, recovery, and redemption?

When Wilkomirski's literary agency hired an independent historian, Stefan Maechler, to investigate the origins of both the author and his so-called memoir, Maechler found not only irrefutable evidence the memoir was a fake but also a complex story of a man in search of a narrative to explain his own absences and indistinct post-traumatic injuries, and thus eager to accept as proof what more self-aware writers might understand as metaphor. When Wilkomirski published *Fragments* he found a reading public eager to make an apparent victim of unspeakable history an object of cultural fetish, investing talismanic and redemptive power into a text and onto the author of a text that—while clearly a worthy artistic artifact on its own accord—gained enormous authority by announcing itself as fact (Maechler 297-300).

Essayist and critic Phillip Lopate has described the contemporary crisis memoir as a banal "staging of vignette about wound and redemption through compassionate insight" (310). Lopate's critique suggests another way to look at the *Fragments* saga. In the case of James Frey, much has been made of the culpability of the author, the publisher, and Oprah, but what of trauma survival narrative forms in general? Should we put the crisis memoir itself on trial? Do we want so badly to believe in the redemption tale that we consistently miss the larger and more diffuse narratives that actually do speak back to the goals of the nonfiction arts, which are, by definition, forms meant to grapple with the world as it actually exists? In *The Wilkomirski Affair* (which includes the only full text of *Fragments* currently in print) Maechler writes:

As a person who had never felt he belonged [Wilkomirski] now found entry into a community of victims who held him on occasion in the highest esteem. What was more, his whims or blunders in concrete, everyday life were now obviously excused by his former suffering. The most important gain however was that he had found a meaningful story for an inexplicable and inaccessible past. The dark side of the metamorphosis was that he lost himself in the role written for him. [...] Videotapes and eyewitness reports of Wilkomirski's presentations give the impression of a man made euphoric by his own narrative. [...] Perhaps he did not really believe his story, but he did believe his own telling of it. Anything that had such an effect on listeners must be true. The glow in their eyes lent him a living, coherent identity—that of the greatest of all victims—and gave his story

overwhelming authenticity. Without an audience there would be no
 Wilkomirski. (272-3)

Such confusion of memory and metaphor suggests that any memoir granting authority to the speaker on the basis of that speaker's perceived injury—whether or not the injury is valid—does in the long run subvert the real power of ethical and artful nonfiction forms to reveal and excavate actuality. When publishers play the "real story" card, willfully profiting from memoir fraud, they perpetuate a system of rewarding injury and over-simplifying human experience. If we allow creative nonfiction to sentimentalize victimhood we cease to understand the complexity of both victims and perpetrators, thus perpetuate oppression, and allow greater cultural space for abuse of power.

The genre boundary questions posed by memoir fraud debates may have little to do with the choices writers make in the heat of composition, which really do, no matter what any of us promise is our line in the sand at any time, change tremendously depending on the project. Literature, and all artistic expression, must be more flexible than any simple rule. But in the book promotion realm, beyond books themselves, when an author becomes confused or needlessly sneaky about what s/he does or does not fabricate—when the author obfuscates this issue for reasons beyond that of the workings of the text itself—then the whole nonfictional project becomes skewed.

Even if we do agree that a certain level of narrative embellishment is necessary for any memoir—wherever any of us draw our truthiness line—we still need to ask: what do writers mean when they claim to write "emotional truth?" It's one thing to fabricate in order to close memory holes and convey the ineffable feeling/impression of experience,

quite another to create a sense of truth that is read a certain way because it's called "a real story" but which is, in fact, not a real story at all.

Does it matter whether Frey's emotional truth feels, to him, like his truth about the experience of addiction recovery? Does it matter that Wilkomirski's emotional truth is, apparently, metaphor for some personal and inexpressible grief that feels to him like the happening of the Holocaust, even if the Holocaust never actually happened to him? Might this be the juncture where seeming true and being true really matter? I think so. A bestselling book that portrays the myth of human experience rather than experience itself, then claims that myth as actuality, is socially dangerous.

This is tricky territory where the text and the world around the text are connected in ways that reach far beyond marketing categories. In the actual world beyond books both Frey and Wilkomirski claimed their personas as literal autobiography—therefore granting themselves the wrong kind of authority. This is where the shadow role of nonfiction literature becomes distorted. While all nonfiction must rely on an actual referent, the artist cannot allow the referent to subsume the reference. The reference is the art, the made thing, the shadow. When the object subsumes the shadow we are left with no art, just an unmediated mass.

Regardless of the large role publishers play in the marketing of any commercially successful book, we have a cultural problem when authors grant themselves (or when the media, or readers, grant an author) authority based on perceived actual life struggle and redemption, rather than on the authority of having made a work of art. Not only are we then doing away with the significance of art, and gutting the transformative power of art making, we are trivializing human trauma by sentimentalizing struggle. To sentimentalize

is to reduce a subject to a broad surface, removing the complex, ironic and often unpretty, unbrave, unheroic underpinnings and interpretations that mark actual experience. When we sentimentalize human trauma and struggle we doom ourselves to perpetual personal and cultural confusion. When we sentimentalize history we doom ourselves to a regressive rather than progressive world order.

This does not mean that the rules regarding the role of invention in creative nonfiction writing are rigid, static, unassailable. But we can't ignore that memoir is a form of witness, and we can't forget that the "hero's journey" is an archetype, not the way actual life plays out, and we have to deal with the actual world as it actually, palpably exists. Writers who choose to work in the nonfiction genre have a responsibility to creatively and honorably grapple with both witness and facticity.

Which leads me back to that link between nonfiction literature and actuality—not just whether the stories authors tell us are actually real—because we know in the case of Frey and Wilkomirski they aren't—but also whether we, as readers, too often allow the *THIS IS A REAL STORY* label to unduly influence how we judge the quality and worth of a memoir. The precise actuality of a personal narrative matters when small or large issues of human consequence and history are at stake. Therefore the veracity of, say, a red sweater or the actual presence or absence of a pet cat may be a matter of authorial preference and sensibility, but the purportedly factual account of surviving rehab that turns out to be a lie could influence the success or failure of what for many is, for instance, the life-or-death choice to turn themselves over to chemical dependency treatment. The consequences of lying about history should be self-evident, the least being that the literary witness of any era must be equal to the demands that era makes on its

citizens, lest the populace be unprepared for life that presents itself to our decision-making and judgment.

But this, of course, assumes that literature is still culturally important and the role we play as makers of literature, particularly nonfiction literature, matters. I'd like to think the work does matter to the intellectual, spiritual, and transformative workings of the messy world creative nonfiction seeks to render, express, convey. If such is the case, then the creative nonfiction writer's job is not to mimic the Hollywood action film arc, but instead to reside in the unexplored recesses of the hero's shadow.

Deep Portrait

I once spent a few weeks in the Iron Range region of northern Minnesota, one of many regions where my Croat great grandfather worked as a miner. I was a part of a group of writers and photographers undertaking the Iron Range Documentation Project, during a time when the region was undergoing economic distress due, in part, to the changes in the mid-1980s American steel industry. Working under the direction of a well-known couple—a married poet and photographer known for their documentary work in Central America—most of the participant artists were in our twenties and thirties. We were not natives but visitors, or perhaps interlopers, most of us driving four hours up from the city, Minneapolis-St. Paul. We spent our time on the Range interviewing and photographing locals and creating documentary poems, essays, and photographs from our encounters.

I can't say I produced any worthy work out of experience. I was a twenty-something, recently-politicized, lesbian-feminist, and an inexperienced artist; our portrait subjects were, for me, too much like the post-immigrant Slavic-American family I'd yet to reckon with, back in the old steel mill suburbs of Chicago. In those days, well before lesbians and gays were on TV, I had yet to develop the diplomacy skills I later learned from years of teaching, and lacked the boyfriend, husband, new baby talking points that the other women artists, regardless of their political leanings, used to meld into conservative family life on the Range. I would have been better equipped to document the last years of the old-school lesbian bars in St. Paul, but the Iron Range was a draw

because even then I knew "lesbian" was not a big enough map upon which to chart all of my American story.

And I did then begin to think about both the ethics and difficulties of writing about actual, living people. At one of the planning meetings we—the young, white liberal-to-radical, college educated artists from the city— discussed our difficulties fielding the social attitudes of some of the small mining town interview subjects, people like my relatives, who back on the south side of Chicago we would have described as "white ethnics," or "Reagan Democrats." Our work on the Iron Range took us to bars, weddings, polka festivals, and family dinner tables, and while the Iron Rangers talked about the mine closings, the unemployment, the friends and family members who'd abandoned their homes when they couldn't pay the mortgage, and their dream vacations back to the Old Country, they also (again, like my relatives) did not shy away from letting fly a few racial slurs.

"I know how to make them ugly," one of the photographers said at the meeting, describing the ways he could manipulate the camera angle or the framing, in ways to convey the ugliness of words one of the former miners had felt free to share. Everyone laughed nervously as the photographer spouted; we all knew what he was talking about. Were we required to accept and record every hateful aspersion and racial epithet? What was our role as documentarians, as writers-of-witness committed to truth telling?

I sympathized with the angry photographer, but at the same time, because of my own sense of disharmony in this queer-unfriendly territory, I began to cultivate an awareness of all the ways the artists involved in this project worked from a slippery ethical position, evidenced by how physically repugnant the photographer appeared to me

as he described to us how ugly he could make his portraits of subjects whose home ground we had invaded, with our notepads and cameras, during a time their community suffered great vulnerability. Were we comrades? Judges? Friends? Something was missing in my understanding, but I could not have said then what, and thus was only able to write about the russet tones of the open pit iron mines and the charming lilt of the polka mass. Some of the others developed powerful work out of that project, but I was myself unable to create a deep portrait with any lasting resonance.

I have become, in the nearly twenty-five years since, no more patient with any variety of identity slur, but my ideas about the documentary ethics of the creative nonfiction writer, as well as my strategies for rendering creative nonfiction portraits, have, at least, expanded.

What was missing in my early understanding of nonfiction portrait has again to do with the shadow role of creative nonfiction. Character may be the area where nonfiction prose is the most unlike fiction, because the nonfiction writers, due to the nonfictional nature of the genre, will never be able to fully speak from a deep character point-of-view separate from our own, and because, in as many cases as not, our character referents are not only actual but actually living, potentially wounded by any words we publish about them, leaving the nonfiction writer a relatively limited ethical field within which to work. This means that characters in most nonfiction works play a much different role than they do in most fiction, functioning as portraits and foils for a more deeply developed narrator, rather than as longing and obstacle-battling narrative engines, advancing plot.

When talking about creating character in creative nonfiction we begin, as does the fiction writer, with the classic five-pack of character development: What do they look

like; what do they say; what do they do; what do they say about themselves; what do others say about them. From these elements, as in fiction, creative nonfiction writers are able to bring a sketch of human character to the page. We may also refer to the definition of character John Gardner described in his classic text *The Art of Fiction*, as an agent struggling for his or her own desires, reminding us that characters, to take full presence on the page, must act, not just be acted upon (65).

As we consider these fundamental craft tenets, we see already all the ways the angry documentary photographer's threat to "make him ugly" would not be nearly enough, if our goal is to bring a full portrait of this beleaguered, slur-slinging Iron Ranger to the page. Such a depiction of only the subject's ugliness might serve as a character sketch of the photographer's point of view in that moment, but would probably be too narrow a depiction to have any real meaning as either portraiture or documentation.

What then is needed to deepen the portrait? Some nonfiction writers have used third person point of view as a tool to unfurl human presence on the page, but in most cases this strategy is merely another way to expand the first person point of view by use of what appears to be, but is (as in the photographer's ugly portrait) not really a third person point of view. Some nonfiction writers employ a limited third person point of view guided by deep interview, capped off by what the subject is willing to reveal to a writer; some rely on explicit or implicit cues that the narrative is temporarily digressing into invention, a move tempered by any essay or memoir's structural ability to withstand tangent. (For instance: Tom Wolf's immersion reportage point of view shifts in *The Right Stuff*; John Edgar Wideman's narrative retelling of his brother's arrest told in his brother's voice in *Brothers and Keepers*; Nick Flynn's speculative ventures into his father's psyche

in *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*; Jo Ann Beard's forays into a deceased killer's motivations in "The Fourth State of Matter;" and Maxine Hong Kingston's deft use of "perhaps" to propose alternate versions of a family story in *The Woman Warrior*.)

In these cases—as in a more straightforward descriptive portraiture in which the narrative lens of a first-person narrator's point of view is clear—the people on the page are essential elements of the narrative atmosphere, necessary to provide the reader with concrete understanding of a narrator's world, but which operate in the manner of what Virginia Woolf called "moments of being" (70), carrying the reader past the skin and bones of the human subject, into the observable cloud of impression all humans leave in their wake. We understand people through the sound and movement of their existence as well as their physical and psychological impression, which is an approach to portraiture that moves away from the longings and obstacles of plot formation and into the realm of lyric.

By lyric portraiture I refer to more than just the music of character, or the lyre of language we might pluck and strum to express character, but also the employment of literary strategy that gets at our encounters of be-ingness—the visceral, and often embodied, impression or experience of moment and image and understanding, obtained without telling a story or attempting to explain, but rather illumination achieved through opening the subject to some new and gut-felt view. A lyric move can shatter a reader into awareness or shades of consciousness that can't be achieved in any other manner. Sometimes that impression or understanding comes of letting go of discursive meaning, the way we might experience a jazz improvisation or abstract painting. When we approach character from a lyric rather than narrative direction we get at not the

psychological interiors of characters other than the narrator, but rather the evocation of observable human presence.

The sparest of actions can convey, as in photographs, the emotional resonance of the human body. A middle-aged woman at the wedding stiffens, and her spouse narrows her eyes, when a man they do not know places his hands on her bare shoulders and leans in to whisper into her ear. A newly married retiree notices her new daughter-in-law collects old teapots, then seems to forget the man she just married as she drifts into a memory about her dead husband's antique business. The light across the spare bedroom lengthens as a man tells his adult daughter that his mother, her grandmother, never seemed to love him. Compression, attention, detail, intense witness, and authorial love for the human experience are some of what deepen the lyric portrait.

As does attention to context and history. We will likely not be able to write of a human subject's unshared thoughts and unconscious impulses, but we are often able to explore the forces that carried any person to his or her particular place and time, in tandem with the others of his generation and condition. I ask my students, when considering the people they bring to their pages, to consider: where these people come from; their cultural and class background; what in the world they are a part of and what they are not a part of, what, out of history, they carry; and the ways history might infiltrate their present moment. A retired teacher making coffee in her tidy Florida kitchen overlooking a golf course grew up in a unkempt Chicago housing project. A snazzy widow out to dinner in the Pump Room in the Chicago Loop was the daughter of an East Side railroad worker ripped off by company lawyers. A Midwestern lesbian

college administrator who wears suits to work has a tattooed back just like her Italian-American grandfather, back East where her mother lived before she married the Michigan Swede who doesn't know his daughter has tattoos.

Creative nonfiction writers enter deep portrait as much through nuance or context as through psychology. As artists of actuality our job is to lean back to take note of where our subjects have been placed by history, as well as where they have placed themselves, and we must then lean in close to notice our subjects' most subtle moments of resistance, determination, resignation, and affection. Our pages then are shadow realities made of the embodied intelligence of image, sound, and suspended moment intersecting with the visible and invisible histories that carried our people into the current moment, allowing us to experience any human subject as flawed and full, and therefore alive.

And so if I had that Iron Range Documentation project to do over again I would imagine the difficult old Iron Ranger was my uncle. Then I would aim for a complex portrait, that included, yes, the ugliness of some of his words and world views, as well as the hands-on beauties of his years working the gears and the dirt of the late industrial revolution, and including my own discomfort over what I perceived to be my alienation from these small towns where gays and lesbians were still in the closet, and my awareness of the ways my discomfort might skew the portraits I created of others. I would, as well, include portraits of the lesbians I snuck away from the documentation project to have dinner with, in the home of the lesbian friend-of-a-friend whose neighbors did not know she was a lesbian, and I would include stories of the Iron Range families of some of these lesbians, families who undoubtedly included a few of the old uncles who my photographer colleague might have liked to use his camera to make ugly. I would also

write of the russet tones of the open pit mines and the way that old foul-mouth ranger danced on his toes on the way out of the polka mass, and perhaps, too, speculations of whether (though I will never know) my grandfather had, as an immigrant child, learned to polka on this ground between the boat and Chicago, his father a miner, his mother a cook in a rooming house for Croat miners, the antecedents of the ones still leaning against some mining town bar, face illumined russet in the low light of afternoon, fingers grasping a cold bottle of beer, yammering an old-time story I would, were I there, either hate or love to hear.

Lyric of the Unseen

The image of Chicago presented on most conference programs, tourist pamphlets and promotional posters is a photograph of the famous skyline, shot from somewhere out over the deeps of Lake Michigan. In these wide angle portraits, the Sears Tower and the John Hancock Buildings are fraternal twins, each a third of the way in from the outer edge of the lit-up cluster, seemingly holding up the glassy herd of the Loop. I grew up loving this view as much as any Chicagoan, and for a while, the summer I was nineteen, I rode the bus or the train into that center herd five or six days a week, to work at the Exchange National Bank— but I would be lying if I said that glossy skyline was my home.

I lived instead in the shadow city, the industrial suburban region that stretches south and east from the ports to the mills of Gary, Indiana, a region not likely to show up on any conference brochure. The streets and houses where my family resided were nice enough, first a brown brick bungalow, then a red brick ranch, but we were never far from some smoke stack or slag pile or waste dump.

I share this behind-the-scene scenery because I believe, as a nonfiction writer, my job is to describe both the shadows and the scintillation. I don't intend—this time—to make a point about the frenzied, lit-up stage set of the center that would fall down without the invisible gray scaffolding behind, nor do I intend—this time—to take note of the damage done to this swath of land, once the tallgrass prairie but now scorched and soldered down to its bones, memories of the prairie springing up wild between the ties of

the railroad tracks or in the names of area businesses—Prairie Cleaners, Prairie Bank and Trust, Prairie Tire and Auto. Nor do I mean to write up another scene featuring my father and me, sharing statistics, projections, memories and fears about toxins that may have leached from this landscape into our bodies.

Rather, I want to describe to you the business of carrying the un-seeable essence of the shadows onto a nonfictional page with a breadth no less than that skyline view—one tower with a footprint deeply embedded into the ground of this city of lit-up exteriors and gravel-gray soul, another tower set into the imaginative and resonant intelligence of lyric language—that which will not just describe the confidential and promotional aspects of this city, but will also attempt to puncture notions of the Midwest as a landscape of absence, rupture the bright skyline posters with the smoke-spewing semi-truck of the industrial Midwestern urban real.

If one of the functions of creative nonfiction literature is similar to that of any of the documentary arts—to invite readers to look at what they might otherwise turn away from, or never encounter, then one of the strategies of invitation is the lyric mode, or that compression of language and container which evokes the poem-like jolt of awareness. The way into the lyric of the commonly unseen is through the tiny lingering details of beingness expressed through the breath of some particular human life inhabiting some fissure of location. The way into the urban unseen, or at least the urban unseen of my experience, is the evocation of the corporeal meeting the industrial. What is the quality of air? What is the taste in the mouth? What is the sound, the song of this moment?

For instance: *when I was girl we lived across from a tangle of tracks and truck routes, under a sky made silver-gray from the smoke of the steel mills and paint factories*

of the far southeast side of Chicago. I didn't always notice the wincing stench in those years before the Chicago mills shut down, except when it got worse, on the way up to 103rd and Torrence, Mom's old neighborhood where her mother still lived, just a block from their old Projects, around the corner from Wisconsin Steel.

"Rotten eggs" my mother muttered, when I was six or eleven or fifteen, as we drove past the slag heaps and landfills along what was then still called the Calumet Expressway, her powdered nose crinkling. She'd told us many times—sulfur from the mills smelled just like rotten eggs.

I could see Mom's profile from the back seat of our blue station wagon, her downturned lips, wrinkled nose, the tower of brown beauty parlor hair, re-poofted every Friday afternoon. All the women we knew in the lower-middle-class steel mill suburbs of Riverdale, Dolton, Harvey, in those days before shag haircuts and handheld hairdryers, attended, devoutly, the weekly communion of the beauty parlor, where Sandy the hairdresser ratted an extra six inches onto their height, then consecrated them with hairspray, as their daughters waited in padded, bronze hair dryer chairs, paging through Photoplay and Modern Screen, deciding who to be when we left.

Mom complained about the stench as if she hadn't smelled those eggs her whole life. Yet she repeated the words "rotten eggs" with the authority of the devoted, muttering a prayer cycle, the hypnosis of repetition, the American sacrament of knowing, yet refusing to know, her blessed devotion to familiarity.

Dad drove. Headlights swept the leveled prairies and fouled wetlands of the southeast side, lighting up Mom's muttering. My brothers shoved each other. Holy.

Rotten. Holy. We knew, but could not see, the lights of the Loop, twittering. This night we would not ride that far north.

Moments like this one matter to me as a writer not just because the car ride into and out of the industrial plain is an actual and continuous memory of many of our Midwestern urban childhoods—as is the sweet sticky smell of the hairspray from a pink can, and the *Photoplay* pictorials of Liz Taylor with a scarf in her hair, and the twilight glow of the mills and that stink that did smell like either bad eggs or the devil—but also because that moment links me to the history of cities, of mills, of class and ethnic identities, of human migration, of industrial pollution, as well as the subsequent attempts of the post-steel city to re-green itself, and my own attempts, and the attempts of so many like me, another generation of American re-inventors, to re-green ourselves.

The purpose of writing from the shadow of the middle American city is the same as the purpose of writing from the shadow location of a literary genre linked to actuality. The creative nonfiction writer writes to elucidate the unseen, in order to better see, interrogate, interpret, and represent some aspect or version of what really does, or once did, or will exist in factual time and space. The nonfiction *word* is not itself the nonfiction *thing*, but language leads us into the vicinity. Seeing is part of knowing, but we can't see the whole until we see the middle.

Autogeography

One afternoon, loitering in Manhattan between the end of a conference and a plane home to the Midwest, I happened to walk by the Empire State Building. It was a Sunday in early February, not yet tourist season, and there wasn't much of a line, so I decided, on a whim, to take the trek up to the legendary observation deck. I navigated banks of elevators, ticket lines, security rituals, and forced detours through souvenir shops, and even stood before an Empire State Building backdrop while a man took my picture, which I thought was some new kind of post 9-11 security procedure, but no, was just an attempt to get me to buy a souvenir portrait. (Had I purchased the photo on the way out I would have departed with an ironic keepsake, documenting the inner tourist trap corridors of the Empire State Building but leaving me no proof that I had stood on the precipice of that famous view.)

Eventually, after another cramped line and another upward lurch of the elevator, I arrived on deck, a crowded circular balcony, busy with bodies, most of the visitors speaking German, everyone leaning against the fencing, peering out over the city of cities. People pointed. People peered. And below, the city spread out like an enormous jigsaw puzzle. The day was clear so I could see everything of Manhattan, sights of sites that for me, a native Chicagoan, were equally alien and familiar. I could see the Met Life Building where my brother's wife's brother worked, and the Chrysler Building my spouse's workman grandfather had helped build. To the south I could see the clustered

spires of Lower Manhattan, with the missing tooth gap where the Twin Towers used to stand. I looked over the skyscraper peaks, the valley of the park, the gray-green runner of the East River, all sites I knew better from the maps and movies than my own experience. but which, from this vantage point, I could see for the first time in actual relation to each other. The view offered me everyone's story of an iconic city, and too, as a native Midwesterner, from the metropolis in the middle known as the Second City, another visual interpretation of my own story set against the purportedly premier American city.

I tell this mundane tourist's tale because it illustrates two ways geographical concepts are important in creative nonfiction. The story of any human life is a tale of both quest and containment and places are both destinations and receptacles, providing both interpretive context and comparison. When writers reckon with the harmonies and disharmonies of their physical, emotional, and theoretical locations they often find new ways to render their life stories.

In any narrative, report, or rumination, place has more than one function. The first and most obvious, in terms of fundamental narrative craft, is that of setting. In film this concept is called *mis-en-scene*, and refers to what the auteur chooses to contain in any single frame, the scenic characteristics and telling details that help illuminate character and do some of the visceral work of telling the story. Writers must, of course, describe rather than simply capture these details, but the role setting plays is much the same.

But the function of place in any literary work is as more than just a container of action. I frequently ask my students to try to define the feeling one gets when crossing some geographical border, whether the line is as dramatic as the difference between Indiana and India or as subtle as the shift between regions of the American Midwest.

Whether or not people are actively conscious of how land, landscape, architecture and other reverberations of their public and private surroundings impact them, the human sense of, and attachment to, place is, as geographers tell us, profound and deeply embedded in our stories.

Inside a Reno casino or atop a desolate mountaintop, the air smoky and dense, or muggy and reeking of spilled beer, or traffic-bound and rainy, or so windy and dry the back of our throats itch, we all respond to the texture of the atmosphere. Standing at the apex of Times Square, at the center of a frozen Minnesota Lake, or in a difficult in-law's kitchen, we respond physically and psychologically to the ways sounds, bodies, and objects move or don't move through space. In the neighborhood where we pay rent or own a home, or passing through a strange city where we can't make out the alphabet of the local signage, we journey between alienation and citizenship. Returning to avenues we haven't traversed since graduating eighth grade or peering out over a metropolis we've only seen before in the movies, places contain meanings according to the significance we ascribe to them. Even if our nonfiction writing is not about location, the geography of actual places permeates, bringing to the sensibility of the work, and the autobiography that forms through the work, the visceral, embodied texture of involvement with living.

But often, in creative nonfiction, place—particularly our autobiographical relationship to place—is not just a story element but also our subject, carrying us partway into a slippery partnership with scholarly disciplines such as history, geography, and cultural studies. This is one of the areas where the work literary artists make of our actual attachment to places operates in much the same way as actual people exist on our pages as both character and portrait. When we work in a form where our referents actually

exist, our artistic purpose is not only to compose story or impression and unearth personal meaning but also to ethically bear witness to history, the actual past. The literary nonfiction writer need not mimic the work of the scholars concerned with similar questions, but neither can we avoid the fact that we've wandered into a realm where knowledge and studied opinion does already exist and possibly even overlaps with our own concerns.

I coin the term autogeography to define this type of creative nonfiction project, concerned with the ways we might understand our bodies as historical strata, our work an archeological dig intended to excavate and define personal and public history, political reality, the tactile evidence of what happened at this longitude and latitude to create a particular spatial resonance, the placiness of place. An autogeography is self-portrait in the form of a deep map of memory, history, lyric intuition, awareness of sensory space, research, and any other object or relic we pick up along the way that offers further evidence of what does or did or will happen here.

To illustrate my meaning I will tell of two other journeys up to the observation decks of skyscrapers. One of these buildings was, compared to the Empire State, not very tall at all—the 27th floor of the "World Trade Center" overlooking the harbor in Baltimore, Maryland, advertised as the "Top of the World." I ventured up to this relatively unimpressive height when researching my family immigration story. My Croat grandfather, along with his parents, my great grandmother and grandfather, arrived in America at a little known entry, the B&O Railroad's Locust Point Immigration Piers. Part of my research was historical. Over two million Eastern and Southern European immigrants entered the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century, many

immediately boarding trains that carried them to the copper and iron mines of Michigan and Minnesota.

I had come here to walk the ground of this forgotten location of history where not even a plaque commemorates the American beginnings of immigrants such as my grandfather, and I had come to better understand the threads that led into a family story in which Chicago is the nexus into which all roads lead. So first I wanted to get the history right. But I wanted to do more than understand. I wanted to connect to a story that was otherwise no more concrete than a few typed lines on copies of immigration papers. I wanted a touchable, visceral experience of my father's Croatian identity.

Of the many forays and journeys I took in order to better understand my grandfather's story, the Top of the World was one of the most successful—silly as it was with its hyperbolic name and the loop of that old Anne Murray song playing endlessly on the observation deck sound system. This was because I could see from the overlook both the old pilings and the railroad tracks that ran from the harbor all the way into the westward haze. I couldn't see the railroad terminus of early 20th Century Chicago from the floor-to-ceiling windows at the Top of the World, but I knew that's where the train tracks headed, and so I was able to imagine, and later write about, a context invisible to me from ground level, the literal tracks of my family's journey from old Europe into the steel mill plain where I was born. Speculation, the fragments of family story, and history, fused with the language I would use to bring my version of the story to my autogeographical page.

The other high rise I will describe here can boast of a more impressive vantage point. The Sears Tower in Chicago, as of this writing still the tallest building the

Americas, locates its skydeck on the 104th floor. I had been away from Chicago for nearly twenty years before I ventured up for a look, though every time I'd traveled home to Chicago from Minneapolis by Amtrak I'd passed the entrance, and the entry line, just a block from Union Station. I had been in the skyscraper before, just once, years back when I worked in the Loop and a good friend from high school had a job in one of the glass-walled suites halfway up the tower. Tourists, not locals, queue up for skyscraper views, but I suppose I was some kind of tourist by the time my spouse Linnea and I, killing time downtown before our trip back to Minneapolis, noticed the line was short, and so why not? I had, after all, done it in Baltimore. We lined up behind extended families visiting from India or Pakistan, no one speaking English. To this day, my first visual memory of the interior of the Sears tower is as a country where the native garb is the sari. We all waited patiently for our big experience, riding to the top of what had recently been downgraded to the second tallest skyscraper view on earth, just a year out from being trumped by new construction in Kuala Lumpur.

What I experienced at the top surprised me; it was as if I had stepped into the deep map of my own body. This was a landscape more familiar to me than any other, by virtue of map travel, car travel, train travel, bus travel, foot travel. I'd seen this view in motion, from the tiny windows of planes as they took off or landed, but never like this, standing still like a map or a diorama, but deeper, more resonant, both silent and alive. To the south I saw the gray industrial corridors I'd dreamt of escaping from as a girl, then did escape, though not in the direction I'd planned. I saw the curve of lake Michigan, smoky from the East Side and into the mill fields of Indiana, the steel mill plain that drew the immigrant generations of my family to this city nearly 100 years prior. I saw the gold and

white granite glow to the north, the richy-rich side of the city where as a girl I wished to someday live, before I understood the relationship between profession, economics, and urban geography. I saw the complete tableau of my origins, but as one place, not segments, not regions. The signage of the skydeck noted that the view from this height on a clear day stretched across a breadth of four states, and I could see all four from here, the urban upheaval into the peaks and cluster of the city, then the falling away at the outskirts, into first the detritus of heavy industry, then, at the horizon hem, the flat farmland that had once been the tallgrass prairie.

My autogeographical discovery was that the industrial Midwest is actually one place, and the borders between suburbs and neighborhood were only subjective markers, whether my own or that of urban politicians and planners. The land itself and my ideas about history, identity, migration and the American city merged in that moment, forming a synthesis of experiential knowledge so profound within my own body that anything I ever try to write on the subject can only hope to succeed as a readable shadow.

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Description, Interpretation and Criticism are part of writing a critical paper. The following is a general structure to follow for the body of a critical paper. Be sure to include a suitable introduction and conclusion, as described in the previous section, How to Write a Whole Composition. Adapt it to specific assignments as appropriate. Part one: description. Classify the book/message according to kind and subject matter. Very briefly, state what the whole of the book/message is about. Enumerate the major parts of the book/message in their order and relation. Research paper writing guide including step-by-step instruction on picking a topic, effective research, writing, proofreading, and compiling the bibliography. A bibliography is a list of the sources you used to get information for your report. It is included at the end of your report, on the last page (or last few pages). You will find it easier to prepare your final bibliography if you keep track of each book, encyclopedia, or article you use as you are reading and taking notes. Start a preliminary, or draft, bibliography by listing on a separate sheet of paper all your sources. Note down the full title, author, place of publication, publisher, and date of publication for each source. Also, every time a fact gets recorded on a note card, its source

A critical bibliography is primarily a test of your critical appraisal skills: can you analyze the central concepts and arguments of the material, as well as summarize its content, and provide a concise evaluation of its relevance and usefulness? Readers who have no prior knowledge of the material must come away from your review with a clear sense of the contents and relevance of the article or book you've examined on their behalf. who is the audience this book or paper is written for? what are the issues being addressed? Are they clearly formulated?