Occasional Papers on the Essay: Practice & Form

Imagining Ourselves: Narrative Stance in Memoir

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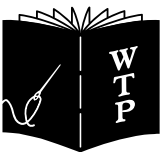

June 2011

Crossing the Boundary between Memory and Art

Dustin Beall Smith

In the late summer of 1944, Ernest Hemingway paid an unannounced visit to Pablo Picasso's studio in Paris. Discovering that Picasso was away, and asked by the concierge if perhaps he would care to leave a message for the artist, Hemingway thought about it for a moment, then went back to his Jeep and returned with a box of hand grenades. Picasso certainly didn't need Hemingway to help him explode his art. But we memoirists, who are bound by a certain allegiance to fact, can always benefit from the occasional grenade as we transfer memory to the written page.

Picture a memory arriving in a delivery truck at your front door, which is sort of what happens, right? Since memory isn't substantive, let's call it pink air. The truck driver lowers the tailgate and takes off a box labeled The First Time I Saw My Parents Fight. You take the box inside and sit down with it in front of your computer. With one hand hovering over the keyboard and the other holding a matte knife, you prepare to transfer the memory to the written page. You slice open the box, flip the lid, inhale as much of the contents as you can, and start typing. Let's hope you've inhaled deeply, because you get exactly one shot at uncorrupted memory. When your breath runs out, the content of the box is gone, and you are left with your memory on the page. Is it still memory? No. It is now a construct of memory, and will surely be rife with unsupported detail and inexplicable gaps in the action. So you'll have to shape it in order to make sense of it for your reader. You'll hold as tightly as you can to the "truth" of the original memory, but with each revision you'll inevitably drift closer to the reconstructed truth. That's just how it works. Writing a memory disturbs the memory because it materializes it. And it's the material that we—and our readers—must contend with.

So what is this materialization, this reshaping of memory into memoir or personal essay? Is it the nonfiction truth? Well, it better be. We all have access to Google. But it is precisely because I can find out on

Google whether the sun was shining on the day you said it was, that it better be something else as well. What we writers and teachers should be assessing when we read and write memoir material is the nature of the necessity behind what we've decided to write. Art, as Rilke suggests, can be assessed in no other way.

Since I'm not intimately familiar with the artistic process of other writers, let me talk about my own experience with necessity. One day, in 2003, I was sitting in an MFA nonfiction workshop at Columbia University. My fellow students were mostly in their late twenties, and they were getting on my nerves with their oh-so-sure-of-myself personas. It was making me grumpy, so I scribbled a sentence in my notebook that read: "You're twenty-seven years old and you don't have a clue yet, do you?" When I got home that evening, I transferred the sentence to my computer, thinking to begin a rant about my classmates and the whole program at Columbia, but as soon as I transcribed the line, I realized that the rant was going to be about me—*me* at age twenty-seven, and how clueless *I* was.

I kept the second person and the present tense and proceeded to write about myself in 1967—a would-be writer who is sitting sideways in an open window, five floors up, on West Eighty-Fifth Street, in NYC, drinking beer from a frosted mug, and looking down at a black man in a red bandanna. Bandanna Man is totally stoned on heroin, trying to step over a crack in the sidewalk. He's making a huge production of it, and this allows me to digress and describe other things that occur or have occurred on that block—all the street life, including a murder I witnessed from my window, and the shenanigans of a flamboyant pimp named Renaldo. By the end of the piece, the reader understands that what the cocky twenty-seven year old sitting in the window doesn't get is that he is going to wind up just like Bandanna Man, overwhelmed by the dissipated life, and that Bandanna Man's inability to step over the crack in the sidewalk foreshadows the young writer's—my—failure to knuckle down and write.

It's a harsh piece, self-critical, and in your face, because of the second person. The details of the street are exactly as I remember them—Bandanna Man was a real character on that street, where I *did* witness a murder; Renaldo the Pimp *was* a fixture on the block; a phosphorous-tipped match stuck in the crack of the sidewalk *was* what Bandanna Man was having trouble stepping over (to him it probably appeared as big as a log); the clacking of dominoes and the static from transistor

radios *were* the dominant sounds on that street in the Sixties, et cetera, et cetera.

When I read this brief piece, called "When You Finish Your Beer," at the Kenyon College Writer's Conference, a few years ago, it received a rousing response. Many students came up to me afterward and thanked me for what they called a "warning" about the dangers of the drinking life for writers. The next evening, when I had dinner with some of the faculty, the novelist Brad Kessler told me he'd really enjoyed my reading.

"Thanks," I said. "I'm glad you liked it."

We clinked glasses, and Brad leaned closer to me and confided, "But I know it's fiction."

"What?" I said, not a little surprised by his assertion.

"That's okay, I liked it," he said. "But I know it's fiction. And good stuff, too."

Coming from Brad, a terrific novelist, this probably should have seemed like a compliment, but I found it disconcerting, and I surprised myself when, rather than protesting that it was *non*fiction, I responded, simply, "You think so, eh?"

Brad nodded and smiled at me conspiratorially. "I'm sure of it," he said.

I took another bite of salmon and simply smiled back.

But he had me thinking. *Was* what I'd written fiction? In order to achieve the extreme compression of material, I'd taken one liberty with perspective: I'd made Renaldo's ground-floor apartment fully visible from my perch on the window sill, when in fact his apartment was on the same side of the street as mine. And I'd created a pair of binoculars (which, like many apartment dwellers, I *had* kept handy by the window) to determine the source of Bandanna Man's difficulty, when, in fact, back in 1967, I'd actually left my window perch and gone down to the street to see what was bugging the guy.

Hang me for that, if you want, but Picasso, among others, rearranged the elements of a face in order to create an accurate portrait. In the end, the portrait we draw of the world is inseparable from whatever inner necessity fuels our vision—it is *all* self-portrait, and the "truth" is nothing more than what we, from an individual perspective, are able to convey. This applies even to what we think of as literal art—such as photography.

In any case, I didn't protest Brad's assertion and I've wondered about

that since. Why did I allow his allegation to go unchallenged? Perhaps because, for me, the piece itself, like every other piece of personal nonfiction I've written, no longer *felt* like nonfiction, or memoir, but something entirely *other*—something that more nearly resembled art. The necessity that produced it had left me and now resided in the work. It no longer mattered to me that the material was true—it *was*, but the truth had lost its original urgency in the mix, as had the necessity to be critical of my twenty-seven-year-old self. What mattered was that the memories had been transformed from the pink nonsense that memory is, into a meaningful, transcendent text. The text, unlike the memory, now *existed* i*n the world.* Separate from me, unattached anymore to the memory and necessity that gave it birth.

Or perhaps I didn't protest because I understood that, just as the fiction writer struggles to achieve the *illusion* of reality, thus rewarding the reader's willing suspension of disbelief, the memoirist struggles to achieve an *implicit* or *shaped* reality, which is to say a kind of fiction—or art. And, such being the case, if one can compliment the novelist by saying, "It seems so true," then the equivalent accolade for the memoirist might be, "It reads like fiction."

Personally, I'll settle for that, any day.

Deuteragonists, Lutherans, and Other Nonfiction Narrators

Sherry Simpson

I came to literary writing through daily journalism, where the dirtiest word you can use in a story is the pronoun *I,* a word I shall now proceed to abuse liberally. Though I generalize what I write as "personal essays," I operate under something more like the North American Free Trade Agreement for writers, blithely crossing borders between the provinces of memoir, literary journalism, and essays, smuggling whatever my narrators need. In some pieces the narrator is a solemn interrogator of the meaning of death; in another, she's a ditz wondering how she's going to survive this fine mess; occasionally, she's both in the same piece.

A writer who allows her narrators to take such liberties—particularly in a collection of essays—risks making readers suspicious because they're not quite sure where to situate the narrator (or narrators), what to make of the writer's intentions. Journalist friends who've read my essays sometimes react as if I've suffered an identity crisis and have decided to find myself by traipsing off to a Californian nudist commune where I study the Kabbalah and spend most of the day gazing at my thoroughly uninteresting navel. On the other hand, literary acquaintances have suggested delicately that perhaps my prevailing narrative stance—which I think of as reticent—is a pose, a ploy to hide behind my subjects and avoid self-revelation or deflect deep inquiry. Science reviewers have also accused me of the great crime of being "poetic," which wasn't intended as a compliment but rather an indication of confusion as to my motives.

Among essays I've published are only two that I would call frankly memoiristic, in which the central subject is me or my relationship with other people. The others employ narrators who tend to signal, "This essay is *through* me, not *about* me. Look over there!" Sometimes the reticent narrator is an observer, sometimes a participant, sometimes not the protagonist but the deuteragonist—the second most important character, the sidekick.

I'm making this kind of narrator sound like what Garrison Keillor might describe as the Lutheran of narrators—undemonstrative, fairly reserved, reluctant to draw too much attention to her feelings. A better

description comes from Annie Dillard's comments about her memoir, *An American Childhood*. In her book *The Writing Life*, she observes

> Another thing I left out, as far as I could, was myself. The personal pronoun can be the subject of the verb… "I see this, I did that." But not the object of the verb: "I analyze me, I discuss me, I describe me, I quote me.

This is a narrator who doesn't command the spotlight but rather directs it—though ultimately, of course, the entire theater belongs to the writer.

To be sure, I sometimes worry that what I'm describing might actually be a manifestation of what we would call, to use the proper literary term, "the chickenshit writer." I did once write an essay about my family's habit of never holding funerals in which I described my parents' will and their minimalist plans for a memorial. When I saw this piece in print, I was so appalled at my breach of their privacy, at my narrator's intrusiveness, and at the thought of their reaction, that I've made it my mission to ensure that my parents will go—not to their graves, of course—but to the great beyond never knowing that I wrote such a horrifying thing. This is probably not the act of the born memoirist.

But the opposite of reticence isn't exactly confessional, because a chickenshit writer may reveal all and yet say nothing. And truthfully, from my perspective, my essays seem suffused with emotion—a controlled and sometimes sublimated emotion, a calibrated intimacy—that depends less on what I say than I how I say it. Memoiristic elements rise in response to the subject at hand only as they're needed. So, for example, an essay about madness and wilderness includes a scene describing (tastefully, of course) my first sexual experience, which took place in the forest. An essay about the logistical challenges of backpacking describes a house fire and explores the kinds of losses my husband and I experienced. In my most deeply personal essay, which is about my marriage, I mention but do not describe my husband's alcoholism; describe but do not dwell on our conflicting desires for children; and quote but do not reflect heavily upon expressions of true cruelty on my part and true love on his. But the discussion of our marriage is refracted through the experience of two frightening encounters with a brown bear, which somehow precipitated the most painful confrontation of our years together. The compulsion to write the essay was not to write about my marriage, but to triangulate between three mysterious points of reference: the bear, the fight, and my need to make sense of it all.

The essayist Carl Klaus insightfully illuminates the essential challenge for this kind of narrator in his recent book, *The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay.* In one piece, he focuses on a passage by Virginia Woolf as she praises Max Beerbohm. She wrote

> We only know that the spirit of personality permeates every word that he writes. The triumph is the triumph of style. For it is only by knowing how to write that you can make use in literature of your self; that self which, while it is essential to literature, is also its most dangerous antagonist. Never to be yourself and yet always—that is the problem.

Never to be yourself and yet always. That *is* the problem. And it's a problem that appears every single time I imagine a narrator, inhabit a narrator, create a narrator, set a narrator loose on a story. Usually it is the story, the concern, the subject, the need for the right language, that calls the proper narrator—and more importantly, the appropriate narrative stance-—into being. The narrator acts in service to the work, not to the writer's ego.

One advantage to using such narrators occurred to me while reading Klaus's thoughts on E. B. White. Klaus describes realizing that White was not actually projecting a stable, similar voice throughout his essays. Not even White thought so. White saw himself as a narrative chameleon, multivoiced, capable of pulling on, as he explained, "any sort of shirt, be any sort of person, according to his mood or subject matter." Klaus argues that the ability and willingness to display different aspects of personality, to adopt different voices, to employ various narrators, is actually more true to an essayist's experience of life. Through this lens, I can see that my narrators *are* by turns intimate and reserved, confident and uncertain, goofy and serious, just as I am.

A kaleidoscopic narrative stance doesn't serve every kind of personal narrative, of course. A great challenge in writing a fully conceived memoir is "discovering" or perhaps manifesting a steady and largely consistent narrator who is responsible, no matter what's happening, for guiding readers through complicated lives and complicated stories, for being someone upon whom the reader can depend. Deploying a multitude of narrators within a single long narrative would, at least in my hands, create a mash-up, an erratic and dodgy confusion of personae who would resist and even undermine story as they slip in and out of the foreground. Think of Joan Didion and her array of essayistic narrators, reticent and revealing to varying degrees as she attends the funeral of a soldier or lies in bed with a monstrous headache. Then

consider how she harnesses her characteristically observational approach to the deeply personal emotions and disorienting thoughts of her grieving narrator in her memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

No matter what the mode, however, the success of every narrator surely depends on that crucial factor that Virginia Woolf identified as "the spirit of personality that permeates every word." The truth for me is that the words conjure the narrative self, not the other way around. I'm not sure I have ever deliberately set about creating a narrator. The intensity of being, the distillation of narrative personality, emerges by focusing on the writing, not on the self. Or, again, just as Woolf recognized: "Only by knowing how to write can you make use in literature of your self."

Discovering the Narrative Persona

Valerie Miner

I don't create persona for my characters. I listen to their voices, watch for their behavior. I don't shape their identities. More likely they shape me. Just as Virginia Woolf enjoined us to make the reader our companion, I've become the companion to my characters, arguing with them, learning from them. Yes, I believe in the "Subtractive I" in personal narration. But the I is named in my work more through discovery than design.

It's like when I have lunch with friends at AWP. I don't plan ahead to present one Valerie to my old friend Mary and another one to my former student Pat and another to John, a valued new acquaintance. Yet a separate narrative persona of Valerie appears at each of those lunches.

Janet Burroway asks the right questions in *Writing Fiction: A Guide to the Narrative Art*:

Who speaks?

To whom?

In what form?

At what distance?

With what limitations?

Again:

Who speaks? For instance, an unnamed narrator/character.

To whom? The reader, another character(s), the self.

In what form? Story, monologue, letter, journal.

At what distance? Complete identification; complete opposition.ith what limitations? Reliable or unreliable? Burroway asks. Because I believe all narrators are unreliable, I ask instead in what interesting ways the narrator is unreliable

I have a habit of telling the truth at AWP lunches. I get too mixed up when I shift the facts and don't like those tangled webs Shakespeare and Scott and my mother warned against. Still, I can only tell the truth as far as I know it, through my fallible memory and insight.

With her old friend Mary, the Valerie persona will be most candid and most relaxed. With former student Pat, the Valerie persona will be

inclined to mentor or instruct or be useful. With her new friend John, the Valerie persona will be discreet with her questions and revelations. Now, I know I should be less parental with Pat and I hope to grow closer to John, but the interaction in each case shapes the narrative persona.

At AWP last year, memoirist Jane Bernstein beautifully illustrated how persona emerges from context when she described naturally finding different voices for her first book, *Loving Rachel*, a young mother's memoir of raising a blind and developmentally disabled daughter; for *Bereft*, a retrospective meditation on the murder of Bernstein's sister in the 1960s; and for *Rachel in the World*, the updated story of Rachel growing into a young woman. The distinct voice emerged from the story in each case.

Last year I gave a talk at AWP about the second-person persona. This year I'm asking if finding the narrative voice is the same process in fiction and in nonfiction.

I began my writing life as a journalist, a "new journalist," who practiced narrative nonfiction in North America, Europe, and Africa. But only two of my thirteen books are nonfiction. The rest are novels or story collections. Perhaps because of my journalistic experience, my fiction is characterized by an interest in questions of social justice and individual agency.

It's excruciating for me to write novels in the first person. Perhaps because of those years as an observer-journalist. Perhaps because I don't write very autobiographical fiction. Yet even when I'm writing a protagonist very different from me, it's easier to sympathize if I'm using she or he or the gender-queer ze. No doubt this is evidence of a penchant for self-criticism. I wonder if other writers here share this pathology? My only first-person novel, *Range of Light*, alternates voices between *two* major characters.

If journalism colored my fiction, novels shaped my memoir. As a storyteller, I knew there was more to the narrative than what people said, what they knew, what they thought they knew. Growing up, I learned about a new aunt or uncle every couple of years. I assumed this happened in all families. Not until I had written seven novels did I try piece together my family's story. That's when I found the holes—chronological, demographic, emotional.

I never wanted to write a memoir. The resistance is both ethical and temperamental. Yes, I've been enlarged by transcendent memoirs, some of them written by the people on this panel. These fine books

aside, I've grown suspicious of nouveau autobiography, whether in memoir or on Facebook. Psychologically, I am a reticent narrator, who inherited a polite reserve from my Scottish mother. I also am timid about going deeper, worried about self-indulgence, afraid of letting go. Yet I can't honestly tell the fascinating, valuable stories of my grandparents and mother and her siblings without revealing fragments of my own life, for every book is the author's story of the story. I am implicated in their sentences. Trapped in expression or in silence.

The Low Road: A Scottish Family Memoir started out as a novel. The book all my friends said I was destined to write. It would come more easily than the others because the narrative was already written, in my blood. Yet fiction requires imaginative distance from characters, who emerge with their own living integrity from a land the writer has yet to travel. And this new book wasn't driven by my subconscious or my sixth sense or my guardian angel, but by a bond with and an increasingly passionate interest in real people.

For too long, Mom told me nothing, ashamed of being "illegitimate." Her parents—Mrs. McKenzie and Mr. Campbell—were married to other people when Mom was born in Edinburgh in 1910. My grandparents conceived a second child together. I eventually learned that they were divorced and then married to each other in time for the birth of their third baby. This new life meant that Grandmother relinquished her first four children to Mr. McKenzie. Grandfather left his seven kids behind with Mrs. Campbell. A terrible rift. A Scottish Opera. Then, when Mom was seven, Grandmother got pregnant once again and decided to have an abortion. She died on the kitchen table of their tenement flat. Seven years later Grandfather died of tuberculosis. Mom was fourteen. She quit school, rented lodgings, and got a job in a dance hall. Eventually, the children scattered, as many poor Scots did, to Canada, the U.S., India, England, New Zealand, and Australia.

Only after I tried to write Mom's life as story did I count the aunts and uncles, did I see the narrative gaps. Why so many births? What happened to the kids Mr. Campbell and Mrs. McKenzie abandoned? What happened to their relationships with my mother? Storyteller's curiosity led me to Edinburgh's Register House to discover that my grandmother started work at age eleven as a live-in servant in a one-room tenement where she was "paid" with food and shelter for her work. Register House is where I found Mom growing up in a red-light district. Where I learned my grandparents were common-law spouses who couldn't afford divorce and remarriage.

This book had to be written for a chorus, a sometimes dissonant one. Mom's voice is in the first-person past; mine is in first-person present. Grandmother's voice is third-person past and Grandfather comes alive in the second-person conversational.

So the personae emerged. In *The Low Road*, I faced Mom's grief at losing her parents to early deaths and her siblings to estrangement. Grief that she would never admit when she was alive. After uncovering my grandparents' struggles, Mom's forbearing voice became clearer. Likewise, Valerie's voice shifted as the chapters progressed from the disturbingly "good" Catholic-school child; to the argumentative teenager; to the curious, abrupt adult; to the abashed, admiring, and grateful daughter.

The voices emerged from the story as I addressed Burroway's questions.

Who speaks?
To whom?
In what form?
At what distance?
With what limitations?

I'll end here. I look forward to your comments and questions for the panel. After that, I'm looking forward to lunch with Mary.

Putting on the Cloak

Nancy Lord

I tend to be a private person and am not comfortable writing memoir—at least the confessional kind of memoir that admits stupid things I have done or embarrassing thoughts I have had. I'm fine about admitting readers to the part of my brain that deals with ideas—but much less so with emotions or anything "personal." A memoirist I very much admire and try to emulate is Patricia Hampl—partly because I, like her, have had an ordinary life without much trouble or trauma to serve as material and partly because what I find most interesting is not what happened to someone but what's inside a person's head. As Hampl herself has said (I'm paraphrasing), memoir is not what happened but what the mind, over time, makes of what happened. The writer's life is just the lens through which to observe the world.

My approach to memoir and to all nonfiction comes from the essayist E. B. White, who wrote in the introduction to his collected essays that every time he starts a new essay he feels as though he's going into Montaigne's closet and putting on a different cloak. (This is as I remember it, although when I went back to check, what he said was somewhat different—but I like my version.) Whenever I begin a work of nonfiction I see myself following E. B. White into Montaigne's closet, and all of us trying on different clothes. I'm quite aware that the self that will appear in any given work is wearing an outfit different from the last. You might also think of that narrator as wearing a mask, which is of course where the word *persona* comes from—literally Latin for *mask*.

The essential point is that the narrator, for me, is always something or someone other than the me who eats granola for breakfast and spends too much time checking e-mail. The narrator is always a construct, made to best serve the particular story. This doesn't suggest a lack of truth, but means that any narrator I present is only a piece of me, a voice that says things I want to say in that particular piece of writing and to say them in a particular manner. I disassociate the whole of me from that created speaker—which makes it easier to write the part. Easier in terms of focus, and easier in terms of dealing with whatever emotions might be involved.

Let me give some examples:

I've written two short memoirs or essays (I'll call them memoir-essays) about my parents' dementia and my reaction to those terrible aspects of their end-lives, including reflections upon our earlier family life. The first one I, perhaps curiously, wrote not even as an "I" narrator but in the second person, you. It begins

> *You* watch your father sleeping in his chair by the window. The wing chair holds him as though he is something small and fragile, something it will fold up around as he sinks farther into it, into himself.

Later in the piece my father tells me, "I lost my chance," and I realize what he's saying—that he meant to kill himself and regrets that he didn't, and now it's too late. I wrote

> When he talked this way, *you* tried not to react; any reaction, *you* thought, would only emphasize the thought, wire it more tightly. *You* said, 'that would be very sad' and changed the subject.

In the case of this essay-memoir, the narrator is holding herself so far away from the writer—or is it the writer holding herself apart from the experience?—that she calls herself "you."

The second piece, also about my parents, is in more traditional form. The narrator speaks for herself:

> Late morning, and my sister and I have arrived. She punches the code into the keypad, and I pull the door open. We're in the saddest place I know, the place I want to run screaming from, the place that is, now, my parents' home.

Here I am, visiting my parents in an Alzheimer's nursing home. The cloak I've chosen for the narrator dresses a dutiful daughter; younger sister to my sister; the one who has been more remote (physically and emotionally) from the place I describe; a careful observer; someone thinking in memories and about memory, loss of memory, and the genetics associated with memory loss; and a questioner, someone who asks about her mother (no longer recognized by her father)

> Is it worst to lose your mind, or is it worst to keep enough of your mind to realize that you're forgotten by the person who means the most to you in all the world, the person whose happiness you've devoted yourself to forever?

In both of these memoir-essays, my goal was not just to tell my family story but to expand into some larger ideas related to memory, what we remember and forget, and how the mind works. So the narrator

in the first piece is someone who, while experiencing her father's dementia, is also learning about dementia and weaving that learning into the story. In the second piece, the narrator has a different interest and concern, again beyond the immediate family story; she wonders about her own memory and how reliable it is or may become, and she probes into more ideas about memory and selfhood. In both cases, I as writer have exaggerated the narrator's concern with memory, as though it's a driving force in her life. It's only the driving force in the narrative, but it's essential there, for focus and meaning. Readers don't need to know, in the context of that one work, anything else about the writer behind the narrator.

The narrators in both these memoir-essays are both more limited than I am, a partial "me," and also much smarter than I am. At least I think of them as being smarter. One of the pleasures of writing is creating a narrator to know and say wise and important things. In real life I stumble my way through, often being slow to take in information, misspeaking, failing to put things together in a logical way. When writing, I take the time to think things through, even do research to learn things I didn't know during the actual experience about which I'm writing. I organize my thoughts to be coherent and articulate in a way I never am in real life. The actual experience about which I've written is to the final product what I in my sweatpants and old baggy sweater am to the character dressed up in Montaigne's best suit.

Let me give one more example of my narrating self, in a work that is less memoir and more journalistic. In my most recent book, *Early Warming: Crisis and Response in the Climate-Changed North*, the narrator is on a quest to see how northern people are coping with and adapting to climate change. The narrator is looking outward in terms of describing, reporting, listening to, and quoting others, but then also taking what she learns and reflecting upon it. As an example (I opened the book quite randomly to a page where I was walking along an eroding Arctic coast): "As I looked at the slumping coastline that reached into the distance, it was clear to me that no engineering feats—no seawalls and protective barriers—were going to hold back the unleashed forces except in very limited and temporary situations." It was important to me in writing about climate change that the narrator be very factual—knowledgeable and credible. It was also important that she interpret what she sees, hears, and learns—that she be present in the narrative as a reliable guide through the experience. As with the earlier memoir-essays, she's learning along the way. She questions, learns, interprets,

admits her biases and what she doesn't understand well. She's smarter, more patient and empathetic, more moral and just—an all-around better person than the real-live one who, to return to our metaphor, keeps a closetful of mostly familiar but sometimes odd apparel.

I Life: The Poetry of Authenticity & Memoir Rails

Allison Adelle Hedge Coke

In poetry, I am not an I poet. My I, if introduced at all, enters late, often only to position reflection. I, in poetry, carries the potential of overwhelming narrative stance. In memoir, I, by definition, is the stance. Definitions, and our version of them, are integral to our memory and memory is, by definition, a made thing. Memory, in some ways, has a narrative life of its own.

During the process of publishing my memoir, I was asked to change many names within the volume. The publisher informed me that several of the people named could be incriminated by their inclusion and might face charges, go to jail. I said, "Good!" They said that it was not, that they could not support the legalities, and asked me to write a disclaimer of the truth as I know it.

The following is my front matter response to that directive to camouflage implication:

> Memory is what compels us to act in the world. It is a deep, though subjective, matter that influences perspective and demeanor. Like fingerprints, no two are alike, yet truth lies inherently somewhere within. And congenital memory, that of belonging by nature to landscapes, runs the deepest of all the rivers of the Earth. This memoir is of my memory and is my search for truth in self and in the world surrounding me for the first thirty years here. Some names have changed to provide for anonymity where appropriate.[1]

And an early excerpt of the narrative included:

> My sister, brother and I shared a bedroom together. Pumpkin slept against the east wall in a separate bed with an attached maple bookcase headboard, while my brother, younger than me by only fifteen months, slept on the bottom bunk under where I slept against the north wall. The bed covers were plaid-printed cotton, and we each had our own pillow. One of my first memories in this room was watching two boats float across my brother's bunk bed. They were small, like wooden or bark toys, and moved along as if the spreads were fluid. They enraptured me, and I told Pumpkin and her friend Trudy, who were in the

room with me, but they laughed and said it was my imagination. I had heard about this because my sister had an imaginary friend: a giant rabbit she would feed and talk to. Sometimes I thought I saw grass moving next to her feet in the yard where the rabbit was supposed to be.

I often dreamed I was a deer fawn, and my dreams were filled with lush green clearings and trees filled with ripe fruits. Late in the night Mom would come in, snapping our sleep like a bear through winter-cold branches, the fawn fading far away. We were awoke, late night, to be "informed" about Mom's life and "knowledge" that she passionately described in detail. And, being Canadian, most everything she said ended with "aaayee" or "eh." She told us of their first three babies dying and how one, a boy, was shaped identically to me, his back long and lean, his face light complexioned, his infant bones angular and slim, eh. She told us that the "Buggers" made her lose them and that the American Medical Association was involved in a plot against her.

At night the moonlight brightened our bedroom walls as Mom told stories about ghosts she'd seen when she was young, like the ghosts she watched as a boarding student in Montreal. She said she had witnessed two ghosts, a male and a female, dressed in old-style clothes, go down a basement staircase, where my mother was washing clothes in a Bendix washer. She said the female whispered to her companion, "We should drink some tea." Soon they vanished, and my mother finished her laundry.

My mother loved to tell me a story about a face that peered at her when she was a young child. The face was huge and serene and "nothing to be afraid of," she said. "It was the most intelligent" and "was hard to describe its intelligence, it was so obviously great." Mom said she ducked under the covers and reemerged to find it gone. She told us she sometimes prayed to it. I envisioned her preschool age, dressed in cotton slips, with her dark hair twisting down her back. I felt a great empathy towards her because she seemed unable to prevent herself from sharing these stories. It seemed as though something propelled her. Her stories were almost a plea for confirmation.

She said another face once appeared to her while she was attending McGill University. She was rooming on the top floor of a three-story apartment house. The floors were wooden, and

she told me she had to wax them on her hands and knees with balls of steel wool. One evening, in a soft light by the closet door, she saw the shape of a face in three parts, "in a smear—like a cloud." She said she got up and turned on the light and the face wasn't there. She turned it off and it was. On again and it was gone. Off again and it was there. She said she thought to herself, "At least it's friendly, eh," and went to bed.

Her madness distorted her voice, so the stories she told had an added inflection of urgency and madness and were scary when she told them, even if she said they were nothing to be afraid of. Afterward, she moved down the hall, continuing her monologue to the Buggers. I wouldn't be able to sleep for hours and hours, waiting in the night for the faces to peer at us.

In appearance my mother was modest and proper, always wearing long skirts or pants and no makeup except red lipstick on special occasions. Even in her forties, her face was lined and deeply creased, framed by black hair cropped above the shoulders. Her thick black hair, however, was interrupted by shoots of even thicker stark-white hair—resulting from shock treatments—that would subsequently fall out.

My mother was truly tortured; with great difficulty she struggled with daily life. As an adult my mother heard voices. In a schizophrenically distorted voice inflected with urgency and madness, she ranted about crimes committed by the federal government, churches, and other organized religions (most of which turned out to be somewhat true) and how these agencies were torturing and controlling her through computer programming, bugging devices, and radio waves. The Buggers were "plotting" against her; they could see her so my mother refused to remove her underclothing when bathing; they bugged the stove ventilation hood in the kitchen; the Buggers were in my parents' bedroom closet—everywhere.

Face and limb muscles twitching, eyes filled with horror and fury, every atom of her body would come alive while screaming at the ventilation hood, "LEAVE me A-lone! Quit RAP-ing ME with RA-dio waves! Leave our FAM-ily a-LONE!" My mother ranted at the bedroom closet whenever we kids took turns bathing or brushing our teeth. We came to believe that great monsters and ghosts lived in that closet and would come to torture us to if they noticed us moving about. Afraid to flush the

> bathroom toilet at night for fear of arousing these beasts, we would flush it with an outstretched foot while a hand was turning the doorknob, prepared to run for the cover and safety of our shared room. I found my courage to face that fear one time in the fall of 1961. My mother was crying and screaming at the closet so loudly that I stood on the bed behind her, made myself as fierce looking as possible, and demanded, "LEAVE MY MOTHER ALONE." When nothing happened, I began to realize that the problem lurked not within those walls. I asked Pumpkin later that day, "Do any of the other mothers do this?" Looking into my eyes—thoroughly, completely, and without leaving room for misunderstanding—Pumpkin said quietly, "No. None of them." [2]

That was my stance. Then the realization of a separateness of what was left of I, perspective.

We were fostered out a bit as children. Oftentimes we hung out with children who were sick to catch illnesses there were no vaccinations for. This is how we met other children. Or, from their need to reach out as their parents were drinking.

> Most of the non-drinking families seemed to regard my mother's insanity as contagious and wouldn't let us in their yards.
>
> We were once invited to a house where no one was sick or drinking. It was for a birthday party for some distant relatives who had oil on their Oklahoma and Panhandle lands. They even sent invitations with two gray tabby kittens sitting at a white table sipping soda through straws. When you pulled the card open, it unfolded a long table full of more kittens in between them at a party.
>
> It is the only invitation I remember seeing as a child.
>
> It was late summer; the party kids were dressed up in store-bought clothes, all frilly and proper. Pumpkin and I were in our favorite broadcloth shifts my dad had made for us. I hated shoes, and since we only got one pair a year, mine were always for running or playing ball and did not go at all with dresses, so I was soon barefoot, and Pumpkin had on some worn canvas sneakers while the other girls there had on patent-leather shoes. They made fun of us and pointed at us, wrinkling up their noses. I remember that my sister had given the girl a Chatty Cathy doll we purchased with S&H Greenstamps. Pumpkin had many nonspeaking dolls, and she really wanted this one or at least to

play with it. The little girl had stacks and stacks of presents lying on a wooden table strewn with colored paper and bows. So Pumpkin ventured a polite request to play with the doll for a little while. The girl wouldn't let her, and my sister turned to me and, without moving her lips, said "do it now!" The next thing I remember we seemed to be floating high above the party and the properly dressed girls, and we were free. Pumpkin still looked at me and talked to me without words coming from her mouth, and she said, "If they knew we could do this they wouldn't make fun of us, Ali."

I don't exactly remember what truly happened when she commanded me. Though, I distinctly remember the feeling—the spaciousness. I remember what everything looked like below us, children twirling around the birthday girl amid presents and paper and Pumpkin's face, particularly her eyes, which seemed to speak for her, though I heard her voice in my mind as if she spoke. I remember clearly where we were, suddenly high in the air. Then someone far below yelled that there was cake to eat, and we zipped back down to join in. It is a strange memory. As an adult I once asked my sister about this memory, and she remembered some of it but not all, and we spoke of our childhood imaginations, and my dad still remembers taking us there to a party and dropping us off. I do not claim to understand this memory, but for me it as if it happened a few moments ago.

I'm thinking of stance, of I, imagining:

I[1]

noun: the ninth letter of the alphabet.

I[2]

pronoun [first person singular]: used by a speaker to refer to himself or • *electric current : v = i/r* symbol (i) Mathematics The imaginary quantity equal to the square root of minus one. Compare with J.

I'm thinking of life, imagining:

life: noun:

• *either of the two states of a person's existence separated by death*

• *(in art) the depiction of a subject from a real model, rather than from an artist's imagination*

Thinking of memory, memoir:

memoir: *a historical account or biography written from personal knowledge or special sources*

memoirist*: ORIGIN late 15th cent. (denoting a memorandum or record): from French* mémoire *(masculine), a special use of* mémoire *(feminine)* 'memory.'

Considering authenticity in the narrative of memory:

authentic

1 *of undisputed origin; genuine.*

2 *Music comprising the notes lying between the principal note or final and the note an octave higher. Compare with* plagal.

Of placement, plotting, of organizing where one might fit. Thinking of organizing narrative, story, where the I rests itself, hangs itself—of barriers in life, life's rails:

rail: noun

1 *a bar or series of bars, typically fixed on upright supports, serving as part of a fence or barrier or used to hang things on.*

Like life, authentic memory, the I, me, our life fixed on monsters:

- (the rails) the inside boundary fence of a racecourse.
- the edge of a surfboard or sailboard.
- the rim of a billiard or pool table.

2 *a steel bar or continuous line of bars laid on the ground as one of a pair forming a railroad track : trolley rails.*

- *[often as adj.] railroads as a means of transportation : rail fares | traveling by rail.*

Of moving through memory as if propelled, of rails as:

3 *a horizontal piece in the frame of a paneled door or sash window. Compare with* stile.

The closet door, complete with monsters. Schizophrenia—computers, computer programming devices, radio waves, electroshock, of chronically insane parental influence, the Buggers, connected kinship, remembering self:

4 *Electronics - a conductor that is maintained at a fixed potential and to which other parts of a circuit are connected.*

Each time I return to write memoir where the I is essential at onset.

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[1]Hedge Coke, Allison, *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer,* University of Nebraska Press. 2004.

[2] Ibid.

The Narrator as Time Traveler

Judith Barrington

The narrative voice I used in my memoir, *Lifesaving*, is very different from the narrative voices I have used in poetry. The only thing I'll say today about poems is that I did once find a very useful persona, in whose voice I've narrated several poems in the third person. That persona I named "The Dyke with No Name," and she has narrated poems such as "The Dyke With No Name Thinks about God," which is in my collection *Horses and the Human Soul*.

I'm going to say a few words about the narrator and *time*. I'll read an excerpt from *Lifesaving: A Memoir*, from a chapter about being ill in bed. Here's the scene: at the age of twenty, I'm living in a small town in Spain, alone, the only foreigner there. Both my parents have recently drowned, and I have left England for a job as a tour guide at a Spanish winery. With a high fever, I'm lying in bed in my small *pension*.

> Mostly what I remember are the clocks. Church clocks. Four of them. Naturally they were not synchronized. So the first one, just the other side of the market square, started off bonking the hour and then the second one joined in while the first was still going… The fourth was a straggler, limping in like the horse that finished twenty lengths behind. Nevertheless I waited for it, hating myself for my crazy need to anticipate its first tinny note.
>
> The fever was burning me up, people were crashing in and out of my dreams, only I wasn't asleep, and the clocks never stopped. Soon the first clock was starting to chime hard on the heels of the fourth clock. The quarter started while the hour itself was just fading. Half past and quarter till merged together until every hour was filled with bells.
>
> First it was the old St. Mary's Hall school bell with the bronze clapper that summoned us in from break time all through the fifties. No matter which beautiful senior was on duty at the time, standing on the top terrace in her snowy white blouse, lifting the bell in the air, and sweeping it back and forth, we gazed up at her from the lawns as if at

> a goddess… Then it was the sober bell of All Saints', Patcham, ringing from its square Norman tower. All Saints' was the one that reproached my mother when she forgot to change the clocks at the end of daylight savings time and walked up the path to the church door an hour late. It was also the one that summoned me to my wedding as I rode in the back of the black Rolls Royce in my white dress up the hill under those ominous oak trees—but no, that hadn't happened yet! That was still four years in the future, though maybe in my fever I foresaw it—who knows? I was in Figueras with a temperature of 104 degrees, not married yet, but somehow I knew those bells would ring for me one day soon. They would let out thunderous peals of celebration as I emerged from the church and posed as a wife in front of the cameras. Bells for the marriage that wouldn't last a year.
>
> The air in my room was hot and thick and that bell would not stop. Now it was eighteen months ago: January 2nd, 1964. It was 2:30 and my sister and brother and I were in the front pew at All Saints. The vicar was talking about my drowned parents. Then we were singing *oh hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea* and the bell was ringing one note, *bong bong bong*. The one repeated note that on Sunday mornings means you are late. It was tolling now through my Spanish window and I suspected I was late. Late to church, late to my wedding, and late to the tears of grief.

Like all narrators in memoir, this narrator knows what will happen *after* the events currently being described. Sometimes such a narrator chooses to make reference to those future events.

In this passage, she starts narrating the events—what Vivian Gornick, in her book "The Situation and the Story," calls "the situation." My own "situation" involves lying in bed listening to church bells. The protagonist begins to think about various bells from her past life, and we get this passage about one particular church bell:

> It was also the one that summoned me to my wedding as I rode in the back of the black Rolls Royce…—but no, that hadn't happened yet! That was still four years in the future, though maybe in my fever I foresaw it—who knows?

So what happens here? And what does this say about the narrator herself?

Well, first of all, the passage moves the reader *outside* the story set in Spain and reminds the reader that there *is* a narrator—not at all invisible—looking back at these events from the future. It draws attention away from the *character* who is ill in bed in Spain to the *narrator*. What this requires of the reader, then, is that she or he must hold two realities in mind—the reality of the storyteller and that of the younger version of the storyteller who is the protagonist.

Secondly, it does the job of actually *merging* the adult narrator with the younger protagonist. In this case, these two get merged when the storyteller starts to act as if she, too, has a fever and can't quite keep the events straight in her mind. She's telling the story but—oh lord, she's included a fact that is impossible! At least it's impossible on the continuum of *time inside the story*. The wedding hasn't happened, so of course it's impossible for the young woman to be thinking about bells ringing at her wedding. But it's *no*t impossible for the *narrator* to be thinking of it *now*, as she looks back and remembers hearing all those bells in Spain.

One of the great challenges in memoir is to elegantly blend these two aspects of the narrator: the one who lived the story and the one telling about it. The success or failure of this blending rests heavily on the narrative voice chosen by the writer.

In this memoir, the voice I chose relies quite heavily on letting the reader see not only who I *was* in that story, but also who I *am now*. So I'll end with an example of how I included the adult narrator speaking to the reader from "now." It's the last paragraph of a chapter mostly set in the Mediterranean landscape, which in the memoir I explored on horseback and which helped to soothe me as I tried to deny grief. This paragraph leaps out of 1970s Spain right into the narrator's present time. Note the use of the word "now."

> Sometimes, now, when I am in the city and life seems too frantic, I open a window and just breathe to calm myself. It's not that the air is clean, any more than the smooth, green water of the Mediterranean was clean, but it feels fresh and clear like that water. It's not that I can smell sagebrush or ocean; all I smell is damp compost and the smoke from woodstoves. But it works because the air is part of the sky, part of the trees, part of the grass—because it's out there touching clouds and the warm skins of animals I can't see.