Person, Place, and Thing

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ABSTRACT

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Person, Place, and Thing

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The dissertation is divided into two sections: an essay titled “The Self-ish Genre: Questions of Authorial Selfhood and Ethics in Creative Nonfiction” and an essay collection titled, Person, Place, and Thing.

“The Self-ish Genre: Questions of Authorial Selfhood and Ethics in Creative Nonfiction” engages with late modern and postmodern theories of selfhood in the service of moving towards an understanding of the ethical nature of the authorial character in the personal essay. I will position the authorial character within the framework of Paul Ricouer’s construction of the narrative self, identifying it as an artifact of the work of giving an account of oneself. I will consider how this artifact can be imagined to function inside a Levinasian ethics, and ask whether or not the authorial character can adequately serve as an “Other” with whom both the reader interacts in their own formations of self. Finally, I will turn to Judith Butler to suggest a way the ethical act of giving an account of oneself can be rescued from the postmodern disposition of the self.

Person, Place, and Thing is composed of short essays that play with various constructions of the authorial self. Traditional narrative pieces which suggest a coherent and self-knowing author exist alongside collage essays in which any coherence or meaning-making is left to the reader.
This dissertation is dedicated to Dominik Heinrici, my loving and patient partner,
who did the laundry and cooked the meals and made the beds
and washed the dishes and cleaned the apartment
so that it could be written.
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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION: “THE SELF-ISH GENRE”

Questions of Authorial Selfhood and Ethics in First Person Creative Nonfiction

Introduction

As a writer, I am deeply—some have said overly—concerned about what an ethical writing practice might look like, particularly but not exclusively when writing work that claims a nonfictional position. Some questions are more easily answered than others. For instance, I feel comfortable saying that it’s categorically unethical to write a piece with the sole intention of doing harm to another person. I’m equally certain that it’s always ethical to write as truthful an account of one’s own experience as one is capable of writing, when the intended audience is only oneself. (It may not always be wise, since diaries and journals are often not as private as we had believed them to be, but it’s ethical.) But beyond that, it begins to get murky for me. Can I ethically write, with the intention to publish, a piece that will harm another person, even if it was not my intention to harm them? Is writing as truthful an account of my own experience as I can, again with the intention to publish, ethical when there are other accounts—also by people doing their best to be truthful—which contradict my own, and which suggest that my understanding of the events and situations considered is limited by privilege, naïveté, or bias? Does it matter whether or not those other accounts which contradict my own are published and available to readers to serve as a counter-balance to my own? Does it matter whether or not I am a more or less central actor in the events being considered than the people whose accounts contradict my own, or whether or not I seek publication in a more or less
prestigious venue with a greater or smaller readership than they do? How does non-payment for the work itself factor into the ethics of publishing such a piece?

As I said, I’ve been told I worry too much about all of this, and that’s almost certainly true.

Still, it’s impossible for me to position the collection that follows without first talking about the ethics of creative nonfiction because of how deeply informed my writing is by my own growing and changing understanding of what it is, and is not, ethical to write and publish. Occasionally in this collection, I confront this question directly. For instance, in “Mountain Jews,” I write toward the question of whether or not I am entitled to use Appalachian phrasings and idioms in my work, when I don’t use them in my speech. Is having grown up with this language enough to grant me access to it, or would using it be an appropriation? In other places, it’s less obviously engaged, but still critical to the decision-making that went into how to construct the included pieces and which pieces to include. For example, there is an essay titled *Miracle Cure* that examines my romantic relationship with a lover whose multiple sclerosis had progressed to the point where our intimacies often involved lying in bed together, holding a bottle of Amantadine that he had cached away in the event that suicide felt to him like the better option, and waiting quietly together for him to decide that he was not yet ready to die. Ultimately, I decided not to include that piece here—or seek publication for it—because my access to his thoughts and his understanding of the situation in those moments was so limited that I could only create a portrait of him which reduced him to his impairments, and it goes against my own understanding of ethical writing to put forth such a piece. For
in my exploration, I have come to believe that it is unethical for me to tell someone else’s story when I am only tangential to it, unless that person has given me their permission to write the events from my own perspective, and in this case I both do not have that permission and do not have the ability to render him as he sees himself on the page.

Most often, though, the ethical concerns I have about my writing shape the pieces in subtle ways that might not be immediately apparent to the reader, and this most often has to do with questions of selfhood and identity. For instance, in *When I Lived in Manhattan*, the choice to include the crot that reads, “When I lived in Manhattan, most of my lovers were men” is there specifically to ensure that I am not claiming access to a primarily lesbian identity either inside or outside the text of the essay, because such a claim would be false and, without it, I believe the reader could be misled. In “Fat,” I am careful to give my weight at the time of the essay (208 pounds), because the word “fat” is so fraught—sometimes claimed by people who would like to lose ten pounds, sometimes claimed by people who are already dangerously underweight—that I felt the reader could justifiably insist on knowing whether or not my claim to the word was a fair one. Even in the highly stylized essay *A Meditation on Love*, which examines the loneliness of early adulthood through the lens of the spiritual offerings of a Rainbow Gathering, I’m careful to position myself as someone who’s come to the gathering for less than spiritual reasons (I’m there, primarily, to buy drugs). To not do so would risk encouraging the reader to mistake my own casual dismissal of the more political and spiritual aspects of the gathering as an attitude held by Rainbows in general, as it’s safe to assume that most readers will never, themselves, have interacted much with the Rainbow Family, beyond
perhaps seeing a few of the self-described Drainbows panhandling by the side of the road
during their annual trek to the event.

I believe very strongly that positionality matters, and that readers should have
enough information to understand the position of the narrative character in relation to the
subject matter of the essay. As a reader, I want to know if the author of a memoiristic
essay I’m reading that discusses, for example, growing up poor in Appalachia actually
grew up poor in Appalachia, and if so, what does that author mean by “poor” and when
and where in Appalachia did she grow up? It’s not because I’m reading the essay for
statistics on poverty or an ethnographic reading of Appalachia, but because my
understanding of what the author is saying is per force dependent on my understanding of
her position within the context of her essay on the subject.

There is an argument to be made that concern for ethics over artfulness in crafting
the authorial persona in creative nonfiction is deleterious to the genre itself. In speaking
with Jared Levy at Interview Magazine about his book The Lifespan of a Fact, in which
he and Jim Fingal construct an over-the-top dialog about the process of fact-checking
D’Agata’s not completely nonfictional essay “About a Mountain,” John D’Agata says,

(W)hen I'm called an asshole by a major media outlet, or a jerk or a liar or a hack
or a whatever, it's very clear that these reviewers are reading the persona in that
book as me: that I'm behind that figure. Which, for me, proves how we approach
nonfiction at a much different level than we approach fiction or poetry or drama:
that there's almost no room for metaphor. We expect the "I" in any nonfiction text
to be an autobiographical "I" when there is a history in the essay of the "I" being a
persona. And, it's certainly disheartening to realize, throughout this book, that we are really nowhere when it comes to reading this genre. It at least has helped me understand where we need to go, what more we need to do.

The argument here seems to be that there is no ethical obligation that the “I” in nonfiction be constructed in such a way as to suggest the author is making the effort to offer a true account of herself. It’s important here to note that elsewhere in the interview, D’Agata uses the term nonfiction interchangeably with the term essay, and that he is not arguing for the validity of the persona essay, a form that is recognized and accepted within the genre, but rather that the construction of a self in the nonfictional essay is always inherently fictional, and that a failure to read it as such is a failing on the part of the audience, rather than the author.

D’Agata is not alone in making this argument, though he is at the extreme end of it. In “Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction,” Lynn Bloom asserts that “writers of creative nonfiction live-and die-by a single ethical standard, to render faithfully, as Joan Didion says in ‘On Keeping a Notebook,’ ‘how it felt to me’” (278). She argues against allowing interventions in the work such as fact-checking by other participants in the events described, a willingness to correct factual errors where they are found in the writer’s memory of events, or even concern for the feelings of the others who were impacted by those events and for their own understandings of them. This idea that the author’s account of events need only be consistent with the author’s own feelings about them is a popular one, and while it’s one I would trouble (if someone can show you incontrovertible proof that you are wrong about
some important factual thing, I believe—and think most authors do—that it the correction should be made), for the sake of my exploration here, it does point us toward what I believe to be the most significant ethical question facing writers of creative nonfiction at this moment. Namely, what is the value of first person creative nonfiction to the reader, and how might we as writers construct an ethical writing practice based on this relationship with the reader?

I will explore this question in depth, looking first at the historical development of the self in the personal essay, beginning in early modernity with Montaigne, with particular interest in how the Enlightenment ethic of rationality informs the way the essaying subject is understood. I will then consider the idea of the self through the lens of late-modern and post-modern constructions of selfhood in service of suggesting an understanding of the ethical relationship between the author of creative nonfiction and her readers that is informed by the works of Paul Ricouer and Emmanuel Levinas. Finally, I will turn to Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* to discuss how the essaying subject might be ethically constructed in post-modernity.

These are weighty questions, and it is not my intention here to weigh down the work of others writing within the genre(s) of creative nonfiction. Rather, what follows here is an exploration of how this exploration impacts my own writing, and of the ethical obligations which I take onto myself in answer to the questions this exploration raises. It is, then, a self-justification, one that must begin by first identifying what, exactly, is meant by “self” and go from there.
It is probably also necessary here to talk about my idiosyncratic relationship to theory, and how that relationship informs what I’ve written here. The best analogy that I can give for how I read, and make use of, theory is to say that I read it the way my great-grandfather would have read Talmud, which is as a way to think about and instruct my ways of being in the world, but not with the intention of adding to it, and with the knowledge that I am reading toward, rather than with, an understanding of the texts. Here, then, Levinas, Ricœur, and Butler are my Hillel and my Maimonides. I read them as the learned interpreters of experience and with the goal of gaining greater grace through their insights. This makes me perhaps an overly friendly reader, but as it is my goal to engage with rather than to intervene in their works, I hope this can be forgiven.

The Significance of the Authorial Self in Creative Nonfiction

Creative nonfiction, as a genre (or, more truthfully, a collection of genres—literary journalism; memoir; cultural criticism; travelogue; lyric, personal, and hybrid essays—which do their best to engage with the nonfictional), can be understood as writing which is centered on the experience of the author. Barrie Jean Borich, in trying to find a unifying element across the subgenres of creative nonfiction, suggests “What links all these forms is that the ‘I,’ the literary version of the author, is either explicitly or implicitly present—the author is in the work.” The centrality of the authorial “I” is what sets creative nonfiction, then, apart from adjacent genres such as biography and journalism, in which the author is reporting on people and events with a primary concern for accuracy, and in which the authorial perspective is of lesser concern than the events or people themselves.
Why would anyone want to read such a thing? What value is there for someone who wants to understand the atrocities of World War II in reading, for example, the memoirs of Auschwitz prisoner Tadeusz Borowski—whose understanding of the events surrounding *Shoah* were limited to that which he could know as a prisoner of Auschwitz—when there are such moving novels as *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak and comprehensive histories such as Saul Friedlander’s *Nazi Germany and the Jews*—with its careful scholarship and breadth of information—available? What can we learn from David Wojnarowicz’s AIDS memoir *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* that we can’t learn from Jonathon Engel’s sweeping *The Epidemic: A History of AIDS* or Tom Kushner’s excellent play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*?

There must be something of value to the memoiristic genres that goes beyond their flawed recounting of history, their imperfect narrative arcs limited by the arc of actual events, which allows them to endure. I will argue that this value is in the connection between the reader and the author of the work of creative nonfiction, that this connection is one that depends on readers understanding of the author as present as herself rather than as a fictional construct on the page, that this connection differs significantly from the connection between the reader and characters in works of fiction, and that certain ethical obligations adhere to both the author and the reader as a result of this connection.

Toward these ends, I engage with both critical theorists and with writing about writing from authors of creative nonfiction. The role of theory here is to provide me with the ability to ask the questions I wish to ask; to give me the conceptual framework that makes their asking possible. But this is still an essay, and as such, it seeks to engage with
these concepts in an open-ended way. As Adorno has written, “The essay… takes the
anti-systematic impulse into its own procedure, and introduces concepts directly,
‘immediately,’ as it receives them. They gain their precision only through their relation to
one another” (160). And so it will be here. It’s my goal to ask “What is the self in self-
centered writing,” and then to think—in the company of the others I cite—about the
ethical relationship between that self and the reader, but it isn’t my goal to come up with
an answer. I doubt there is an answer, in fact, but rather believe there are many answers,
some of which of necessity will not occur to me and so will not be included here. It’s the
nature of the essay, of work that is centered around the “I” of the author, that its scope is
limited to that which it occurs to the author to consider. This essay, then, is to be read as
part of a conversation about the self, and in particular the authorial voice in creative
nonfiction, and not as either a synthesis of those conversations or as claiming any
particular authority to intervene in other constructions of the authorial self.

Modernity and the Birth of the Essaying Self:

The personal essay arises in and from modernity, a period marked by its ethos of
rationality and its concern for the “self” (Wain 352). The modern subject as an
autonomous rational being capable of both self-awareness and self-construction is, I
argue, necessary for the birth of the genre as we know it because it is otherwise
unthinkable that the self reflecting on itself would be of interest to another—rational,
autonomous, but also unspecified—self. Where the genre is presaged in the Western
canon prior to modernity, it’s necessary for the author to construct an audience to
address: Seneca’s essays are epistolary, Augustine’s Confessions are addressed to God.
And although we as readers are aware that the constructed audience and the intended audience are not the same—clearly both Seneca and Augustine are actually writing works they intend to be public, even as they are framed as private—the specific audience is a necessary conceit when the construction of the self is one that is not self-reflexive or self-constructing.

It makes sense, then, that Michael Montaigne, often heralded as the father/patron saint/first practitioner of the personal essay, wrote during the early days of modernity. (The beginnings of modernity are placed by various scholars as from as early as the mid-1400s and as late as the early 1500s. For the sake of this essay, I’ve settled on the dates 1500-1789 for Early Modernity, 1789-1900 for Classic Modernity, and 1900-1989 as Late Modernity (Osborne 25).) Philip Lopate describes the atmosphere of these times, and their enabling of Montaigne’s “circling, minute self-observations,” as one of a new spirit of humanism which “gave Montaigne license to write in support of pleasure and an integration of mind and body” (44). In defense of this new sort of personal writing, Montaigne says “I set forth a humble and inglorious life; that does not matter. You can tie up all moral philosophy with a common and private life just as well as with a life of richer stuff. Each man bears the entire form of man’s estate” (611). The idea that a “humble and inglorious life” is as instructive to our understanding of moral philosophy as is one elevated by piety, heroics, or nobility is both central to and centered in humanist philosophy.

The centrality of this idea to the personal essay from early through classical and into late modernity is made clear from the way in which essayists, up and until about the
1950s, regularly move between a first person singular and first person plural (and, less frequently, the second and even third person) narrator without signifying a shift in either the narrative voice or the intended readership. So thoroughly have essayists embraced humanism’s universalized rational subject that the “I” and the “we” of the essay are undifferentiated. In “Of Greatness”, Abraham Crowley (an essayist writing in the mid-1600s), in writing of reading Seneca, uses the first person to describe the actions of reading (“I believe,” “I speak,” “I remember,” “I know not what”), but the third person when writing of his reaction to that writing (“we stand amazed,” “if we were always bound”) (117). Thoreau’s “Walking,” published in the 1850s, moves between “I” and “we” several times, generalizing the benefit he finds in walking as a benefit for all (whom he assumes to have the freedom and capacity to walk, because as has oft been noted, the universal subject of modernity was always assumed to be an able-bodied white man). In the 1952 essay Such, Such Were the Joys, Orwell makes the move from the first to the third person mid-sentence: “I base these generalizations on what I can recall of my own childhood outlook. Treacherous though memory is, it seems to me the chief means we have of discovering how a child’s mind works. Only by resurrecting our own memories (emphasis mine)…” (301).

It is only in late modernity that we see the rise of the essayist speaking as the other, not as a universal subject, but as an exception to the very possibility of a universal subject. Mary McCarthy, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Richard Rodriguez… the canon of creative nonfiction begins to fill with narratives from outside the imagined commonality of the “rational man.” Their narrator voices don’t have access
to the easy movement between the “I” and the “we,” and their presence in the canon also makes it clear that neither does anyone else. Their presence requires that all writers of creative nonfiction must return to the position of singular voice, speaking only from singular experience rather than as a synecdoche for the whole of humanity. It is this self, the self that speaks only for itself, but which speaks nonetheless authoritatively about itself, that is the voice of narrative nonfiction in late modernity.

In post-modernity, we are beginning to see the ways in which constructions of the self as not self-knowing, even of the self as incapable of self-knowing, inflect the voices of essayists. In this transition, we see a rise of the discontinuous voice. “Essayists… have made a virtue of fragmentation, offering it as a mirror to the unconnectable, archipelago-like nature of modern life” (Lopate xliii). It is this construction of the assaying self that most interests me, and which is ultimately where I will come to rest in finding an ethical voice for myself as an essayist. But to get there, I must first decide for myself what exactly a self is.

First Person Creative Nonfiction and Paul Ricœur’s Narrative Self

I first started studying Creative Nonfiction as an undergraduate in the early 1990s, at a time when the genre was just beginning to move from the margins of creative writing studies and into a place of primacy. Much of what we read as exemplary came from classical modernity—Thoreau, Emerson, Muir, White, etc.—and so the essaying subject often did quite a lot of freewheeling between “I” and “we,” and when it didn’t, there was still, in the tone and presence of the authorial voice, that sense that the author was most often positioning himself to be emblematic of, rather than the exception to, the universal
suggested in Montaigne’s assertion that “Every man bears the whole stamp of the human condition.” I understood, as I think most of us did, that such a voice wasn’t available to me. It was a heated moment in the culture wars, and questions of identity were central in both the courses I took and the way we arranged ourselves socially. We were, then, deeply aware of all of the ways in which we were positioned not as emblematic of human subjectivity, but as a very specific instance of it instead. It wasn’t quite clear how to make a smaller, more particular version of the essayistic “I” of interest to anyone but ourselves and maybe, unless we were writing about things that might upset them, our mothers. (We were of course most usually writing about things that would upset them.) How does one construct a self on the page that is meaningful to anyone but that self?

At the same time, the idea that we even had a self had been troubled by postmodern theory in general and, most particularly, by the arrival of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. There was a significant overlap between the cohort in the Women’s Studies certificate program at West Virginia University, where I finished my prolonged and complicated undergraduate career, and the make-up of those early creative nonfiction workshops, and the impact of that book had significant implications for how we imagined the selves we could/not construct on the page. Our understanding of Butler’s work was shallow and sensational; we used the word *performative* with almost no understanding of what it actually meant, and enjoyed insisting that there was no *self* behind the performance of social identity. It made us sound smart, we thought, and even if we knew that we didn’t really understand what Butler was saying, we were pretty sure that she was saying that performing the identity of “smart person” was as close to actually being a
smart person as any of us could get, so we weren’t particularly bothered by what we didn’t understand.

In the same way, we began to argue in workshop that we were free to construct whatever version of ourselves we wanted on the page, since we now understood it to be only a construct, with nothing so lofty as a self which we might be obligated to try and construct truthfully. We were never so bold as to argue that we could make up the events we wrote about—we were still pretty sure that the non in nonfictional meant we should only write about things which had actually happened, or at least signal imagined material as such when it appeared—but we felt free to manipulate our understanding of the narrative character through whom the reader encountered those events however we chose.

The first essay in this collection, “Fearsome Beauty,” was written during the throes of this exuberant discarding of the idea that there was a self to whom my work owed allegiance. In it, I talk about an annual solo camping trip that I made to Beauty Mountain during my late teens and twenties. The events in the essay are absolutely true, but the narrative arc of transformation from fear to a kind of meditative grace is not. That camping trip scared the absolute shit out of me every time I made it, and I only continued to make it because I was trying to prove to an old lover that I was a capable and spiritual person, and that his dumping me because he thought I wasn’t had been a terrible mistake on his part. (He makes a brief symbolic appearance in the essay as the nightshirt brought back from Paris, because of course I imagined that after I wrote it, it would be published, he would read it, and although I had no intention of taking him back, I’d at least have the satisfaction of knowing he knew just how wrong he’d been about me when he’d called
me “shallow” and “uptight.”) I knew that the insights this version of myself had on the mountain were not actually insights I had had, that they were just the sorts of insights I imagined one was supposed to have while camping alone on top of a mountain. I used my poor understanding of Butler to justify the untruthfulness by telling myself that if performing enlightenment was as close to enlightenment as anyone could get, then creating the enlightened version of myself on the page was a performative act and by doing so, I was making myself as enlightened as it was possible to be. If that logic doesn’t track, well… remember that I was, at the time, not only sophomoric but an actual college sophomore. The essay is included here primarily as an example of this sort of self-fictionalizing; it is not, I now understand, a particularly admirable essay, both for the falsity of its narrative character and for the clumsiness of its prose.

I was, however, lucky to have good mentors who recognized my lazy exuberance for what I thought I understood from Butler for what it was, and pushed me onward from it. In 1993, Virgil Peterson, who was one of my literature professors, returned a paper to me in which I’d relied—once again—on Butler for the entirety of my analysis of whatever we were reading at the time with a C- on it and a note saying to come and talk to him about my grade. (I can’t recall exactly what we were reading, but it was likely by George Elliot.) In his office, he handed me a copy of the newly published *Oneself as Another* by Paul Ricœur, and said that if I was going to insist on talking about “self” in all of my papers, I should read it, because it would give me a theoretical leg to stand on. It wasn’t an easy book, but I loved Virgil in the way that passionate young scholars love their mentors and so devoted myself to getting through it. We met several times that
semester to talk about my progress, and about what I was mis/understanding in the writing, and eventually we agreed I’d at least understood it better than I had *Gender Trouble*.

For quite a while, then, *Oneself as Another* was how I understood the ethical work of creating the “I” of first-person creative nonfiction for myself. (That “for myself” is important. I’ve always been well aware that this kind of informed-by-theory approach of mine is pretty idiosyncratic.) It goes beyond my capabilities—not just in here, but in general—to provide a thorough examination of the work and its implications for philosophy and literary theory, but I can give an account of what I’ve taken from it and how I’ve applied it to my own writing.

At the heart of Ricœur’s exploration of the concept of selfhood in *Oneself as Another* is the idea that the self exists in two different and irreducible modalities: the *idem* and the *ipse*. The *idem* identity can best be understood *sameness* (18), as that which is a singular, continuous instance of humanity. I am, at fifty, the same singular example of humanity that I have been since my birth, even though the person I am now has almost no recognizable commonality with the infant that I was. I understand this best when I think of the sameness of a seed and the flower that grows from it; it is that small part of identity which is constant over time. The *ipse* identity, on the other hand, can be understood as *selfhood* (24) and requires no consistency over time; it is that expression of the self which is manifested in the moment. It is, then, akin to the seed’s sprouting, the flower’s flowering. These two versions of self-identity are linked by a third, which Ricœur identifies as the narrative self. It’s this tri-part idea of the self that has, in one way
or another, informed my understanding of how I construct the narrative character in my first person creative nonfictions.

The concept of the *idem* identity led me to experiment with collage essays in which the events recounted transpire over a significant period of time. For instance, the apologies in the essay “Self Portrait in Apologies” are for events that took place over a period of twenty-odd years. In that piece, the narrative self is present only in the action of apologizing; I’ve made no attempt to create narrative unity or posit any causal relations between the actions in one section and those in another. In fact, to subvert such a reading, I have intentionally arranged them so as to make it nearly impossible for the reader to order the events chronologically. My interest in this piece is to see whether or not we can take what I think of as core samples—to borrow from the work of biology—of the *idem* self and, from those, see the *ipse* self made evident. Do these discreet apologies from over the course of what was then my life to date gesture toward the self that I was in the moment of writing? I would argue that they do, and in a way that a more coherently narrative account, one with a clear chronology and which positioned the events as part of a continuous experience of regret, could not, precisely because the self is a discontinuous thing.

In other work, it’s the *ipse* element of identity that interests me. This is most apparent in the essay “A Meditation on Love.” It details a very specific moment in my life, a moment in which I was aware of having just become an adult without ever having come to understand exactly how I was supposed to survive the world as one, and in which I was very close to giving up my own search for answers to the comfort of
religion, not for its spiritual truths, but for its willingness to dictate and delimit who I should be working to become. My goal in this essay was to offer the reader the experience of that particular moment in which, for me, childhood had ended but adulthood had not yet begun, and I was excruciatingly aware of the fact that I might not, in fact, know how to become a person who was responsible for herself. To that end, I adopted a significantly more lyrical voice than I had in the past in an attempt to capture, if not the voice, than at least the way of thinking that was true for the self I was at that time in my life. It is a voice I was very uncomfortable—as a woman in her mid-forties—writing, but a voice I would have admired in my twenties. And that stretch to recall and recreate the ipseity of myself at twenty is the real work of this particular essay.

Of course, as I am primarily a writer of narratives, it’s Ricœur’s construction of the narrative self that has most impacted my understanding of the work of creating the authorial character in the essay and memoir. It’s the existence of the narrative imagination—because by nature the narrative of a life is an imagining of it—that Ricœur asserts is that which allows us to understand ourselves as ethical beings.

(T)he tormenting question ‘Who am I?...’ can, in a certain manner, be incorporated into the proud declaration ‘Here is where I stand!’ The question becomes: ‘Who am I, so inconsistent, that notwithstanding you count on me?’ The gap between the question which engulfs the narrative imagination and the answer of the subject who has been made responsible by the expectation of the other becomes the secret break at the very heart of commitment (168).
As I have understood this, Ricœur is saying that my understanding of myself as a continuous being capable of ethical action is dependent completely on there being an/other who believes me to be capable of accountability. Or, put another way, that my ability to narrate myself requires that I have someone to whom to offer the narration, and that someone must be willing to believe that I am capable of that narration in order for meaning to adhere to it.

It’s this construction of the narrative self as dependent upon, and responsible to, a receiving other that initially shaped my sense of obligation—my early infatuation with the word *performative* not withstanding—to speak as truthfully as I am able in my work, and it’s at the heart of my vehemence when confronting John D’Agata’s argument that reading the narrative character in creative nonfiction as an honest representation of the author is a failure to appreciate the genre as an art form. As I will discuss in the next section, this initial understanding has been very much reinforced for me—and become the ethical cornerstone of my writing practice—by the work of Emmanuel Levinas and his construction of our obligation to the other as the central event in the formation of our selves.

**Levinas and the Ethics of First Person Nonfictional Narration**

It will probably come as no surprise to learn that someone whose first book chronicles her friendship with a homeless man and her attempted interventions into his homeless—which included traveling several thousand miles, renting an apartment for him to live in, and almost daily interactions over the course of several months—would be enamored of the works of Emmanuel Levinas, and of his insistence that ethics, rather
than arising from the fact of selves, is in fact the pre-ontological requirement for the emergence of the self as a self. “In opposition to ontological formulations of the self, for Levinas, the construction of the self begins in its relation with the other, in an ‘ethical intrigue prior to knowledge’ (Loureiro 6). It is this awareness of the other that makes it possible for the self to be aware of itself; we come into being only as selves when the other impinges upon us, before we are even capable of willing the other’s presence, by confronting us with the fact of its existence. In short: I am only because you, also, are. If not for you, there would be no cause for me.

This is difficult stuff, so please forgive me a perhaps overly long quotation directly from Levinas.

The epiphany of the absolutely other is a face, in which the other calls on me and signifies an order to me through his nudity, his denuding. His presence is a summons to answer. The I does not only become aware of this necessity to answer, as though it were an obligation or a duty about which it would have to come to a decision; it is in its very position wholly a responsibility… To be an I means then not to be able to escape responsibility, as though the whole edifice of creation rested on my shoulders. But the responsibility that empties the I of its imperialism and its egoism, even the egoism of salvation, does not transform it into a moment of the universal order; it confirms the uniqueness of the I. The uniqueness of the I is the fact that no one can answer for me. (“Meaning and Sense”)
The presence of the other not only, then, calls me into being, but it does so by obligating me to answer for myself. And this obligation to answer for myself also obligates me to the well-being of the other to whom I am answering, what those discussing Levinas often shorthand as “the obligation of the face.” And, because this obligation adheres before ontology, in the moment that the I becomes aware of itself as an I, there is no possibility of refusing it. “The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no ‘interiority’ permits avoiding” (*Totality and Infinity* 201).

It’s this understanding of myself as constituted first and only through my relationship to the other, and of the obligation to answer the other for myself as myself in response to an obligation which adheres to me before and beyond the possibility of refusal, that is at the heart of my own ethical understanding of how the self in creative nonfiction must be ethically constructed. But how this obligation manifests is different in the two distinct modes of being a self on the page: the creation of the self through writing, and the offering of the account of that self to others through publishing, or making public, that account.

In both Ricœur and Levinas, we have seen that is in is the act of giving an account of oneself that one experiences oneself as a self. Might it not then be an act of self-harm to construct a false account of oneself? If we are able to know ourselves only in discourse with the other, how is our knowing—perhaps even our being—undone by the act of crafting an account which represents us other than we are, as something that is—by virtue of its falsity—not a self at all, but merely a literary construct which has been presented to the other under the guise of an account of oneself?
Very early on in my writing, I had a terrible crush on one of the members of my writing workshop. She was smart, funny, and far more worldly than I was or, likely, will ever be. I had written an essay about working in the garden on the communal farm where I had recently lived and, in particular, about driving around on an old tractor to collect manure from the neighbors who kept livestock. A few days before I was to turn it in, I realized that this would be the first thing she would know about me: that I was someone who drove up and down the hollows of West Virginia begging my neighbors for animal shit. I was mortified by the idea that I would have to present myself to her, through the process of the workshop, in this way. Who would fall in love with a shit-gatherer?

And so I wrote a different essay, one about going to Paris with very little money, staying in the apartment of a friend who was a minor punk rock sensation in Europe, seeing people shoot heroin for the first time, going to cafes… basically, the obligatory young person in Paris piece. None if it was true. I had never been—have still never been—to Paris, but there were enough examples of this essay out in the world that I was able to fudge it. I made my roommate, who had been to Paris and lived amongst arty junkies, fill in the names of streets and cafes. I went to the library—because this was before the Internet existed—and browsed books about the Louvre so that I could write believable passages about spending my days there, enraptured by the art. I even wrote myself a better wardrobe—Doc Martens and leather jackets and long, spangly skirts made out of silk—than I could possibly have afforded, and gave myself waist-length hair, because I’d always wanted waist-length hair. This me, I felt sure, was someone she’d at least be willing to meet for coffee some afternoon.
To my credit, I turned in the gardening essay and threw out the Paris one. I don’t remember if it was because my conscious got the better of me, or only that I realized I knew several other people in the class pretty well, and that they would be able to recognize it for the fiction that it was. I’m afraid it was probably the latter, because I wasn’t always so worried about the ethics of writing and it was a pretty serious crush.

But what would it have meant for me if I had turned it in, or if—God forbid—I had later published the piece? I think about the obligation that would adhere then to either admit that I had lied (which seems both the simplest and the least likely way to move forward from such a thing) or to carry this fiction out in my friendships and, had the young woman actually agreed to date me (I never got brave enough to ask), my romantic relationship. How would the false self that I had created on the page require continued falseness from me, and what would the effect of this falseness be on my ability to connect meaningfully with others? It seems to me that even such a small act could, indeed, have had long-reaching consequences on my ability to ever again give a truthful account of myself. If the act of coming to an awareness of myself as a self is the act of giving an account of that self, what does it do to a person to give a false account? What would it to do spend a career giving false accounts?

Still, whatever self-harm such a career might bring, I’m not sure that the harm it would do would to me makes it unethical in a Levinasian sense. But I would argue that it’s an unethical act to offer a false account of oneself as a true one to the reader precisely because of fact that in giving an account of myself, I impinge on the reader—I call the reader into being as a subject—because I have presented my face to them.
For that to be true, we must, of course, agree that the act of presenting a nonfictional account of oneself is an act of presenting one’s face to another. Is it necessary for the other to be physically present to impinge on the self, to call the self out of interiority and into discourse? In writing about Levinas, Derrida does not think so. “(T)he writer… expresses himself better as other, addresses himself to the other more effectively than the man of speech… Is not the ‘He’ whom transcendence and generous absence uniquely announce in the trace more readily the author of writing than of speech?” (127). If an embodied, literal face-to-face encounter is not a necessity of the encounter with the other, if the impinging occurs and the obligation adheres when the self is confronted with the other on the page, then I argue that a unique ethical relationship is formed between the reader and the author of nonfictional first person writing.

My suggestion is that once the nonfictional work is presented to the reader, the reader becomes the self and the author the impinging other in the discourse. As such, the reader becomes ethically obligated for the well-being of the author, at least within the confines of their interaction mediated through the page, and that this is a substantially different relationship than the reader has to the author of fictional works as a result. When a reader reads my memoir or personal essay, my existence as the other calls that reader into awareness of herself as a self and obligates her to me precisely because it is an account of a self, the presentation of a face if you will.

In fiction, there is always an awareness that one is being presented with a construct, not an actual person, and that any peril the fictional characters encounter exists solely in the narrative world of the book. While we experience empathy for these
characters, we also know that nothing we can do will intervene in their well-being (although an argument could be made that the phenomenon of fan fiction, particularly fan fiction which resurrects characters killed off in their narrative worlds, suggests an impulse on the part of readers to do just that). Readers of nonfiction, particularly memoir, are faced with a more complicated dilemma.

Levinas asserts that “(A) face imposes itself upon me without my being able to be deaf to its call or to forget it, that is, without my being able to stop holding myself responsible for its distress” (“Sense and Ethics”). If we accept (as I believe we should) that the reader encounters the face of the other through nonfictional first person narrative, then we must also accept that the reader is compelled by the encounter with the text to hold herself responsible for the author’s distress before the moment of choice; that the reader cannot choose to ignore the pre-ontological demands made by exposure to the other. “By this susceptibility the subject is responsible for its responsibility, incapable of withdrawing from it without retaining the trace of its desertion” (“Humanism and An-Archy”). If the reader turns away from the work upon finding the particulars of the author’s distress distressing in a way that makes her put aside her responsibility for the well-being of the author, then she is still implicated, still carries with her the trace of the unethical act of turning away. In fact, it may not even be necessary for the reader to read the text at all to be called to responsibility by it; it seems to me that Levinas’s construction of the encounter with the other as happening in the moment the other appears, rather than through relationship in discourse, would mean that she is implicated
as soon as she intends to read the text, that the obligation adheres at the moment she recognizes the text as an encounter with the other.

If this is the relationship of the reader to the author—the reader as subject called into being and responsibility upon being confronted with the other—then what is the relationship of the author of first person creative nonfiction to the reader? Here, it can’t be that the reader impinges on the author, and in doing so obligates the author to her well-being, because the reader remains an abstract construct to the writer as she is writing… there is no concrete other, only the construct of an other—or, if the author is lucky, many others—who encounter the text through the social worlds of literature and commerce.

Here, then, it becomes necessary to explore Levinas’s construction of morality and justice, which come after ethics, and which requires the presence of an other other, and happens only in the context of the relation between the I, the other, and what Levinas calls The Third Man. “(M)orality is a plot with three personages: the I approaches the infinite by going generously toward the you, who is still my contemporary, but in the trace of illeity, presents himself out of a depth of the past, faces, and approaches me. (“Phenomenon and Enigma”). In other words, through my contact with the other, I become aware of myself, and my awareness of a third other makes me aware of myself as an other. It’s through this awareness of myself as both self and other that I am able to understand my own actions as violent and arbitrary, and to judge myself, and to hold myself accountable for the harm my actions do, and in doing so to understand my actions, and the actions of others, as just or unjust. It is also the existence of this other other, who can be hurt by my actions toward the original other, which calls into being the need for
justice. In the intimate society of the self and the other, violence (by which I understand Levinas to mean anything which impinges on another) is always pardonable (if not always pardoned) because it is always within the power of the other to grant absolution. However, violence against another which harms a second other cannot be pardoned, because it is not within the power of the other to grant pardon on behalf of the second other. It is from this understanding that I assert that the relationship the reader has with the author of first person creative nonfiction is an ethical one, but that the relationship the author has with the reader(s) is a moral one, and one thus bound to abide by the rules of justice (“The Third Man”).

What, though, does it mean for me to be bound to behave toward the reader in a just way? I would argue that the first requirement is that, if I present my work as a nonfictional account, it must be nonfictional—it must be as true to my own experience as I am capable of making it—both because any untruth has the capacity to do harm to the reader because she is bound to me in an ethical relationship, one that forces her to acknowledge my distress and be responsible for it, and because the harm that I do to her might also harm another other. If I have impinged on her with a false account of myself, and that falsity is discovered, I have not only damaged her credulity and done harm (violence) to her, but I have harmed the other other who will encounter a less credulous, generous person when she encounters the reader.

Let me offer a concrete example, although to do so I will have to resurrect the dead horse of James Frey and his not fully factual memoir *A Million Little Pieces*. I return to this well-trodden ground not because I think anything needs to be added to the
conversation about this book, but because it is the best example I have from personal experience of the sort of harm I mean to suggest.

When Frey’s book came out, my mother—like many other mothers of children struggling with drug addiction—bought and read it precisely because she believed that it offered a truthful accounting of Frey’s recovery from addiction, and because the possibility of his recovery suggested also the possibility that my brother, too, could recover. At the time, my brother’s life looked quite a bit like the life Frey described in the book (but did not, in fact, live), and it was the similarity of experience as expressed in the particular details of the book—time in jail, amount and type of drugs used, etc.—that allowed her to make the move from Frey’s recovery to the possibility of my brother’s. When it was revealed that these details were largely fabricated, that in fact Frey’s issues with addiction never rose to the level of serious criminality and did not involve the length and quantity of use he portrayed, she felt a very real betrayal. In her own words, “Well, I guess he’s just another junkie lying to get my money.” In this betrayal, too, she saw my brother. During the weeks between her reading of the book and her discovery that it was largely false, she had in her hopefulness been able to offer up to my brother the kinds of help the book had led her to believe he needed: yet another stay in a rehab facility, some financial support to get back on his feet afterwards, the warm regard of his family. In the weeks and months following the revelation of Frey’s deception, she was less able to offer those things than she had been even before she had read it. Thus, Frey did violence to her because he had made her responsible to him and for his distress and then misrepresented that distress, but he also did violence to my brother, whose requests for help were met
with less generosity than they would have been had Frey not thus harmed our mother. Had my mother read the book with the understanding that it was a novel, she might still have felt more generously toward my brother after reading it, as her identification of him with the character of a work of fiction might have made her equally hopeful. This is part of the value of fiction, that although we understand the narrative world of the work to be untrue, we are nonetheless able to feel empathy for the characters who inhabit it. It isn’t the fact that the story isn’t true which was damaging, but that it was presented as true when it was not. It is the presentation of the false as the true that is, I argue, both unethical and unjust in the writing of first person creative nonfiction.

But what, some will argue, about the idea that creative nonfiction is art, and that as art, it cannot and should not be held to the same standards as other utterances? In “Reality and Its Shadows,” Levinas confronts this issue. He acknowledges that literature is a specific sort of speech, precisely because of the completeness of any work. A work is finished not because of some social interruption, but because the work itself is complete and cannot hold any new thing. I understand him to be saying by this that a work of literature is finished in a way that resists, if not makes completely impossible, an ongoing discourse with the work and therefore it is fundamentally different from discursive uses of language. But he also speaks against the idea of art for art’s sake. “The formula is false inasmuch as it situates art above reality and recognizes no master for it, and it is immoral inasmuch as it liberates the artist from his duties as a man and assures him of a pretentious and facile nobility.” Because ethics are pre-ontological, no argument can be
made for art to release the artist from her ethical responsibilities, as these responsibilities always adhere when one is confronted with the existence of the other.

Another, more compelling, argument often made against the requirement for truthfulness in first person creative nonfiction is that it is impossible to write the truth of our lives, because memory is faulty and, even if it weren’t, we are often opaque to ourselves and don’t understand our own motivations or the implications of our actions. And, since truthfulness is an impossibility, we are not bound to even attempt it. To address this, I will return to where I first encountered theory: Judith Butler.

**Judith Butler and *Giving an Account of Oneself***

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler’s project is far more ambitious than my own here. She stipulates that “the ‘I’ has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or set of relations—to a set of norms,” and acknowledges that this problematizes the idea of personal responsibility. Her goal is to recover the possibility of responsibility for oneself from contemporary critics who, using this contingent self as a grounding point, “worry that this means there is no concept of the subject that can serve as the grounds for moral agency and moral accountability” (8).

Butler acknowledges that an “I” which could give no account of itself could also not be an un/ethical actor, and so her project is to discover how one can give an ethical account of oneself in spite of the fact that no self ever fully understands the matrix of social institutions from which it emerges. She accepts Levinas’s assertion that the self comes into being only when confronted with the other, although she critiques his construction of the ethical obligation the self incurs in this moment of coming into being.
For Butler, not only the call to give an account of oneself, but also the impossibility of doing so completely, problematizes the idea that in that moment the self becomes responsible for and to the other. “Before the other, one cannot give an account of the ‘I’ who has been trying all along to give an account of itself. A certain humility might emerge in this process, perhaps also a certain knowingness about the limits of what there is to know” (69).

This knowingness about the limits of what there is to know is always a part of the process of writing first person nonfictional essays. Butler is clearly indicating the sort of great unknowables—how did the social institutions which have shaped me come into being, how did those institutions shape the way I understand myself to be, how does the language I use to think these questions limit and define the possible account I might give of myself—that trouble the critics to whom she is addressing her critique. For the memoiristic writer, there are always also more pedestrian unknowables—who said what twenty years ago, did the mechanic ask if we were from Jew York before or after he’d seen my West Virginia license, were we really watching cartoons when the firetrucks dopplersed by—but they nonetheless introduce the unavoidable truth that every time the self tries to account for itself, the account will always be flawed by the unrecoverable facts and unknowable undercurrents of the events in question. There is always, in first person nonfictional writing, not just the specter of falsity, but the absolute certainty of it. There are always things which the author simply does not know.

How, then, can any argument for the best truth possibly hold up, when it is always true that this truth will not be absolute and will, of necessity, be tainted by
misremembering or misunderstanding on the part of the author? For Butler, it is the fact that it is a universally inescapable truth that the self giving an account of itself will always be contingent and incomplete that suggests that the relationality between the speaking self and the receiving other becomes the basis for a new ethical understanding. The act of giving an account of oneself becomes an act of discovery, rather than one of reporting the already known. “Giving an account is thus… a kind of showing of oneself, a showing for the purpose of testing whether the account seems right, whether it is understandable by the other” (131). This is an ethical act precisely because the self is contingent upon the other, and it is through giving an account of oneself and discovering whether or not that account can be accepted by the other as an intelligible utterance that we put aside the construction of a self-sufficient ‘I’ and embrace the reality of an ‘I’ dependant upon its relations to the other. “(W)we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human” (136).

I think it’s important to note here how like Montaigne’s own undertaking Butler’s idea of the act of giving an account as an act of discovery is. It was Montaigne’s goal to—through assaying, or discovering his own thoughts through the act of writing them down and following his digressions and discoveries as they grew and changed on the page—to “put before the public a full verbal portrait of himself” (Lopate 43). The impossibility of that task, as made clear by Butler, in no way minimizes the value of it: it is the assaying, and not the coming to some final conclusion, which Montaigne put
forward as an account of himself to the other. The essay, then, is in and of itself an artifact of an ethical act in Butler’s construction.

Inherent in Butler’s argument, I believe, is the necessary assumption that the account one gives is the best account one is able give, that the falsity and incompleteness inherent in the account are only those which must be there by virtue of the fact that not everything is knowable to us. In fact, I would argue that because it is always true that a first person account is flawed for exactly these reasons, but is nonetheless offered to the other as an account of oneself, that it is a particularly unethical act to pepper it with intentional falsehoods. The work of the other, of the reader, is to receive the account as as true as the self giving the accounting has been able to make it, and to say back to that self whether or not it is understandable to them in spite of its incompleteness and its failings. To offer something which is not an account of oneself, but which pretends to be, is to ask of the other that she does her part of this labor even though no real value will adhere to her disclosure of the un/intelligibility of the account, as it is an account then of no one. It’s an act of bad faith, then, and one that asks the other to participate in a sham discourse without letting the other in on the fact that it’s a sham.

Must An Essay be Nonfictional? A Brief Pause

Before offering the understanding I’ve reached of what will, for me, constitute an ethical writing practice, I want to pause for a moment to account for the possibility of the essay which is not also a nonfiction. In his introduction to the anthology The Next American Essay, D’Agata writes, “(H)enceforth please do not consider these ‘nonfictions.’ I want you preoccupied with art in this book, not with facts as facts” (1).
And here I want to argue that one of the difficulties with D’Agata, and with the discussion of truth and deceit on the essay in general, is the conflation of the words “essay” and “nonfiction.” It seems to me that there are essays which are nonfictional and essays which are not, and that when we conflate the two we limit the possibilities of both.

One can certainly assay on purely imagined topics. For example, Lia Purpura’s excellent “On Coming Back as a Buzzard” is a first-person meditation on the place of the buzzard in the order of things, on waste and use, in which the narrator moves from buzzard to person fluidly. The reader understands that this lyric exploration is just that: an imagining, and there is no falseness in its presentation to the reader. Likewise, BJ Hollars’s book Dispatches from the Drownings: Reporting the Fiction of Nonfiction alerts readers from the outset that one fourth of the brief essays included—rewritten accounts of drownings in Eau Claire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—are fully false, and part of the energy of the book is that he refuses to tell the reader which accounts are which. There is a rich and varied tradition of essays that don’t portend to be nonfictional accounts of the author’s lived experience, including those that are, like Purpura’s, written in the first person. And there is no expectation from the reader that they are being presented with facts.

The problem with D’Agata’s argument against the necessity of truthfulness in nonfiction is that he conflates these two disparate ways of assaying. In writing about Jenny Boully’s imaginative essay “The Body,” he asserts that the piece challenges the very nature of what nonfiction means, and then goes on to say “What happens when the essayist starts imagining things, making things up, filling in blank spaces…What happens
when statistics, reportage, and observation in an essay are abandoned for image, emotion, expressive transformation?” (435). But it’s key to note that, from the beginning of the essay—which is written entirely in disjointed footnotes—the reader is aware of the way lyric imagination informs the telling. The author is not in any way attempting to deceive the reader, but rather makes the imagined nature of the exploration clear on the page. This is substantially different than, say, Frey’s writing that he spent months in jail when he in fact had not, or D’agata’s own dismissive attitude toward the factual in his own work.

There is no reason to assume an essay has to be nonfictional beyond the signaling of the author to the reader that it is not. Would it be better if—as D’Agata seems to want when he insists in the Interview article quoted earlier that our reading nonfiction with the belief that the author has been as true to the facts as she is able to be is a failing of the reader—if readers assumed that the essay was full of untruths unless the author specifically told us that it were not? Perhaps. I genuinely don’t think it matters which we privilege, but it does matter that literary tradition has led readers to assume that essays which appear to be written truthfully are in fact making a serious and ethical attempt at truthfulness. The tradition makes room for the inclusion of imagined or even blatantly false narratives, but it is an expectation of the genre that when the author does this, she will also signal the reader that this is the case. This does not seem like an overly strenuous or prescriptive requirement, nor is it possible for me to see how this damages the essay as a work of literary art.
That said, I believe there is some specific value to the essay or memoir which works to truthfully give an account of the author’s experience and of her interior life, and that “art” which essentially calls out the reader as inadequately sophisticated if she accepts the nonfictional work she reads as such is harmful to the genre. It creates, should we embrace it, the impossibility of the sincere attempt. It’s a totalizing move, because the author impinges on how readers encounter all nonfictional work in the future. It is not art insisting on its place at the table, but rather “art” that seeks to banish everyone else from it. “Art” that, at its core, seems to persecute the reader for the generousness of credulity and the kindness of receiving the author’s best attempt to give an account of herself.

**Conclusion: The Enactment of Ethics in My Writing Practice**

The collection of essays presented here seeks to demonstrate the enactment of an ethical practice of writing the first person nonfictional essay as I have come to understand it, informed by the theory which I’ve explored here. It is a curated collection of my published works, arranged chronologically as written (rather than as published), and is intended to show by way of example how this ethical practice has developed over time, the way it impacts both form and content in the essays, and also that which I am still wrestling with in my practice.

The first essay in the collection, “Beauty Mountain,” is actually the first full-length personal essay I ever wrote, and as such it was written when I was concerned solely with form and hadn’t yet even considered the ethics of writing. It’s a bad faith essay, I now believe, because although the events described actually happened as presented, I have overwritten my own experience with an experience that more fully
realizes the conventions of the camping alone essay—an essay so common that it does, indeed, have conventions—and so enacted on the page a transformation which did not actually happen in the woods. It’s not an essay I would write, or publish, now for precisely this reason. It gives an account of the various camping trips, but it does not give an account of myself.

The second essay, “The Way Things Go,” is the first piece I ever published, but it was written many years after “Fearsome Beauty,” as I took a decade and a half long break from writing precisely because I was troubled by the falsity of that first essay, but felt I was not yet ready to write essays that didn’t borrow their insights from the work of other, better writers. It’s a piece very much informed, though, by Butler’s ideas of alterity and otherness. A fair criticism of it is that it relies too heavily on signifiers of Southerness which are not, in fact, uniquely Southern, but I stand by that, as it is an essay primarily about the way in which I, as a person clearly othered in a Southern context and feeling imperiled, over-determined the threat and was attuned to the presence of these signifiers in ways that I am not in places where I don’t feel imperiled. For the “I” of this essay, Confederate flag mud flaps and billboards about Jesus signify differently the further south she goes.

The third essay, “Shelter,” was written about a year after “The Way Things Go,” as part of the drafting of my book “Mot.” It appeared with substantial edits in The Sun’s November 2014 issue, but I’ve chosen to include it as it was originally written here, because in some ways those edits—which highlight the happier sides of my relationship with Wilbur—obscure the ethical work I was attempting here. It’s the first essay that I
wrote genuinely in response to the call from the other to give an account of myself. I had done this strange thing—taken a homeless man dying of cancer into my home—and the strangeness of it prompted friends and family alike to call me to account for why I had done it. This essay is my attempt to explain, both through a recounting of events and my understanding of the underlying causes of events, how and why it was Wilbur came to live with me, and what the value of these actions was.

The fourth piece, “Self Portrait in Apologies,” is my first attempt to play around with Ricœur’s idea of the ipse self as the grounding for an essay. Here, I’ve attempted to present the ipseity of the self by creating a collage of small regrets accumulated along the living of a (my) life as a way to explore the meaning we can make of the disjointed accounting of who we were at given moments in our lives. It’s a form I’ve come to like very much—one I think I would write in all the time, if I thought everything I needed to account for could be made sensible in this way—because it leaves so much of the meaning-making up to the reader. It is, in part, the enactment of the long-term but casual friendship on the page… the way in which we encounter the people we know piecemeal, and over time, and how the limited, episodic information we have comes to be our understanding of their characters.

The fifth piece, Fat, is a further exploration of this way of meaning-making on the page, but with stronger, more thematic ties between the four panels of the essay. Whereas the goal of Apologies is just portraiture, the goal of this essay was to account for a single thing about myself—my fatness—by looking at the way food and sex had become
entangled over time for me. Again, much of the meaning making is left to the reader, though not quite as much as in *Apologies*.

In *A Meditation on Love*, the sixth piece, I wanted to ground myself in that specific moment in time when I became aware of myself as no longer a child, and the vast loneliness that this awareness engendered in me. In order to capture the self I was in that moment, I adopted a more lyric voice than the one I have as a mature writer—one infused with the rhythm of the drums at the Rainbow gathering and the sort of sing-song nature of the children’s rhyme—and wrote with a voice that the me of that moment would have found admirable, even if the me of this moment found the move risky and, perhaps, a little precious. Reading it now, I find it makes me uncomfortable in a way that I think suggests it succeeds; I find it to be both a well-realized essay but also one that is self-indulgent and “voice-y” in a way I don’t usually allow myself.

“What I know of Madness” is my first attempt to collage image, lived experience, and personal history together. (I acknowledge that the use of images in this piece is less than fully successful, and that I don’t have a photographer’s eye, but I still find them necessary to the meaning making work of the essay and so have included them.) It’s also my first move towards the transgression of telling family secrets. In “The Way Things Go,” my father’s alcoholism is elided; here, I put forth not only his own addiction but also that of his mother in order to account for both my need to acknowledge the atrocities of the asylum era and my obvious fear that these atrocities could become my destiny. Again, the collage form allows for a disjointed accounting, which in this case is not only
mimetic of lived experience, but also of the way in which hidden histories return to us in fragmented form.

The eighth piece, “When I Lived in Manhattan,” is as close as I will ever come to writing an account of my experiences around 9/11, and in some ways what is left out of this essay is as important as what was included. The only mention of the events of the day are in the crot that says, “When I lived in Manhattan, the skyline was still intact.” My story is the totalizing story of the events of that day—the white, upper middle class woman who loses a white upper middle-class partner to the attacks. And my choice to write this essay without that story is a choice not to add to the way in which the specific suffering of white, middle-class widows has been privileged in the recounting of the damage done when the towers fell. Instead, I’ve tried to craft a collage that speaks to the way in which New York, in the decade leading up to 9/11, was a city constructed almost entirely out of the alterity of its residents, and one that understood itself as separate from—rather than emblematic of—the general construct of “America.” It was, back then, still Jew York, still the island on which they put all the queers, still a place reviled and feared in my hometown in West Virginia. And this essay is an attempt to return to New York its New Yorkness, its alterity, in the wake of its assimilation by conservative forces in order to facilitate public mourning and retribution. It is an account of myself that is meant to serve as an account of the city in a particular moment in time, and to preserve that time through personal recollection.

The final essay, “Mountain Jews,” directly interrogates the question of what language I can use to give an account of myself, a question that always haunts my
writing. As you can see above, I am not fully comfortable in the language of theory; I see my relationship to theory as one who receives wisdom from, rather than one who engages in, it. And so I do not feel fully authorized to use its ways of speaking. Similarly, although I grew up and have lived the majority of my adult life in West Virginia, and consider myself an Appalachian, it’s a fraught identification (as is made clear by the editor who refused my work for the Appalachian anthology on the grounds that my account of my life as an Appalachian was still somehow not Appalachian enough for the book). Am I authorized to use the language that I heard spoken around me, when I myself never spoke that language, and when the reason it was never my language was through specific interventions in my way of speaking to remove accent and idiom that also served as class markers? Can my account of myself be truthful if it’s spoken with words I would not speak myself? It’s a question the essay leaves open, and one that I continue to grapple with even now.

This collection of essays, in the way that it’s been curated, is itself a collage. I would not, indeed could not, write the first essays in it now. First, because my ethical awareness of the dangers of falsity in first person creative nonfiction would compound the unethical nature of the fictitious “coming to peace” that is part of “Fearsome Beauty,” but also because as an older, different person, I no longer relate to the world in a way so fraught with the possibility that otherness will imperil me. I’m still Jewish and queer, and now live well into Dixie, but age and position protect me from the sorts of dangers I felt vulnerable to as a younger person. Other, more recent essays, I could still write, but they too would be tinged with the changes in how I understand myself and remember events.
For instance, though it’s only been a few years since I wrote “When I Lived in Manhattan,” I don’t remember with the same clarity the nights hanging out with my drag queen friend. I remember remembering the details of our meeting when I wrote the piece, and feel confident that what I wrote is true to those memories, but now all I can recall is that remembering, and not the meeting itself. This collection, then, is the account of my *idem* self—that self which is a unique instance of humanity—as told by my *ipse* self, that part of myself which is my selfhood in any given moment along that continuous line which is my life.

I offer it here as a means of giving an account of myself as a writer who tries to engage ethically with the work of writing, with the reader, and with herself. It’s also, I think, important to acknowledge that this collection was called into being by the requirement of the PhD program at Ohio University that I account for myself as a writer and as a scholar. Certainly, it’s inevitable that I fail to some degree or another, and differently for every reader. The self on the page is every bit as contingent and bound by relationality as the self that lives in the world, and this account is not—and is not even intended to be—an exhaustive one. But I hope that it suffices. As Emily Dickenson wrote, in a poem I memorized in the elocution lessons that cost me my ready access to Appalachian idiom, “This is my letter to the world, which never wrote to me. For love of her, dear countrymen, judge tenderly of me.”
WORKS CITED


I have never been able to stand yards, those tiny cramped plots of grass guarded over by the windows of neighbors. At seven I realized most of my mother’s omniscience was in fact simply the work of an elaborate network of spies, women who watched out their kitchen windows ready to phone in the least misdeed. I could feel their eyes forbidding me to venture beyond the strict code of neighborhood law. There was no time that I felt less alone, or more isolated, than when I was playing by myself in the backyard surrounded by the hostile stares of other people’s mothers. “Outside” was the most public room in our house.

When I was eight, the gate in the backyard was finally opened and I was given the run of the streets. Once freed from the omnipresence of adults, I lived in a world populated by fairies, ancient Indian tribes, and murderers. Every reclusive old woman became a witch, every abandoned house the site of a brutal massacre. Ant trails in the bark of fallen branches were really cryptic messages sent by shaman; broken pieces of Melmac dishes abandoned in the alleys were shards of ancient pottery. I created a world of demons and dryads I knew would crumble under the careful scrutiny of adult eyes. I came to covet my aloneness, even shunning the company of other children who would stubbornly insist on seeing only a discarded glass, never a grail.

Now that I am older, I find that I must go even further from home—and those eyes so filled with judgment—to recreate the world and confront my demons. Each year, as the
languor of spring ripens into the lethargy of summer, I make a pilgrimage to Beauty Mountain in central West Virginia. There, amid the teaberry and mountain laurel, I set up my tent on one of the outcroppings overlooking the New River Gorge. Nine hundred feet down—almost straight down—the river tosses fragile rafts back and forth as it rages towards its destination, but on the mountain all is still. I come here to live alone among the snakes and the silence because it frightens me and fear reawakens my senses to the mysteries that surround me.

As I prepare for this, my seventh sojourn to the mountain, I become my own parent. I borrow my father’s eyes to crawl under the car and check the brakes, change the oil, gauge the air pressure in my tires, and check the treads. Like my mother, I sit for hours in front of the weather channel, placing my faith in the mystical powers of meteorologists. I ask a neighbor’s child to feed the cat and bring in the mail; as he takes his ten dollars he calls me “Mrs. Einstein” though I am single, and I know it is because in his eyes I am old.

Of all the rituals necessary to begin this journey, choosing the contents of my backpack is the most crucial and the most superstitious. If I pack my poncho instead of extra batteries, I can ensure that the weather will be good but my flashlight will die. Having caught on to Nature’s contrary psychology, I pack as though headed into the aftermath of some terrible disaster. Over the years, aspirin has replaced alcohol and my Field Guide to North American Reptiles the works of Carlos Castaneda. For days, I equivocate about what to take and what to leave behind, until I reach the perfect balance between practicality and paranoia.
As I load the last milk jug of water into the car, Mrs. Atkins stares at me from the porch next door, nursing a sour look and a forty ounce of malt liquor. “You gonna mow that lawn before you head out?” she commands as much as asks. I bristle. “Paid someone to do it while I’m gone. He’s supposed to be here today or the next at the latest.” I am lying. My shaggy, seedy lawn is a hex sign designed to ward off the prying eyes of women who, like her, have appointed themselves my moral guardians. With a last fond look at my crabgrass and dandelions, I drive off.

Cruising down the quiet highways of weekday West Virginia, I play startling, incongruous music. The Violent Femmes query “Why can’t I get just one fuck?” as the gentle hills roll by. Patti Smith rambles on in an endless stream of psychobabble as I pass by cows peacefully chewing their cud. I drive too fast, smoke too much, and play the music too loud in the hopes that I will frighten off the evil spirits that follow me, waiting for the moment of silence so they can whisper, in the voices of a thousand other people’s mothers, that it is unsafe for a woman to go alone into the woods.

I park the car and follow the power lines up the mountain to my campsite. It seems that no one ever camps here but me; there is no sign of a fire pit or tamped earth. I set up my tent, which is advertised to go up in under five minutes but always takes me at least fifteen, and then string a tarp up next to it. I unroll my sleeping bag and lash my pack to a tree to keep my food safe from scavengers. I gather rocks for a fire circle and set off to find wood.

The sun is beginning to set as I drag the last of the night’s firewood into camp. I walk out to the edge of the rocky finger. Brilliant reds and pinks begin to touch the
clouds that roll by beneath me. Like fire, the color creeps slowly towards me until I am standing in the sunset itself and then subsides, leaving the earth blackened with night. I stand for a moment, watching the stars come out. When the darkness is complete, I head back to camp to recreate the colors in my fire pit.

I lie down and wait for sleep. Sounds are magnified to my ears so used to the constant cacophony of cars and conversation. A chipmunk runs by and I hear a deer; a twig snaps and it is a bear. My dreams, when I sleep, are of vague dangers lurking just beyond the fire’s light. I have come for solitude, but the woods seem full of claws and eyes. “What big teeth you have,” I say to the night as I start awake again. All the better to eat you with, it replies.

The first trip I made alone to Beauty Mountain was in 1985. I was nineteen, and very much taken with the works of Baba Ram Daas and Carlos Castaneda. To prepare, I packed worn copies of Don Juan and Be Here, Be Now, Be Nowhere, but little else. I had not yet learned the value of dry socks or waterproof matches. Nature, I believed, was a kind mother who would welcome me to her bosom and nurture me in my quest for transformation. Surely, I would return from the mount an enlightened being, bathed in the golden glow of holiness that adorns the faces of Italian Gothic art.

That trip was nothing but conceit. I made plans less than I fantasized Disney-esque nature scenes complete with The Pastoral playing in the background. I chose my clothes not for warmth or durability, but for their value as costume. When I arrived at the sight I gathered wood, built the fire ring, brewed tea, and pitched my tent as though I was
playing to a full house on opening night. I recreated the actions even as I performed them, living the fiction I would later tell in embellished detail over beers at The Monarch.

I kept up the charade admirably during the daylight hours. The self I had constructed was efficient, competent and, most importantly, not afraid. For a few precious hours it seemed that all that was necessary for transformation was good character development. An act of such magnitude requires an audience, however, and by nightfall the façade began to crumble.

There I was, out in the middle of nowhere, by myself. The voices caught up with me. If you break your leg, don’t come running to me, they said. Did they ever catch that guy who was killing girls along the Appalachian Trail? That Einstein girl never did have any sense. Catastrophic possibilities flashed before my eyes. I was paralyzed. I spent the rest of the night watching my possible deaths in the firelight. At dawn I crawled exhausted and defeated into my tent. That evening I drove home.

This year, as the darkness descends and the movie begins to play, I sit back and watch. I no longer come to this place in search of a holy vision, at least not in the same sense. I come here, year after year, to watch the film in my head play itself out.

Throughout the year, I am miserly with my fears. I put them in boxes labeled “fragile” and stuff them into cramped cupboards in the back of my mind. I wrap them like glass Christmas ornaments in newspaper clippings of men gone mad and women slain. I resist the urge to take them out and look at them, lest they shatter in my hand and leave me cut. And yet, if I leave them there unexamined and collecting dust, they begin
to write gothic novels in the margins of my thoughts. And so, each year, I bring them here to hang them on the boughs of the hemlocks that surround this spot.

The fears have created for themselves a sort of hierarchy—the oldest and most organic have their turn first. As the sun disappears a nameless, annihilating dread comes over me. From early childhood, daughters are taught not to venture alone into the wood at night. Cautionary tales like “The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf” and “Little Red Riding Hood” fill our minds with grim images of agents of divine retribution lurking in the forest, waiting for us to step off the path. Only slightly less abstract warnings about “bad men” and original sin confirm our sense of being alien in the male world of the night wood. Even now, when the fear of anthropomorphized wolves seeking sexual favors and cakes baked for Granny is only an echo remembered from a more gullible time, the taste and timbre of the fear is the same. After all, the defense attorney would say, what was she doing out there alone at night anyway? And if she wasn’t asking for it, why was she prancing around in that red cloak?

These old, childish fears quickly play themselves out. They are only the cartoons before the feature. There is a brief respite as the projectionist changes reels; in the past I have tricked myself into believing the movie is over. Now I know to use these few minutes of calm to feed the fire and put on more water for tea; the long haul is just beginning. I make a brew of valerian and lobelia, toss a bundle of sage into the fire, and settle in to see what horrors I have been collecting.

This year, the fire itself sparks the beginning of the movie, as pictures of riots flash before my eyes. Again, I see a trucker pulled from his cab and beaten by boys filled
with rage. A familiar face rises up, bloodied and bruised, until a foot in a black, black boot shoves it down again. It is replaced by the bloodless face of my best friend’s mother in her coffin. I had driven my friend down to the funeral, and then later to the trial, where her father was allowed to bargain down to manslaughter and do no prison time. I see a boy—naked, bleeding, scared—as he is handed over by police to his supposed lover. This year there has been a bumper crop of horrors, and I see them all again as I stare into the fire.

As the gray glow of dawn begins, the credits role. I assign blame to make sense. Produced by the federal government, directed by the legal system, special effects by CNN…I pull radicalism around my shoulders like a protective blanket and crawl into my tent.

I spend my days with the routine terrors of copperheads and the ticks that invariably imbed themselves into my scalp. These minor, manageable villains help me to regain my sense of control. I watch a group of rafts shoot through “Double Z”—an especially tricky set of rapids—but the screams of fear and delight are lost in the distance. Pink and purple mountain laurel surrounds me in a Georgia O’Keefe fantasy; I find a stand of hemlock and lay down on the mossy ground. I feel self-indulgent and foolish for having been so frightened the night before.

I walk down the path to The Playhouse, a natural amphitheater that leads to a shelf overlooking the river. I play Portia and Gwendolyn Fairfax to the trees. One should always have something fascinating to read on the train. By day, solitude grants
amnesty from the seriousness of my burgeoning adulthood. I twirl and bow and ham it up, enjoying the sound of my own voice. And yet, as the first pinkness touches the clouds, I head back to my tent to prepare for the night’s show.

The second night is more personal, the fears more familiar and thus less urgent. I imagine that I have left the coffee pot on and that my house is going up in flames. It occurs to me that if my father had a heart attack no one would be able to notify me. I worry that if something awful did happen to me up here, no one would think to go through my drawers and throw away the more embarrassing evidence before my mother got there. Is the neighbor’s kid really feeding the cat? Maybe I shouldn’t have paid him till I got back. By eleven, I crawl into my sleeping bag and fall asleep almost immediately.

In the morning I drive to a near-by town. After a truck-stop breakfast, I head down to Mermaid Rocks, a shallow place in the river where the hollows in the bedrock form natural Jacuzzis. I slip naked into the water. It pounds out the knots in my shoulders and kneads my back. I move to a deep pool and swim in aimless circles, searching out the warm spots. Driving away from the sunset and back to the mountain, I sing “Big Yellow Taxi” along with Joni Mitchell and wish I’d brought a bottle of wine.

The nights pass in peace now. I sit by the fire making plans rather than conjuring demons. I remodel my house a hundred times, adding turrets and gables and greenhouse windows. I create plot summaries for enough novels to last a lifetime and pretend to believe that I will write each one. I play aimless tunes on my penny whistle, weave vines into crude baskets, and miss my lover. Old friends stop by to visit, to talk about things I
thought I had long forgotten. By day, I walk through the hollows and along the creek beds, remembering what keeps me in West Virginia. On my last night on the mountain a Bob White calls his own name as the sun goes down. Sar-ah, Sar-ah, Sar-ah, I answer him, recreating myself—sane, adult, brave—for the journey home.

George Winston plays quietly in the background as I drive back to Morgantown. My snakebite kit and rain poncho lay blessedly unused in the bottom of my pack and there are still three full jugs of water in the trunk. I am only mildly disturbed by the metallic naked women on the mud flaps of the truck that plays leapfrog with me between Big Otter and Flatwoods. Having just burned up a year’s worth of psychic garbage at my campfire, I can afford to be a little forgiving.

As I pull up in front of my house, I see that the yard has turned from bush to jungle in my absence and that the mail sits uncollected in a stack beneath the mailbox. The cat eyes me reproachfully as I unlock the door, and to punish me refuses the first can of food I open for her. The answering machine blinks, but I ignore it. The house fills with the smell of wood smoke and I realize I need a shower.

Hot water courses over my body, washing away the last of the sweat and the grit accumulated over the week. I pull on the silk nightshirt brought back from Paris as a consolation prize by an old lover and crawl between cool, clean sheets. I begin to reach for the Mary Daly I had been reading when I left, but my hand lights instead on the more familiar pleasures of Charlotte Bronte. It’s too early to start collecting fears for next year’s trip. As I settle in to help poor Jane navigate the treacherous road to womanhood,
I make a mental note to borrow Mrs. Atkins’ lawnmower in the morning and to call my mother and tell her that I survived.
The Way Things Go

1973

When I was eight years old, Dad came home with a Thing. It was the kind of thing, my mother made clear, that a grown man in his thirties, the father of three children for God’s sake, should have had more sense than to buy. But, then again, this was just the sort of thing she had come to expect from him. She would warm to it eventually, but on that first day she was horrified. I, of course, loved my father’s beautiful, transgressive Thing from the moment I saw it in the driveway. While it didn’t hurt that Mom hated it as much as she hated messy rooms and sass-mouth, I would have loved it for its Sunshine Yellow paint alone.

The Volkswagen Thing was a cult hit. Half car, half erector set, it was the epitome of the big boy toy. My younger brothers and I watched in awe as Dad took the doors and windows off, put the windshield down, stowed the ragtop, and folded the back seat into the floor. Voila—it looked just like a dune buggy! Click the whole thing back together, and it was almost a Jeep. Dad still hadn’t lost his college line-backer bulk and when he squeezed behind the wheel of the Thing, it looked more like an oversized Tonka truck than a real car.

Originally created as a military vehicle for the German army in World War II, it was hard to imagine Nazi soldiers driving around in these surfer-mobiles. Sold in this country in Sunshine Yellow, Blizzard White, and Pumpkin Orange, they just seemed too silly to be war machines. And Things had some serious flaws. At speeds over 40, the
plastic windows pulled away from the top, letting in rain and road dust. Their top speed was a pathetic 68 mph, and if you pushed them to it, they would shimmy and shake like Sandra Dee in *Gidget Goes Hawaiian*. Their primary virtue was their simplicity; they had engines not much more complicated than the ones in lawn mowers and bodies made of sheet metal. They were like the paintings of de Kooning or the music of Yma Sumac — you either “got it” or you didn’t. If you got it, it made you feel better about yourself that you did. If you didn’t, you felt smugly certain that there wasn’t really anything to get.

In 1980, Volkswagen stopped production of the Thing. By then, Dad had long since sold his and was driving my dead grandfather’s silver Lincoln Town Car. It was, as I remember, his first real sacrifice to the realities of middle age.

2002

Life since the Thing has not been all that kind to Dad. His career failed when the bottom dropped out of the coal market. His marriage dissolved shortly thereafter and a rough decade or so followed. It was a time when there wasn’t much any of us could do but sit back and hope he’d find his way to happier times. It wasn’t until well into his fifty-ninth year that we started to think maybe he had.

As Dad’s sixtieth birthday approached, it became more and more important to me to find a meaningful way to mark it. A party was out. It would have required too much agreement, a level of cooperation that my siblings and I just couldn’t pull off. Haven, my younger sister with whom Dad is permanently houseguesting, suggested that we send him on a year-long eco-tourism tour she had seen advertised somewhere. Unfortunately, our combined savings weren’t up to anything so grand. I was afraid I was going to have to
fall back on the old standby; a shirt from L.L. Bean that he would put, still wrapped, in the closet where he kept all the other unopened gifts we’d given him over the years. Dad says there is nothing he needs; in reality, he’s just too contrary to risk actually liking any of our gifts. Pleased isn’t in his emotional repertoire.

Three weeks before the big day, and still without a plan, I got an email from Dad with a link to an auction on Ebay that read simply, “I don’t know how to use Ebay. If you’ll buy this and help me pick it up, I’ll pay for it.” Before I could even open the link, my screen flashed with an instant message from my sister; “DO NOT BUY THAT THING FOR DAD OR I WILL KILL YOU WITH MY BARE HANDS!” Whatever Dad wanted, Haven had already told him he couldn’t have it. I didn’t like her casual reversing of their roles. It suggested that Dad was not just a guy who needed a little time and support to get back on his feet; it suggested a decline I did not think had yet begun.

I clicked on the link and laughed. Dad wasn’t asking for help to buy something, he was asking for help to buy some Thing. It was battered, but the ad said it ran, and it was cheap. It belonged to a young engineer in Huntsville, Alabama, the home of Putt, one of my best and oldest friends. Before I could finish reading the listing, a second instant message popped up. “IF YOU BUY IT FOR HIM, HE’S MOVING IN WITH YOU. I AM *NOT* KIDDING!” Dad, reading over her shoulder, called immediately, said simply “Yes she is. She’s been raised better than that,” and hung up. Obviously Haven, who was too young to remember Dad’s first Thing, was one of those people who didn’t get their charm. At least, didn’t get it enough to want one up on blocks in her front
yard. I responded, “C’mon, don’t you think he should have whatever he wants for his sixtieth birthday?” She shot back, without a second’s hesitation, “NOPE.”

I love my sister, but nothing could have ensured I would help Dad buy and bring home the Thing as surely as her disapproval. It was a chance to be on the wrong side of things with my father once again, the first chance in a long time to share with him the smugness that comes from being the only ones in the room who get the joke. Haven tried her best to dissuade me. She threatened, she begged, she even emailed my home phone number to the sixteen year old girl I was bidding against so she could call to try to play on my sympathies. I apologized to ILUVAJMcLean when she called, and I meant it, but as I was talking to her I put in a bid I knew she couldn’t match and the Thing was ours.

A few weeks later, we loaded up my Chevy Lumina—a car that is to the Thing what Perry Como is to The Grateful Dead—and headed for Dixie. It was a beautiful June Saturday; we had a tank of gas, two pairs of cheap sunglasses, a cooler of chocolate milk and Diet Pepsi, and fourteen hours for an easy eight hour drive. Our mood was decidedly festive as we cruised down Highway 64, passing the Kentucky countryside at about 85.

It was idyllic for, oh, probably all of forty-five minutes. I’d forgotten one of the primary rules for car trips with Dad—don’t let him listen to the news. I don’t believe my father has deeply held political convictions. His opinions are completely situational—he pretends to believe whatever will most annoy the people around him at the moment. That morning a puff piece on NPR about the opening of the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame sparked a heated debate about what he quaintly refers to as “women’s lib”.
It was political farce, with Dad playing the part of the Southern Gentleman Bigot. Born in Virginia, he likes to pepper his speech with stories about Mr. Jefferson and The University, ya’lls and a put on twang. I think this act is a parody of his father, who never could be taught to stop using words like “colored,” “darkie” and my personal favorite, “kike.” It’s improbable, but while I get my obviously Jewish last name from my father, I am Jewish and he is not.

I don’t remember how the argument that morning was resolved, or even if it was. I do remember, though, having some serious second thoughts about our plans to meet Putt and her girlfriend Shawna for dinner. If he could riff for half an hour on the sheer wrongness of honoring cowgirls with their own museum, I didn’t want to think about how much fun he was likely to be over dinner with a couple of lesbians.

Kentucky rolled by greenly and uneventfully. On the far side of Lexington, Dad popped Janis Joplin’s Pearl into the tape deck and, with the windows rolled down, we sang along all the way to Bardstown. A guy in a pick-up truck kept pace just long enough to join us in the lines, “from the Kentucky coal mines/ to the California sun/ Bobby shared the secrets of my soul,” whoop, and speed off. For a ten mile stretch of road, Dad was the dramatic victim in a series of drive-by shootings executed by a six-year-old with a plastic rifle. Every fifteen minutes or so, he remembered to whine, “Are we there yet? I’m bored!” Outside Campbellsville, Dad changed his complaint to, “I need to go to the bathroom”; it wasn’t until we were almost to Bowling Green that I realized he wasn’t kidding.
We stopped for a bathroom break and a quick lunch at a Dairy Queen outside Cave City. Waxing nostalgic, Dad told an old story about his first job, at a Dairy Queen. He worked there until a woman, having just ordered and received three strawberry milkshakes, cocked her head and asked, “Could you make one of those chocolate instead?” “Let me see,” he’d said, waggling his fingers and muttering incantations. Lifting the lid of one, he turned to the woman with a look of great disappointment. “Nope, it’s still strawberry.” Neither the lady, nor his boss, found this funny. “That’s the problem with people,” Dad opined, “They just don’t get it.” He remembers his life this way, through a rosary of oft-told stories, and these stories are all I know of who he has been other than my father. What I like about them is that they leave out the rough spots; they tell a larger story of a life it wouldn’t be so bad to have lived.

Back on the road, Dad drifted off, snoring quietly in the seat next to me as I drove the sunny highway across the border into Tennessee. Once I was certain he was asleep, I tossed Janis and popped in an old War cassette I’d picked up at a garage sale the week before. *All my friends know the low rider* … Music made for the road, music that sounds silly played in an apartment or a bar. While Dad napped, I rocked out down Highway 65. Further into Tennessee, the car to truck ratio tipped in favor of trucks, and the prevalence of yellow ribbon decals made the highway look like a field of spring daffodils. Towards Nashville, the billboards hawked tourist traps, banks, and country music stations. Further south, roadside signs advertised salvation and some place called “The Boobie Bungalow.” *Take a little trip, take a little trip, take a little trip with me*...
Just past Lynnville, I noticed my Lumina didn’t seem to have as much pick-up as before. And it looked to me as if the clock was dimmer, seemed as if the music was quieter, than it had been only a moment ago. I turned off the air-conditioning and that helped, but only for about twenty miles. I watched in dismay as the speedometer fell below forty and stayed there. Finally, outside Pulaski, I had no choice but to pull over. Dad got out, looked under the hood, and said it was probably the alternator but who could tell with all the damned computer equipment cluttering up the engine? We sat by the side of the road, drinking the last of the Diet Pepsi and soaking bandanas in the icy water in the bottom of the cooler to wrap around our necks, waiting for AAA to send someone.

Pulaski, Tennessee has the sad distinction of being the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan. The folks I know from around there say the town has worked hard to live down its history. Apparently, though, no one had told the tow-truck driver who showed up an hour after our breakdown that things had changed in Pulaski, that they weren’t doing ignorant redneck in Tennessee anymore. He pulled up, got out, and asked to see my license. “Einstein?” he said questioningly. I nodded; waiting for the inevitable “any relation?” so I could deliver my standard “Only the hair is genetic.” That wasn’t his question, though. Looking down at my West Virginia license he sniggered, “You all from Jew York?” I was dumbfounded, so he asked again, a little more forcefully this time. “I said, you guys from Jew York?”

There we were, one true and one false Jew, standing by the side of the highway in Tennessee looking for an answer to the question of whether or not we were from Jew York. I waited for Dad to do what fathers do when their daughters are insulted, for him
to say “Now, you look here, young man…” or maybe take a swing at the son of a bitch. I waited for him to flash some secret Southern sign that would clue this guy in to the cracker side of my heritage. I turned to Dad expectantly and saw for the first time the deep lines on his face, the fragile bones of his wrists on thin arms, the tired slump of his shoulders. “No,” I answered quickly, “we’re from West Virginia,” as if the question had been that question all along.

I sat uncomfortably between the tow truck driver and Dad for the twenty minute ride back to his garage—the only garage, he informed us, still open at the very late hour of 2pm on a Saturday. I wanted to joke; to point out that everything in New York shuts down on Saturday, too; to say Shabbat Shalom. Instead, I sat in silence as he listed all the reasons this was going to cost me big. Since it was a Saturday afternoon, he was going to have to charge me double for the labor. He was going to have to drive to a neighboring town for the part, so there would be that time and the mileage. And, even though officially AAA would pay for the tow up to a hundred miles, the last twelve miles weren’t highway miles, so of course he was going have to charge me two and a half dollars a mile for those, too. “Course,” he said, “I guess an extra couple hundred dollars don’t mean much to folks like you.”

Folks like us? We were both wearing jeans with frayed cuffs and battered old t-shirts. My only jewelry was an irregularly shaped rock tied with a leather lanyard around my neck—a gift from one of my favorite three year olds—beautiful to me but hardly ostentatious. Hadn’t this guy just loaded my dinged up, broken down, ten year old car
onto the back of his tow truck? However clever he was at identifying ethnicity, he was a lousy judge of net worth.

In the end, though, it didn’t matter whether or not the money was easy or hard for me to come by; I had to pay what he asked. He left Dad and me on the porch of his shop and headed off to fetch the part he needed. We drank fruit-flavored sodas from the vending machine while I fed Dad the straight lines that elicited the best of his stories: the one about getting busted for performing a black mass in the monk’s graveyard when he was freshman at Belmont Abbey; the time, changing my diaper, he knocked off the stump of my umbilical cord and sobbed for three hours behind a locked bathroom door. Stories about how he rescued his knuckle-headed first born from cold-hearted gym teachers, ne’er-do-well boyfriends, and the attack parrots which seemed to follow us from family vacation to family vacation when I was a child. The telling put things back to right: Dad the protector, me the hapless kid always getting into trouble.

The tow-truck driver came back after about an hour, smelling of beer and carrying the world’s only two hundred fifty dollar rebuilt alternator. While he tinkered with the car, I called Putt to tell her we were running late, “We’re in Pulaski.” She sounded genuinely concerned. “Do you need me to come up there and get ya’ll?” It took several minutes to dissuade her. “Well, as long as your daddy’s with you, I guess you’ll be okay, but for God’s sake be careful and keep your mouth shut.” By the end of it, the bill was four hundred and eighty five dollars. As we pulled away, I rolled down my window, smiled, and called out cheerily, Geh cocken offen yom, Putznasher! He smiled back and waved, fanning out the wad of bills in his hand for me to see.
Safely back on Interstate 65, we continued on as if nothing unusual had happened, and maybe it hadn’t. “We got screwed,” Dad mused, laughing and lighting a cigarette, “but we didn’t get lynched. I guess things have changed around here.”

The state of Alabama is littered with military equipment displayed as trophies or used as playground equipment. In light of the day we’d had, these cast-off Blackhawk helicopters and M42 Dusters looked like thinly veiled threats to me; they put some muscle behind the oft-repeated The-South-Will-Rise-Again sloganeering of the country music station we’d been listening to since Pulaski. The exit we wanted was marked by a Saturn V Rocket; a tribute to Werner von Braun, the city’s favorite adopted son. Huntsville is an ugly, sprawling city of low buildings and pragmatic architecture inhabited by engineers and soldiers. Putt had, for years, worked at Redstone Arsenal in Aviation and Missile Research on projects she hinted were top secret but that I had long suspected she just didn’t want to admit. She’d recently given it all up, finally realized that developing missile guidance systems was the wrong career for an ethical vegetarian peacenik, and started her own handywoman business.

We met Putt and Shawna at The Greenbrier Restaurant, a catfish and barbecue joint that is a legend among road food aficionados. Over huge plates of pork shoulder, cornmeal-encrusted catfish, slaw, pickles, and potatoes, Dad, Putt, and Shawna spoke in the arcane language of engineers about the viability of fuel cell technology and how to build a butter churn from a cement mixer. I noticed Shawna wipe a smear of barbecue sauce from Putt’s cheek with her napkin and later, over the inevitable pie that ends all
Southern suppers, drape her arm around Putt’s shoulder. Dad didn’t flinch, nor did the seven or eight local families seated around the identical Formica tables on all sides of us.

The elaborate rules that govern how Southerners interact have always been opaque to me. I was once married to a man who had grown up in Birmingham, right next door to Bull Connor. Though by no means supporters of Connor’s reactionary politics or his famously brutal methods, my husband and his family had still done all the neighborly things people do: brought in the mail when the Connors traveled, baked them fruitcakes at Christmas, invited them to neighborhood cook-outs. While the nation watched Bull Connor turn fire hoses and attack dogs on unarmed demonstrators, my future in-laws smiled and waved a neighborly “Hello” to him when passing on the street. Anything else would have been rude, my former mother-in-law once told me. My ex-husband and I fought about this throughout our marriage; he staunchly insisted that there is never anything wrong with being polite, and I never stopped believing he had shirked his moral obligation to throw bricks through the Connors’ windows every morning on his way to school.

Sitting in The Greenbrier eating pie with Putt and Shawna, I could have believed that things had changed radically down South in the intervening years. It would have been easy on any other day. When Putt rested her hand on Shawna’s knee as the plates were cleared away, it was an act of simple affection, not of defiance. Men with WWJD on their baseball caps and NASCAR belt buckles did not bother to stop chewing long enough to give it a second thought, although they sat only a few feet away and could not help but see. Their tolerance had something to do with the fact that Putt and Shawna
were from “around here”—not this town, but from towns as deeply Southern—and something to do with the fact that they, themselves, were comfortable and the affections between them were of the small, unconscious sort that become the habits of love over time. Later, Putt and I would agree that the whole place might have erupted in a riot had they kissed, but we would also recall the times twenty years before—when it had been her arm around my shoulder—that we had been asked to leave more than one place for less.

By eight the next morning Dad and I were driving through a subdivision made up entirely of identical duplexes, trying to figure out a numbering system that seemed either random or based on an incredibly complicated algorithm. In Huntsville, it didn’t seem impossible that the non-sequential numbers added up to a very funny mathematical joke but if they did, we never got it. We drove around until we spotted a guy in a t-shirt that read “Byte Me” standing in front of a very battered, topless Thing. At a distance, it looked like he’d painted it cammo; on closer inspection, it was a very dark green with lots of rust and Bondo. He showed Dad the engine, explained a few of the Thing’s quirks, and gave him a screwdriver in case the gas pedal stuck, as it sometimes did. Dad gave him fifteen hundred dollars and, at the guy’s request, took a last picture of him with the Thing before he signed over the title.

Originally, the plan had been to tow the Thing back to West Virginia, but in the end Dad had managed to arrange things so that he would have to drive it the four hundred and fifty miles while I followed in case he broke down. Popping the trunk, he showed
me the tiny engine. “The only thing that can break is the belt, and if that goes, you can fix it with a nylon stocking.”

The trip back was surprisingly uneventful. The Thing managed to cruise along quite nicely at sixty miles an hour for an hour, an hour and a half, at a stretch. When it had had enough, it would die slowly, giving Dad just enough time to pull over onto the shoulder. We’d sit there, smoking and waiting for the engine to cool down, watching the trucks and cars go by. In my pocket, I had the number of a towing company in Pulaski Putt said could be trusted--just in case--but the Thing always started up again.

By the time we passed Nashville, the sky had turned cloudy. We crossed the Kentucky border in the first of three cloudbursts, the rain pounding down hard on Dad as he drove. I honked and flashed my lights, but he just waved happily from up ahead. When he did have to pull over again to let the engine cool down, he pointed to the holes in the floor and said proudly, “See? Water runs right out of it. It’ll take more than a little rainstorm to keep my Thing and me off the road!” With his hair frizzed into a gray afro and the wrinkles around his eyes and mouth outlined in road grime, he still somehow looked more like the father of my childhood than he had in a very long time.

It was just getting dark as we crossed back into West Virginia. Dad waved one last time as he pulled off at the exit for Huntington. I rolled down my window to wave back and caught him singing loudly to himself, “I’m a man of means by no means/King of the Road!” Laughing, I drove away. I had three more hours to go until I made it home to Morgantown. I was tired, but it seemed safer not to risk Haven’s hospitality.
The Thing has been retired to a rented garage and months go by without Dad checking on it. It took a year, but Haven finally got him to move it out of her front yard. By then, the seats had been discarded as unsalvageable, and he had to duct tape a plastic lawn chair to the floor in order to drive it to the storage lot. Cars and trucks honked as he chugged along Alternate Route 10, unable to go over 25 without being shaken out. Haven was humiliated, but I believe the honks were ones of encouragement, not annoyance. If he’d had two lawn chairs, I would have happily ridden beside him. But being Dad, he only had one.

He’s had offers to sell it for a nice profit. When he doesn’t take them, Haven shakes her head and talks about how much it costs him a month to keep it in storage. Dad calls so that we can cluck our tongues at Haven for not getting it. She calls to remind me that it’s a lot funnier from three hours away, that she’ll never understand why he keeps an old car that can’t be driven, and to point out that he could use that money to get an apartment of his own. “I guess that’s just the way things go,” she says, “or, in this case, don’t go.” It’s getting to be an old joke, but we laugh anyway. These are happier times.
Shelter

The day I met Wilbur, the snow was coming down so hard and fast I had to walk to work. My battered old car and its bald tires couldn’t be trusted on icy pavement, and already the drifts lay as high as the front bumper. I was scheduled for a double shift — 8 AM to midnight — at Bartlett House, a homeless shelter, and figured that even if I could get the car there, I’d have to leave it behind when it was time to go home. The weather report called for another foot of snow. So, bundled in my mother’s hand-me-down parka, my roommate’s too-big snow boots, and a scarf, I walked the few miles to the shelter through the beginnings of what would come to be known as The Great Blizzard of 1993.

Bartlett House served the homeless in Morgantown, West Virginia, and its surrounding areas. It was new then, with only a handful of dormitory rooms, a large communal area for watching television and eating meals, an industrial kitchen, and three offices. The shelter had a men’s room and a women’s room, each with two toilets and two showers, and another half bath behind the locked door of the general staff office. There were enough beds for forty people. By the time I got to work that morning, forty-seven had checked in for the day.

“The police are bringing everybody in,” Rich told me. He had worked the overnight shift. “Not just the guys off the riverbank, either. I mean everybody.” He gestured to the hallway packed with people, pointing to one guy in particular: Melvin. We’d kicked him out of the shelter a few months earlier when, after other residents had complained of a terrible smell coming from his bunk, we’d discovered several decomposing squirrel carcasses and a hunting knife tucked inside his rucksack. He’d
refused to give up either, saying the food we served was full of poison and he preferred to
eat what he could kill on his own. Even the police were wary of Melvin, who was
rumored to now be living in a sewer pipe near the Walmart and subsisting on feral cats
and roadkill.

“Did they take his knife away?” I asked.

“They said they did,” Rich answered, in a way that suggested there was a good
chance they hadn’t.

“The cops said we couldn’t turn anybody away until the weather breaks.” Rich
handed me the bed-assignment chart and the cordless phone, our link to outside help in an
emergency. He said he had run out of blankets, so he’d been giving out the towels and
extra mattress pads, but we were almost out of those, too. He also told me there was
space left on the floors in a couple of rooms, but other than that, the shelter was full.

After Rich left, I gathered a small corps of long-term residents and, together, we
worked out a strategy for dealing with the sudden influx of so many people. Traveling
Jack and Cat-Eyes sat guard near the door and escorted the people who came in
throughout the day back to the kitchen, where I wrote their names in the margins of the
bed-assignment chart and showed them to a space on the floor where they could sleep.
Rita and Star peeled fifty pounds of potatoes, Errol boiled them in batches, and Granny
Lynn mashed them with commodity butter and tins of evaporated milk. Carthelius helped
me pull pounds upon pounds of ground venison out of the freezers and defrost it in the
microwave. Granny Lynn mixed it with powdered eggs, dehydrated onions, ketchup, and
cornflakes, making four giant meatloaves in five-gallon metal steam-table trays.
Just before dinner Cat-Eyes clomped in with his shoddy boots wrapped in duct tape. He was escorting a gray-haired man wearing a light jacket and torn sneakers with no laces, carrying a sheaf of paperwork in a wet paper bag. There was a bloodied bandage on his throat, and his eyes were rheumy.

“The cop said they found him sitting at the bus stop in front of the hospital,” Cat-Eyes told me. He said the man’s name was Wilbur, and that he didn’t talk much. He put a hand under the old man’s elbow to steady him. Wilbur swayed a little, then fell back into Cat-Eyes’s arms.

Wilbur spent the night on the floor of the office, bundled in a worn mattress pad and my mother’s parka. He seemed too frail to leave in the hallway with the other latecomers, who were restless with drink or delusion and hadn’t wanted to come inside at all. I sat perched in the desk chair after lights-out, listening to him breathe. It seemed possible that, at some point in the night, his breathing would stop. The papers he’d been carrying were prescriptions and discharge orders, and the bloody bandage covered the hole where he’d had a feeding tube until just that morning. A tumor the size of a loaf of bread hung over the belt of his pants. Stomach cancer, he told me. “I probably won’t live till spring,” he’d said during the intake process, as if it were just another piece of information for the form. “But the medical card only pays for so many days in the hospital, and I guess my days ran out this morning.” He smiled, then turned his hands up in a gesture of helplessness.
Wilbur either never had been, or always was, homeless, depending on how you view private property. He lived in the same tar-paper shack he’d been raised in, but he didn’t own it. His family had been squatting on unused coal company land in Preston County, West Virginia, for three generations. He’d worked odd jobs and done some coal mining, but mostly he lived off what he could grow, hunt, and — since his sixty-fifth birthday a few months before — buy with his meager Social Security check. He drank some but wasn’t a drunk. He didn’t read well but had never needed to learn. He wasn’t much of a churchgoing man, because the church was a long walk from his home and he’d never owned a car, but he said his prayers and figured he was mostly right with God. His life seemed to suit him. Or it had, until the cancer forced him into town.

I’d heard a lot of tragic stories in my year at Bartlett House, and I knew that almost everyone at the shelter wouldn’t have ended up there if jobs were easier to come by. Or if we hadn’t stopped building low-income housing. Or if we still believed the middle and upper classes are obligated to offer a hand to the impoverished. Or if we’d followed through on the promise to build full-service community mental-health centers for the people who’d been released from our asylums and state hospitals. But I also knew some details that made their homelessness more than just the inevitable result of a failing social-welfare system: the women who used the shelter to get away from one abusive man only to leave with another a few weeks later, the old men who had to drink just to get by, the young men and women who were mentally ill and used street drugs but didn’t take the pills prescribed to treat their conditions. The people who came through Bartlett
House had difficult lives and complicated stories. My job was just to feed them, assign them chores and a bed, and keep the peace as best I could.

Wilbur was a single man who had lived in the country until cancer made him too weak to hunt or farm. He hadn’t ended up at the homeless shelter because he’d drunk himself there, squandered his money, or been caught cheating on a disability claim. No, Wilbur had ended up at Bartlett House because he’d never married or had children, and kin was how a man like Wilbur made it through the final years of his life.

Since my late teens I’d been the sort of hippie who thinks saving the world consists of doing bong hits and going to Rainbow Gatherings. Before moving to Morgantown, I’d lived for a while in rural Wayne County on a commune that had electricity but no running water. We showered by standing under a dribble of lukewarm water from a bucket on a hook, and we woke up in the early morning hours to add logs to the woodstove. We tried to feed ourselves solely on what we could grow on the one small patch of bottomland near the well — and failed. It had been worthwhile, but the world had stayed the same in spite of our sacrifices.

By my late twenties, I was trying to help improve the world by supporting my community. I put “Think Globally/Act Locally” and “Who Is Your Farmer?” bumper stickers on my car. I stopped shopping at chain grocery stores in favor of the local co-op and bought clothes only in thrift stores. And yet the world didn’t seem to change for the better.
So, when a man dying of cancer showed up at the homeless shelter one snowy
night in a thin jacket and with no place to go, I decided to offer him the empty basement
apartment in my house. The doctors said he had only weeks to live. *How much of a
burden could a few weeks be,* I thought.

It was surprisingly easy to convince the officials to let me bend the rules about client-
staff interaction and take Wilbur home with me. Even people with long careers in social
services — and the disillusionment that comes with them — understood that Wilbur’s life
shouldn’t end at Bartlett House.

The basement apartment was a dump, even compared to the rest of my
ramshackle little house. When I’d first bought the place, which had no central heating and
cost only TK dollars. I rented the apartment out to a writer, who thought it romantically
rustic, for a hundred dollars a month. After he moved out, I’d left it empty with the vague
plan, but neither the skill nor the money, to fix it up. The floor was a concrete slab, the
walls crumbling drywall or exposed cinderblock. The bathroom had only a toilet and a
miner’s shower — a showerhead attached directly to a pipe in the ceiling — but Wilbur’s
old shack had neither running water nor electricity. The apartment also had its own street-
level entrance with a wide porch shaded by an apple tree and lined with a row of
forsythia bushes, both of which bloomed at the end of winter, almost the instant the snow
from the storm had melted. “I like to sit out on the porch of an evening and have me a sip
of beer,” Wilbur said upon seeing the place. I understood that to mean that he was
satisfied with it.
Less than two weeks after the police had brought Wilbur to the shelter, I moved him into the apartment. Wilbur was fastidious about his new home. He spent his Social Security check on curtains, a slipcover for the tattered sleeper sofa in the living room, and bottles of bleach and boxes of steel wool. The social worker from Bartlett House found him dishes, sheets, a half-busted vacuum cleaner, and a television. The grants director from the state sent him two ferns as a housewarming gift. Virgil Peterson, an English professor at the local university with whom I’d taken a class, provided a mattress and box spring he said were used and just lying around his house, but they smelled as though they were freshly removed from the plastic wrappings in which they’d been packaged. Rich, the overnight shelter worker, borrowed a truck and drove Wilbur to retrieve what he wanted from the tar-paper shack. Merely a few weeks after he’d been released from the hospital, Wilbur was now back on his feet.

Wilbur was also fastidious about his appearance. He kept his thick white hair in a pomadoned pompadour and wore Western shirts and jeans — both of which he kept ironed — and belts with large brass buckles that he shined and white leather tennis shoes that he polished. “If a man doesn’t want people to treat him like a bum, he can’t look like one,” he said. And he didn’t look like a bum. He looked like an aging country-music star — the kind who had a storied past but had grown temperate and dignified with age.

The cancer hadn’t killed Wilbur by late spring of that year. Or the next. For as long as I lived in that little house with the basement apartment, he did, too. He was rarely any trouble. Once in a while, he’d go downtown and forget that, due to the cancer, his body
couldn’t tolerate more than two beers. He’d have four or five, and then start the walk home only to discover he was too tired to make it. The police would find him asleep on a bench in the courthouse square. When they woke him, he’d say, “Call my daughter, Sarah.” The police, who knew I wasn’t his child, would call and say jokingly, “We need you to come and get your father.” When I’d arrive to pick him up from the station, Wilbur would hug me and wink, as if he thought we’d really pulled one over on the man. The police winked, too, as though we’d just pulled one over on Wilbur. And I would smile, because I knew nobody was getting the raw end of the deal.

In addition to my shifts at Bartlett House, I was taking classes and working toward my college degree at the time, so I wasn’t home much. Early on I gave Wilbur a key to my door and and extra set of keys to my junker of a car, because he liked to work on it when I left it at home. On Wednesdays, while I was at the shelter, Wilbur let himself into my kitchen to use the washing machine and hung his clothes to dry on a line he’d strung from the apple tree to the side of the house. When the washing machine broke down, which it did every few months, he fixed it. He was handy, and often came upstairs to fiddle with the plumbing, the old heaters, or the fuse box. He’d never owned a car, but he kept my oil changed. And although he couldn’t push the lawnmower, due to his health, he kept the blades sharp for me and made sure it was full of gas. Because he couldn’t write well, he left me artifacts instead of notes: empty oil cans, the busted belt he’d replaced on the washer, or a bouquet of wildflowers wrapped in a paper towel on my kitchen table.
Every Saturday, I brought him groceries: twenty-one cans of chocolate Ensure, two Hershey’s chocolate bars, and seven forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor. We’d sit on the porch or stand in the kitchen and gossip about the goings-on at the shelter. The folks who cycled in and out at Bartlett House were the closest he had to friends since moving into town. Two or three times a week, he’d go to the soup kitchen for a lunch he couldn’t eat, just for the company. He would warn me when Traveling Jack was on a drinking binge and ought to be put out at night, when Pamela was off her meds and needed looking after, or when there was someone new in town whom he thought was up to no good and warranted extra scrutiny. He knew, without being told, that he shouldn’t bring these friends back to my house. If they gave him flak about this, he never let on, though I imagine they did. Apartments tend to be communal among the frequently homeless, which is partly why it’s so hard for them to hold on to apartments once they get them.

When Wilbur was undergoing chemotherapy, I took him to the hospital twice a week. He told me that, because he got the poison so slowly, it never made him ill, but he refused radiation treatment after the first course. Given the odds, he didn’t think the sickness and discomfort it caused was worth it. “If I was a dog, it wouldn’t be time to put me down, but there wouldn’t be no use in taking me to the vet, neither,” he joked. He was proud of outlasting his doctor’s prognosis. He refused pain medication because the physician told him he couldn’t drink alcohol while taking it and that offended his sense of autonomy. Wilbur told me he usually fell asleep with the beer bottle still mostly full and he dumped out the rest in the morning, but it was the principle of the thing. “Ain’t
nobody,” he’d say, “should tell an old man he can’t have himself a beer at night, excepting his wife.” And, he added, he’d never wanted a wife.

I was twenty-nine the summer I finished college — long after Wilbur should have been dead, according to his doctor — and I sold the house and moved to Alabama. I felt guilty leaving Wilbur behind, with nobody to drive him to the hospital or do his shopping.

“Do you want to come with me?” I’d asked, once my decision was made. “You can. And it’s always warm there, which would be easier on you.” We were standing in his kitchen, both in aprons. I was making pies for a bake sale, and he was teaching me how to make the crust with lard, the way his mother had.

“Nah,” he said, cutting the lard into the flour with two knives. “I like it here just fine, and I can get along.” He told me the ladies from Christian Help would take him to the doctor and that he was sure he could find someone to do his shopping. He passed me the mixing bowl and said he’d never been any good at rolling out the crust.

He didn’t seem sick, just worn out. He’d never really seemed sick after that first night in the shelter.

“I feel like I’m running out on you, though. Maybe I shouldn’t go?”

“Now you’re just talking crazy,” he said, taking off his apron. He told me to finish the pies and said he was going to lie down for a nap. He ducked out of the kitchen without even saying goodbye, and, just like that, the matter was settled.

I knocked five thousand dollars off the price of the house and sold it to some friends with the agreement that Wilbur could stay there rent-free for as long as he lived. They
promised to be kind to him, though not to take him to doctor’s appointments or do his shopping. I called to check on him as soon as I’d moved into my new place. The friends who bought the house carried their cordless phone down to him. “You just get on with your life,” he said. “I’ve got everything under control here. Now quit bothering me and these nice people, and get you some rest.”

Wilbur died two weeks later, sitting in an old armchair that he’d found in a neighbor’s trash and moved onto the porch just that afternoon. He had a pauper’s burial, but then, I’d never known him to be much for ceremony. The social worker at Bartlett House filled out the forms, even though it had been years since Wilbur had been her responsibility. There was no funeral service. No headstone. Just a short prayer before lunch at the soup kitchen on the day he was buried.
Self-Portrait in Apologies

Apology to an Ethically Inconsistent Friend

I’m sorry for picking the chicken out of the soup and telling you it was vegetarian. I was broke and there wasn’t anything else in the house to offer you. Besides, the last time I saw you, you were eating a cheeseburger and smoking a Marlboro.

Apology to Three Lovers from My Youth

I’m sorry for telling you I was a virgin that night in the back of your car. In your parents’ basement. In my dorm room. As you may have guessed years ago, I wasn’t.

Apology to the Boy Who Wasn’t Quite Right

Even in the comparatively egalitarian world of first grade, it was social suicide to be seen with you on the playground. Until third grade, you were The Boy Our Parents Made Us Be Nice To, the one who was invited to birthday parties and sat in a corner, alone except when our mothers dragged you out of your chair to play some game they rigged so you could win.

It wasn’t until we were almost ready for junior high that we realized you’d started to disappear. Your skin became translucent, like the skin of the dead goldfish floating at the top of a tank. You stopped talking, and it seemed your parents kept you home more days than they allowed you to come to school. If we hadn’t stopped noticing you years before, maybe it would have occurred to us that something was wrong, but I doubt it. We were safe children whose understanding of danger didn’t extend beyond the laughing, swinging-too-high, running-too-fast sort.
At some point, you disappeared altogether. I vaguely remember thinking you were away at a boarding school for frighteningly smart children, but that may have been someone else.

It wasn’t until years later that we learned your scoutmaster had raped you almost daily. You weren’t the only boy, of course, but for almost a decade you were his favorite. I like to believe that, had we known, we’d have rallied behind you and launched some sort of children’s crusade to protect you. But, really, I’m certain we would have seen it as just one more reason to avoid you. I’m sorry.

**Apology to a Friend with a Difficult Love Life**

There wasn’t someone at the door; it’s just that you had gone on and on about what a jerk your new boyfriend had turned out to be, and I had better things to do. Had I listened to you for one more minute, I would have said, “Look, you’re only dating him. If he’s such a jerk, move on. You do this every time.” Instead, I rang my own doorbell. I’m sorry.

**The First Ghost Who Lingers, Waiting for an Apology**

An old woman I didn’t know—the grandmother of a friend—reached up toward the sound of my cough and muttered *Who are you* and *Where am I* as I witnessed the spectacle of her death. I’m sorry for intruding on a moment I had no right to attend.

**Apology to a Man I No Longer Love**

I’m sorry for hiding your favorite Leonard Cohen CD in the bottom of a box of tampons when we were dividing up our stuff after the breakup. I still have it, all these years later, and sometimes forget it wasn’t a gift from you.
Apology to a Well-Meaning History Teacher

We were as cruel as 13-year-olds usually are, and didn’t care that you’d escaped a World War by hiding in the dank basement of a strange family’s house. We laughed at your accent but didn’t listen to your stories about surviving on rotting apples and hard, brown bread. We hid your glasses when you stepped out of the classroom, as you often did, to hike up the pants of your ill-fitting suits that shone at elbow, knee, and seat. We rearranged ourselves with utter disregard for your seating chart, knowing you could not tell if we had moved or you had simply grown confused. We laughed at everything except your small jokes meant to show that you, too, knew you’d grown a little pathetic and befuddled. Instead, we whispered Creepy old man to one another behind our pink, uncallused hands on which we’d inscribed the names of Renaissance artists, just in case there was a quiz.

Apology to Everyone in the Dress Row at the Metropolitan Opera, Seats 114–120, on October 13, 1995

When I woke up with a hacking cough and runny nose, I thought only, “These tickets cost a fortune” and “I’ll never get another chance to see Plácido Domingo sing Otello.” I didn’t think of how my constant sniffling and wheezing would ruin your evening. And, to the lady in seat 118, my particular apology for sneezing so emphatically that I caused you to drop your opera glasses onto a gentleman in the Grand Tier. I hope no one was hurt, and that you were able to retrieve them after the curtain fell. They looked expensive, and heavy enough to raise a good-sized lump.
Apology to the Man I Hit With My “Peace in the Middle East” Protest Sign at the Antiwar Rally in DC on March 26, 1991

I didn’t see you until after I felt your hand on my arm, pulling me out of the phalanx of marchers armed with placards and chanting our way down Pennsylvania Avenue. *The people, united, will never be defeated* and *What do we want? Peace! When do we want it? Now!* I was hopped up on adrenaline, a sense of moral certainty, and the bourbon Paula and I were passing between us to fight off the cold. I was marching, and then out of nowhere you were pulling me out of the ranks and shouting at me that I was to blame for every one of our soldiers who died because I was a goddamned bleeding-heart liberal. It scared me, and before I knew what I was doing I felt the thud of your skull against the two-by-four to which I’d stapled my peace sign. I am sorry for the bloody gash across your forehead, and for making you think you’d been proven right.

In This Story, Christmas Past Is the Second Ghost

The Peters boy died on Christmas Eve in 1977, his head in our yard, his body still in his brand-new convertible; the top down in spite of the snow. The drunk who hit him was yelling, “You cut me off, you little shit” at the dead boy. I watched for a while from my bedroom, the scene strobing off and on with the blinking Christmas lights that framed my window, and then went back to bed.

What I remember most about that Christmas is the Major League Baseball pinball machine from my father, with real bumpers and a slot for the quarters it no longer needed. My brothers and I loved that pinball machine, and all the younger kids in the
neighborhood spent Christmas Day at our house, trying for the high score and looking out the window at the torn-up patch of lawn and the blood in the snow.

I’m sorry for being part of the crowd that stood away from your younger brother at the bus stop when school started again, shuffling my feet and looking down whenever he glanced at me from his lonely post by the stop sign.

**Apology to a Great-Aunt, Who Got Just What She Expected from Me**

I didn’t really want the shoes; I had a little trunk full of Barbie shoes at home in my bedroom. I wouldn’t have thought to steal them if you hadn’t said to me, “You can play with these, but only as long as I am in the room. They belong to my daughter, and I wouldn’t want anything to go missing.” What else could I do, really, but pocket a pair of pink rubber mules and then insist I was too old for Barbie dolls, anyway?

**Apology to the Armless Guy Who Used to Steal Panties from the Laundromat in Tuscaloosa**

After the second time, Putt and I started washing our panties and bras in the sinks of the dorm bathroom. We should have told you, when you rushed for our dryers, that all you’d find were T-shirts and socks, but we were afraid that if we spoke to you, you’d speak back to us, and then we would have to know you. And we were too young and too skittish to know an armless man who stole panties from the Laundromat. I don’t regret foiling your theft, but for thinking of you as less than a person, I’m sorry.

**Apology to the Man Whose Woods We Burned Down**

We were 14 years old and brave in that stupid teenage way, learning to smoke and flicking lit matches into a wet pile of leaves in the woods behind your house. Fifteen
minutes later, we were back in Donna’s room, pretending to only then be getting up for the day, and heard sirens wailing closer and closer until they Dopplered past her house. The street was a dead end; they could only be going to the woods. We yawned in our little-girl pajamas and asked her mother what was going on. “Oh, some vagrants caught the woods on fire,” she said. We asked for pancakes and plopped down in front of the television, laughing in that stoned teenage way as we watched *Scooby-Doo*, worried about getting caught but not about whether or not we had done something wrong.

Both you and Donna are dead, so maybe there isn’t any point in apologizing. Still, I wish you could see the hillside now. With the pine all burned away, it has become a Georgia O’Keeffe explosion of pastel mountain laurel; in the spring, it stands out among the scraggly evergreens like a swath of virgin-pink lipstick.

**The Third Ghost, Because in Literature There Are Always Three Ghosts**

I met Great-Aunt Bethel, with her shriveled hands and sunken cheeks, in a nursing home when I was ten. She held my arm with surprising strength and begged, over and over again, “Please get me out of here.” Finally, a nurse pried Bethel’s fingers from around my wrist and took me outside to the horse they had stabled in the backyard. When Bethel died, a year later, my father said, “Well, it’s not like anyone is going to cry over her grave,” and laughed. I’m sorry for not understanding that it wasn’t a joke, and for laughing as if it were.

**Apology to the Spider I Killed in the Bathtub, Even Though I Tell People I Don’t Kill Spiders**
I was already naked, and you were bigger and more menacing than the simple brown house spiders that usually crawl down from the attic. I should have cupped you into a water glass and carried you safely to the garden, but you looked poisonous and I needed to get into the shower. You died because I overslept.

**Apology to an Accidental Cannibal**

We were docked for every sandwich we wasted, and it was only a minimum wage job. So when I noticed that I had sliced off a thin layer of skin along the backhand edge of my right hand, and that the flesh and fatty tissue had fallen into your roast beef sandwich, I just slapped some American cheese over it and served it to you anyway. I am sorry for not telling you, and also for telling the other girls at the counter once you were safely seated and chomping away and I had a rag tied around my hand. You must have wondered why we kept looking at you, laughing, and then doing the stiff-legged zombie walk up and down the service area. “Brains,” we said, “must eat brains. Or hand sandwiches.”

**Apology to the Birds We No Longer Feed**

After you ate the sweet inside of the nuts and seeds, the rats gathered for the bitter husks.

**Apology to My Martyred Forebears**

When Christmastime rolls around, someone always says to me, “You know, you had family that died in the Holocaust because of their faith. How do you think they’d feel if they saw you in this Mennonite church of yours? Don’t you ever think of them?”

And I say, “Which holocaust was that? There are so many.”
But, in truth, I think of you all the time. I picture you miserable in some version of the Hereafter that fits neither my old nor my new religion but looks something like a bus station in Poland in the late 1930s. You are dressed in drab, damp coats and eating greasy food from rolled-up newspapers. Your eyes are tired, your bodies lumpen and dirty. You are the miserable dead, and I am your misery. I am sorry for my thousand betrayals. Forgive me.
Fat

Neil and I rented a side bedroom from his brother’s girlfriend for $50 a month. We called it our afternoon home—it was where we lived between the end of my school day and my 10:00 curfew. I was a junior in high school, he was a college sophomore; both of us lived with our parents. We bought a hot plate, a stockpot, and a teakettle. I stole things from my mother’s house: a white hobnail bedspread, mismatched flatware, chipped mugs, and an elaborate, gold-encrusted finger bowl I used as an ashtray. He repaired broken radios and clocks on a card table near the door; I made boxed macaroni and cheese for our dinner. Playing house. That old game.

 Mostly, though, we made love on the old pullout sofa under the big picture window, afternoon light streaming in through the batiked cloth that we had rescued from a nearby dumpster and hung as a curtain. We lived naked on the lumpy mattress, swathed in the hobnail bedspread. We ate, read, fucked, talked, smoked cigarettes, and learned to drink coffee without our feet ever touching the ground, like children playing at alligators-in-the-carpet. We were a tangle of arms, legs, mouths, hands, and skin and could not say where sex began and ended.

 We did not always remember to stop and find a condom. This was before AIDS taught us all that lesson the hard way.

 I was queasy from the moment I got pregnant. It had only been three weeks since my last period—too soon for symptoms, according to the handouts from health class—when the smell of gas from the Warm Morning heater in the bedroom’s old fireplace knocked me to my knees. Neil scrambled to find a pail while my stomach roiled, and
when at last there was nothing left for me to sick up, he put my head in his lap, tucked a damp tendril of hair behind my ear, and whispered, “Oh, fuck, baby, what are we going to do?”

We gave up the extravagance of the room in his brother’s girlfriend’s apartment. I carefully snuck the bedspread, flatware, mugs, and finger bowl back into my mother’s house. Neil called the assistant principal’s office and pretended to be my father so that we could drive to the state capital and see a doctor at the state’s only abortion clinic. Neil said that the assistant principal, who knew my father and couldn’t have been fooled, said, “Of course, John, I’ll go get her from class now. Just call whenever you need to take Sarah out of school for a doctor’s appointment.” He then said, in a less collegial tone, “We’ve noticed she hasn’t been feeling well these last weeks. We hope you’re going to see someone about that,” and slammed down the phone.

The doctor at the women’s clinic said, yes, I was pregnant, and probably had been for five weeks or so. She never asked what I planned to do; no one showed up at that particular clinic for neonatal vitamins or obstetric advice. She handed me an appointment card for a Saturday four weeks later, patted my shoulder, and said, “See you then, kiddo.”

For a month, Neil and I scrounged for change in between our parents’ couch cushions, begged from friends, and did odd jobs in a panic to raise $250. I took money for a prom dress from my mother but never bought the dress. Neil stopped eating. His father didn’t keep food in the house, and even the subsidized lunches at the Student Union cafeteria would have taken too big a chunk out of the tips he earned delivering pizza for Domino’s for him to save anything. In the afternoons, when he picked me up
from high school, we sat on the floor of his bedroom, rolling pennies and listening to David Bowie. I fed him the bag lunches my mother packed—bologna sandwiches, bags of Fritos, Little Debbie oatmeal cakes—which I was too queasy to eat. He brought me tall glasses of club soda and sleeves of saltines.

“It’s all going to be OK,” he said, every time I let the coins dribble though my fingers and dissolved into tears. “It really will be OK.”

I don’t remember if he promised me we’d have children someday, when we were ready. It seems he must have; we were always talking about the future, imagining for ourselves the kind of life that seems possible only if you are young and privileged. A house with turrets, dormer windows, crystal chandeliers, and, oddly, composting toilets. I would be a writer, Neil a brilliant engineer. And so, with that impossible life shining brightly on the horizon, we never considered allowing the pregnancy to go to term.

Neil drove me back to Charleston, the $250 dollars in his wallet, on the Saturday I was ten weeks pregnant. A woman in scrubs gave me two Valium and took me back to small room with an examination table, a metal stool on casters, and a steel rack full of paper robes. I undressed and slipped into a robe and onto the table to wait for the doctor. In the next room, I could hear the quiet hum of the vacuum aspiration machine, one woman crying and another mumbling encouragement. I wanted to run to the nurses’ station and insist that they allow Neil to stay with me, but the Valium weighed me down. I could not move. I waited, though I can’t say if it was for a long or a short time.

I curled up in the backseat of Neil’s Honda Civic on the way home, staring through the window, still lost in the sedative. I must have slept. I remember nothing about
the trip home. I awoke swaddled in a nest of blankets on his father’s couch. I do not know how Neil managed to get me from the car to the house—he was tiny then, and I never was. Noises from the kitchen must have been what finally roused me. Neil was making me lunch.

He came into the living room after what seemed like a long time, carrying plates heaped with brown rice, shrimp, and broccoli in a rich brown sauce.

“Here,” he said, “I know you haven’t been able to eat much lately, and I thought now maybe…” He trailed off, looking at me hopefully. The food smelled like brine and garlic; it made my head swim. But he was so sincere, so wanted to comfort me, that I ate it. The taste lingered in my mouth for days.

We stayed together for another few months. Because we had given up the room to pay for the abortion, we met in coffee shops. Years later, he was my husband for a few months. He made the shrimp and broccoli dish only once while we were married. When he asked why it made me cry, I didn’t have the heart to tell him. Taste, like smell, carries memory in a way I cannot guard against. After that dinner, we never made love again.

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Putt and I drove from Huntsville, Alabama, to Atlanta for the First National Lesbian Conference without a single argument, which for us counted as an accomplishment. We were always fighting, mostly about the gap between my vaguely defined bisexuality and
her lesbian orthodoxy. We had been trying, off and on, to be lovers for five years and
couldn’t seem to find a way to live comfortably with our differences.

The idea of attending a gay rights conference made up entirely of women—
though, back then, we undoubtedly spelled it womyn or wimmin—thrilled us both, and
that the conference was in the Deep South seemed particularly transgressive. The
Radisson Hotel in which the conference was held was a very modern, very urban sort of
place; neither of us had ever stayed in such an aggressively corporate environment. We
were in our early 20s, not yet old enough to have those sorts of jobs. My luggage was a
ripped army knapsack; she wore frayed jeans and a T-shirt from a women’s music
festival she’d gone to the summer before. We were insurgents, smiling aggressively at the
middle-aged businessmen in the elevator and roping our arms around one another in
triumph. I was at my best as a faux lesbian when it was a political act, though I wouldn’t
have admitted it then.

The conference itself was a little tedious. We went to different sessions; I to ones
with enough theoretical content that I could later write about them for my women’s
studies courses, and she to ones with names like Goddess Spirituality and Sacred
Drumming. There were women at the conference whose official job was to “watch the
vibe,” to be certain that the almighty process moved forward. More often than not, this
meant silencing any voice that sounded even a little like mine; one of these vibe watchers
escorted a young, crew-cutted woman out of a session when she insisted that maybe there
was something positive in the butch-femme traditions of 1950s lesbian culture. I heard
another tell a woman who identified as “not yet sure of her sexuality” that this was
lesbian space, and although she was welcome to stay, she should sit quietly and “let the process continue.”

It was 1991, and we tossed around words like phallocentric and gynocide with revolutionary abandon. Radical lesbian separatism still seemed a viable option, and we quoted Andrea Dworkin with grave seriousness. (“Only when manhood is dead—and it will perish when ravaged femininity no longer sustains it—only then will we know what it is to be free.”) I was, I knew, a snake in the grass. I brought the male gaze into the room, I enslaved my would-be sisters with my disloyal lusts; I gave succor to the enemy. At the end of every session, I slunk into one of the bathrooms (there were no “men’s rooms” in the conference area—we had liberated them) to whisper at the beige walls all the snarky comments I had swallowed.

We would meet up again in the afternoon for the plenary sessions; Putt, high on sisterhood, me furiously scribbling notes in the back pages of my dog-eared copy of Gyn/Ecology, feeling like a sex offender. It was there that the real skirmishes broke out. A group of women claiming to speak on behalf of all the black lesbians in attendance took the stage before one afternoon session and demanded that all the Jewish lesbians leave, because they could not have “lesbian safe space” when surrounded by those who were oppressing their Palestinian sisters. There was an ongoing debate about whether or not the bisexual women in attendance should have to self-identify—perhaps, it was suggested, by wearing a ribbon or button of a specific color—and abstain from voting on any of the conference’s referendums. The gap between who I was and who the lesbian community would accept as a member of the tribe widened into a chasm.
The vendors’ room offered the only respite from the unrelenting seriousness of the conference. There, and only there, did sexuality rise up above the din of politics and make itself heard.

Putt and I leafed hungrily through back issues of On Our Backs. Maybe somewhere in those tastefully shot, mostly black-and-white photographs of real women loving real women, we would find a rubric that would let us be lovers. Oh, we’d each had stormy, tempestuous love affairs with other women, but somehow the alchemy of sex never worked between us; we never stopped being a clumsy tangle struggling toward intimacy, we never dissolved into a single, fluid being. At best, we soldiered on until the effort left us exhausted enough to fall asleep as comrades-in-arms. More often, attempts at sex simply reaffirmed our belief that things could never work out between us, because I had loved a man or two and could not say I never would again.

We purchased buttons with slogans like “Sisterhood is Powerful,” and “Grrrl Power.” We did not buy the ones that said, “Jodi Foster Made Me Do It” or “Vagiterian.” We were not that bold, nor that crude. I bought rainbow bracelets, a tote silk-screened with a photograph of The Venus of Willendorf, pink triangle earrings, and twice as many books as I could afford. I hoped to educate and accessorize myself into what Putt needed me to be. I loved her; it was painful to be told that I was her oppressor.

For the first two days, we walked by the Good Vibrations table without stopping. One of our earliest arguments had been over my suggestion that we just cut through all the trouble we were having and take my vibrator to bed with us. Putt was horrified. She was not, she made it clear, going to let something that could best be described as a
contraption anywhere near her sacred yoni and could not believe that I would even suggest it. We had still been teenagers then, and she was the real lesbian, so I apologized and never brought the subject up again. But there we were, five years later, still confused and frustrated. Finally, on the next to last day, I grabbed her hand and pulled her over the table.

“Look,” I said, gesturing to the table full of dolphin-shaped dildos and Wahl coil vibrators, “if this stuff was anti-lesbian, the conference organizers would never have let them set up here. I mean, they’ve banned perfume, alcohol, and men. It’s not like they’re shy about excluding.”

“I don’t care what they think.” She gave me a long, cold look. “I told you how I feel. Why are you pressuring me?”

I picked up a silicon statue of the Virgin Mary, showing it to Putt. Maybe I even shook it at her, though I like to think I didn’t. “How is this phallocentric? I don’t understand.” The woman sitting at the table, who I now think might very well have been the queen of lesbian sex herself, Susie Bright, laughed at us and shook her head.

“Of course you don’t understand,” Putt said. “You have sex with men. You want us to have a penis in bed with us.” She turned away, and I followed, reminding myself that I had no right to be angry, that I was—as I’d so often been reminded since we arrived—in danger of defiling her with my own impure desire.

That night, we went to a little Ethiopian restaurant that everyone at the conference had been raving about. We were shy going in; it was comfortable in the hotel, but we had lived with the harsh stares of the Deep South for long enough to be cautious. But inside,
women huddled around the small, low tables in multiples of two. It seemed everyone at
the conference was here with a partner.

The owner, a short middle-aged man in a starched white shirt and dark polyester
slacks, smiled and led us to an empty table in the back corner of the restaurant.

“Have you eaten Ethiopian food before?” he asked. We had not and agreed to let
him pick out the dishes for our dinner. “You will like this very much,” he assured us, and
then, after asking if we ate meat and whether or not we liked our food spicy, he walked
off to greet the next table of conferees.

Putt and I looked around, amazed to see so many women openly holding hands,
even kissing, in a restaurant smack in the middle of Atlanta. We were tired, less certain of
ourselves, not as brave. The uncomfortable afternoon weighed heavily on us, and we had
little to say to one another. Finally, the owner came back carrying a huge mesob covered
in thick lentil and spinach porridges, chunks of meat and fish, and a large oval of injera.

“Watch how they do it,” he said, pointing to a family sitting at the next table; a
family who, amazingly, seemed completely at ease in the company of 50 affectionate
lesbians. As we watched, they used small pieces of the injera to scoop up the porridges
and stews on the outer edges of the mesob. “You do it like that, no knives or forks.” He
shook his head and laughed. “But, really, you should feed each other. It’s called gursha.
In Ethiopia, if you love someone, you feed them.” He smiled at us—a kindly smile, not a
leer—and went off to wait on another table.

We sat for a moment, staring at the bread and the thick porridges, considering.
Did we love each other? Before the conference, we would have each said yes, and now
neither of us was certain. But, finally, we could not resist the charm of the custom or the heavy scent of spices that hung over the table. We fed one another small mouthfuls of lentils, lamb, fish, and vegetables. After a few warming bites, we grew playful. Putt was immoderate in the size of her gursha and fed me more than I could chew; I became clumsy and spilled azifa down her chin, into her lap. We laughed. We laughed some more, and then we ate and kissed and talked and forgot to worry about whether or not I was oppressing her. We left the restaurant holding hands.

But we went to sleep that night in separate beds and never made love again, though we are still friends. Every Christmas she sends me her famous Cayenne Cashew Brittle, and I send her jars of grape and cherry jam made during the summer. If I am in the South, we meet up and take one another to restaurants famous for their barbeque or grits or pastries. We swap recipes, and the only contraption we fight over now is her KitchenAid mixer, which I insist she should leave to me in her will. She says she hasn’t, but I don’t believe her.

On our first date, we ended up at Nobu even though we had no reservations and the restaurant was always fully booked weeks in advance. I do not know how he got us through the door, but James seemed to know every maître d’ in Manhattan. He fed me bigeye tuna and fresh fluke with dried miso while we sipped at lychee martinis and I tried to look sophisticated. Afterward, we had Champagne at the Top of the Tower in the
Beekman Hotel, across from my apartment. I had left the lights on, and we could see from our table that I was not a good housekeeper. He laughed about that, saying it didn’t matter. He had a cleaning woman. Later, at my door, he gave me a halting, chaste kiss before scurrying off. I thought I would never hear from him again.

I was wrong. We began a love affair that was more passionate in the city’s best restaurants than in our bedrooms. James introduced me to the voluptuary pleasures of Manhattan’s finest dining. He fed me an amuse-bouche of asparagus soup with frog leg at Les Celebrites, warm octopus salad at Le Bernardin, and pan-seared foie gras with Concord grapes at Jean-Georges. I learned to identify tastes in wine like tar, leather, and smoke. We met for lunch on Saturdays at Caviarteria—a silly place that became emblematic of the excesses of dot-com era New York. They served osetra with crème fraîche on toast points and a glass of Champagne as a lunch special. By the time we finally tumbled into bed, I had gained ten pounds.

When James stopped kissing me and calmly opened a night-table drawer and pulled out a syringe, I was mildly thrilled at the idea that I’d ended up in bed with a junkie—so New York, and I was trying very hard to be a New Yorker. But it wasn’t heroin; it was something called Caverject; a pre-Viagra answer to erectile dysfunction, which was, frankly, a lot less romantic. It smacked of infirmity rather than dangerous hedonism, and the idea of his actually sticking a needle into his penis made me queasy. But I went gamely on, pretending not to notice, afraid to embarrass him. And he went gamely on, afraid to admit he didn’t think it worth all the hassle either and would rather
just go out for a drink or dessert. And so, for several months, we had wonderful meals and terrible sex.

I grew fat. When food is sex, and you’re in love, it’s impossible to eat moderately. Our weekends were protracted gastronomic orgies; we often had lunch and dinner at five-star restaurants on both Friday and Saturday, each a many-coursed affair. We wandered into Chinatown on Sunday mornings, paper in tow, and settled in at a table at our favorite dim sum restaurant—its name long lost to memory, because everyone knew it by its address: 60 Mott Street—and meandered through the small dishes from morning till afternoon. The more I loved James, the more I ate, until the night when we had to cancel dinner with the Michaelsons at Le Cirque because I was too fat to fit into a single one of my cocktail dresses, and jeans simply would not do.

James, who I think loved me, too, took me to a shop for big women the next day, bought me three flowing silk dresses that I would fit into no matter how large I got. They were tents in muted shades of gray and black with elastic waistbands and voluminous sleeves. I wept while I tried them on, and because he did not want me to cry, James made a phone call. That night, instead of food, we made love through a gram of coke. It was hotter, more intimate, and more invigorating than any sex I had ever had. I remember thinking: ur-sex.

Three months later, the cocktail dresses that had been too tight weren’t even snug, and I had left James for a man with better drug connections who did not love me and so did not care that I was rushing into disaster. I think we had sex all of the time, but I’m not sure. The days from that year are a blur, the memories bruised, and I never call this man
by his name. If I talk of him at all, I call him “my coke dealer.” And when I think of him, I also think of James; who was kind and sweet and should have just let me grow fat.

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Tonight, I’m making rigatoni with seafood cooked in a pink vodka sauce. Last night, it was linguine with sundried tomatoes, sausages, capers, and broccoli rape. The night before, simple spaghetti with a meat sauce. I spend $20 a week on Parmesan alone.

I fill one of the huge Fiesta ware bowls from the cupboard with the layers of pasta, sauce, and cheese, then carry it out to my husband, Scotti. He is lying on the couch, watching the same episode of The Daily Show he has watched every afternoon this week. He will eat two bowls this size in the next 15 minutes, and then fall hard asleep. He won’t remember having watched any part of the show, and tomorrow we will watch it again, our routine as set as the show’s script. Only the pasta will be different; farfalle with eggplant, buckwheat, and truffle oil; fusilli with a wild mushroom ragout; Spaghetti Fra Diablo.

Scotti is unhappy. Not with me; the mess his unhappiness makes of my life is collateral damage. But he is unhappy enough that all the antidepressants in the pharmacopoeia only make a dent, and our family doctor has urged me to convince him to try electroconvulsive therapy. Shock treatment. The idea of it frightens me, and although I’ve mentioned it, it would be a lie to say I’ve tried to talk him into it. In truth, his depression is so dark and all-encompassing that I don’t try to talk him into much of
anything these days. Instead, I work to be the buffer between what he needs and the sharp truth of things. Food is my little white lie; it is the “everything is going to be all right” that I cannot bring myself to say.

I am five-foot-seven, and I weigh 208 pounds. When I married Scotti, I was five-foot-eight and weighed 157 pounds. Gravity is pulling hard on me.

Scotti weighs almost 350 pounds, more than even his square, six-foot-six skeleton can comfortably carry around. He’s a striking man—when we are out, children confuse him for Hagrid from Harry Potter, and old hippies holler, “Look, it’s Jerry Garcia.” But his knees hurt all the time and his feet look frostbitten. He cannot feel them. Diabetic neuropathy, near as the doctor can figure, although he isn’t diabetic. It’s just one of many puzzles. His hands are nearly as numb; half the time when he reaches out for me affectionately, he hurts me, unable to feel that he is touching me unless his caress has the force of a slap. When I cry out, he looks bewildered and does not reach out again for days. This is just one of the many ways I fail him.

The bowl of pasta piled high with grated cheese is another of those ways. We would feel better if we were not so heavy, but it would be a long time coming, and I can’t wait that long to comfort him or myself.

Even our dogs are fat; we love them, too, and each has grown old and crippled in a way we cannot do anything about, so we toss them chunks of the sausage or pieces of pasta while we eat.

We have forgotten the ways of showing affection.
In the summer, when the vegetables are fresh, I will put us on a diet...again. We will eat salads piled high with tomatoes from the garden and onions from the farmers’ market. Scotti will lose 30 pounds; I will lose 15. But it won’t last. Soon enough, it will be fall again, the melancholy season, and we’ll put the pounds back on. I will gain 20; Scotti will gain 45. This is how we lose the battle.

In truth, I like him fat, though not myself. I like that even when he is too sad to put his arms around me, I can curl around his back and the sheer bulk of him creates an illusion of safety. And there is so much we need to feel safe from, these days. I like to watch him eat; to see the veil of depression lift for those few minutes, see him go at his dinner with a single-minded passion that I imagine, in his younger years, would have been the hallmark of his lovemaking. I can’t give up this shadow of sex, a remnant of passion, and doom us to becoming distant bodies in the same house.

He jokes that I am killing him with kindness; I say, “No, oh-my-love, I am just killing you.” I am afraid it may be true, but I am more afraid to let the pot grow cold, to let the bowl stand empty, for very long. My resolve is nothing compared to the way his sadness weighs us down. It does not matter that I know what I am doing to the both of us; I am not brave enough to stop. I am afraid that both hungry and sad, we would turn mean or cold and drift away. And fat is not as bad as that. Fat is soft and comfortable; fat stands between us and everything that is not us. Fat softens the blows. Fat, at least, feels safe.
A Meditation on Love

Mommy Buddha is grousing again, hitching up his skirts and planting his big, black Chuck Taylors into the rutted mud of the road. His backpack rests heavy on my shoulders—he is done with carrying it, he’s insisted with a snap of the finger and a waggle of the head that isn’t, here in 1987, yet a cultural marker that’s moved far beyond the drag community.

“Fucking hippies,” he says as we reach the end of Bus Village, where the old naked guy at the hard road had told us we would find Hippie Hollow, the part of the Rainbow Gathering where we intended to camp. “There isn’t anything here. It’s just a dead end.”

I cajole him into moving on, the way one might a small child, with promises of a warm, dry place to pitch our tent and get some sleep. Mommy Buddha is not a small child; he’s a six foot three, three hundred pound Philosophy student and a man tough enough to wear housedresses and a blond topknot to class at the University of Alabama. But he’s also not not a child, with his tantrums and his quivery lower lip and his life-issoso-unfairing. I don’t want to spend the night in the muck of the road, or the swampy dead end of it, and I am able to keep him moving because he is a creature of comforts.

So we trek down the road again, and up another branch off it for a while, Mommy Buddha muttering under his breath. And then, as if there actually was something to this Rainbow Family magic, to this once-a-year-moveable-magic-love-in, I hear a voice I know. And that voice is telling a story I know, the one about Thanksgiving at his parents’ farm, his father grousing at the words we’re using on the Scrabble board, words
he doesn’t know, words like textual and orality which he says don’t sound like good
Christian words to him, and talking about don’t talk that college talk in my house son,
and talking about too big for our britches, and talking about getting above our raising. I
know this story because I was there.

So Mommy Buddha and I stop.

And it turns out that the voice belongs to Terry-who-was-my-boyfriend-before-
that-awful-business-with-the-cops-and-the-weed, and he says, “Okay, then, you can sleep
in my tent,” to Mommy Buddha and “Here, take this” to me and I do take this, which is a
cup of hot tea that turns out to have mushrooms in it but I don’t know that, I think it’s just
a cup of tea at the end of a long journey.

And then I’m sitting by the fire listening to stories about people I think but am not
sure that I knew once, a long time ago, even though I’ve never met the people who are
telling these stories before, and Terry-who-was-my-boyfriend-before-that-awful-
business-with-the-cops-and-the-weed is braiding my hair into a hundred tiny braids down
my back, weaving in pieces of embroidery thread and tiny silver bells and vine. And
because I don’t know that there are mushrooms in the tea, for the next couple of hours I
think maybe the warm feeling in my belly, the loveliness of the faces of the familiar
strangers around the campfire, the joyful tinkling of the bells in my hair mean that I’m
still in love with Terry-who-was-my-boyfriend-before-that-awful-business-with-the-cops-
and-the-weed. That maybe this whole magical Rainbow Gathering moment is meant to
show me that he is my soul mate and that I should say everything is forgiven and forgive
me and we should try again. But right before I make a fool out of myself, I notice that
I’m getting tracers off the joint that the familiar strangers are now passing amongst them and I ask, “Was this tea dosed?” “Just ‘srrooms,” says a girl in a Ramones t-shirt and a The Cat in the Hat hat, and I realize I’m just buzzed, and not still in love with Terry-who-was-my-boyfriend-before-that-awful-business-with-the-cops-and-the-weed, which is a relief, because the friends who lived through that-awful-business-with-the-cops-and-the-weed would not be pleased to hear that he was once again Terry-who-is-my-boyfriend. And, really, they’d be right.

Besides, it would have created pretty significant problems with Dogman-who-is-my-boyfriend-now.

In the morning Mommy Buddha and I take our backpacks and find Hippie Hollow proper. We camp among some students from Kent who are here on a sort of combined peace mission/drug run that never fully makes sense to me. Mommy Buddha spends much of the time running into town to buy fast food; he has Crone’s Disease and can’t take the whole-grain, raw-vegetable, everything-spiced-with-garlic-and-hot-pepper-sauce food that is served up at the free kitchens around the gathering. So he wakes up, walks the few miles to the car, drives into town, and sits at McDonald’s during the heart of the day, and then drives back in the evening. He’s already disgusted with the dirt and the lack of queer boys with ponytails who he’d hoped would want to have sex with him. I spend the days wandering around just staring at stuff: the giant spider webs woven into jungle gyms by the noncompetitive play folk, the painted elephant that the Krishnas
brought from New Vrindaban, the jugglers and giant bubble blowers and dervishes whirling in the dust.

At night I lay in our borrowed tent and listen to the echoing, sing-songy we love yous that float through the hills. I call back until Mommy Buddha tells me that if I don’t shut the fuck up and let him sleep he’s going to show me how much he does not love all this hippie bullshit in his mean voice, and then I just lay there quietly feeling all that echoing love wash over me. Because, although I know it’s hokey and more than a little played out, I actually believe in the power of love, organic vegetable curry over brown rice, dreadlocks, and drum circles to change the world. I believe those strangers up in the hills when they holler into the night we love you the way my Christian friends believe Jesus loves them.

I’m twenty-one and have just figured out how alone I really am in the world, that I don’t belong to my parents any more, that I will make it or not based solely on what I can and choose to do. That it is, in fact, possible not to make it, to auger in and fall apart and wind up spending most evenings alone in your apartment eating green beans out of the can and listening to Joni Mitchell before just going the fuck to bed at nine o’clock because there isn’t any reason not to and you have to work tomorrow anyway.

So, I really want to believe that these strangers love me. And they want me to believe it, too. I know they do. Which is why I stay away from Krishna Kitchen, even though they have the most reliably potable water. I recognize that I am, at this moment, lonely in a dangerous way. In a maybe-it-wouldn’t-be-so-bad-to-move-to-New-Vrindaban-in-spite-of-the-rumors-of-drug-running-and-underaged-sex-scandals way.
Well, that, and there is a persistent rumor that they put salt peter in their food to help folk avoid the temptations of illicit sex, and I’m pretty okay with giving in to that particular temptation under the right circumstances. Though it might explain why Mommy Buddha is having such a hard time finding pony-tailed boys who want to have sex with him.

We stay through the Om ceremony on the Fourth of July, joining in the chanting of thousands of tie-dyed, shaggy-haired peaceniks in Main Meadow and then erupting into hoots of joy and dancing. Or, at least, I erupt. Mommy Buddha sits with our packed gear and waits for me to get the hell over it so that we can get on the road. On the way to the car, we pass a small booth passing out copies of AllWays Free, a sort of newsletter/crash pad guide put together by the Rainbow Family. High on love, and possibly hash from a brownie handed to me by a passing woman in Main Meadow that tasted like dirt and happiness, I put down my name and my address. “Rainbow family all ways welcomed!” I write underneath.

We pile our dirty selves and our dirty gear into Mommy Buddha’s old, broken down Volvo on which we had painted My Car-ma and glued plastic dinosaurs in preparation for our journey. Car drag. I’m dressed in an ugly brown and orange dashiki that I found in a pile of give-aways at one of the kitchens, Mommy Buddha’s wearing one of his customary housedresses. So, of course, we get a flat tire. In Alabama. And equally of course, Mommy Buddha doesn’t have a jack, though at least he has a spare.
“I’m pretty certain that this is where we get murdered,” I say, as we sit by the side of the road. We get flipped off and honked at, but for a very long time nobody is inclined to stop and help.

“Shut up,” says Mommy Buddha. “Just shut the fuck up, okay?”

So I do. We’re both scared. The only thing worse than having nobody stop to help would be to have a state trooper stop to help and—because I’m wearing a dashiki and he’s wearing a housedress and there are plastic dinosaurs glued to the car which most certainly all add up to probable cause—take a little look-see at what all we have in the car. Which, along with all our smelly gear and a week’s worth of fast food wrappers, is a sheet of blotter acid and some mighty fine marijuana. The blotter acid is half the reason I went to the gathering, and all the reason Mommy Buddha agreed to come along. Well, that and the ponytailed queer boy sex I’d promised him that had turned out to be a lot harder to find than the drugs. We would throw it away, but there isn’t any place to throw it. No woods. Not even any kudzu. Just a flat expanse of concrete and dry packed clay. And after about an hour I start praying for the murderer to show up before the southern policeman because I’m pretty sure I’d rather be dead than a Jewish hippie chick locked up in a rural Alabama jail.

Also, I start to wonder how long it takes to die of thirst.

And at pretty much that same moment it occurs to me that maybe I should have looked for Terry-who-was-my-boyfriend-before-that-awful-business-with-the-cops-and-the-weed before we left, and at least said goodbye.
Finally, after we’ve been sitting in the road dust for a good two and a half hours, a trucker pulls over and changes the tire for us. Actually, he makes a u-turn and comes back to change our tire, because he’d been driving the other way. He makes it known up front that he didn’t want to stop, doesn’t really like our kind and thinks we’re pretty much fucking idiots, but he also either never figures out that we aren’t both girls or he does figure it out and has no idea what to make of Mommy Buddha so just pretends to still think we’re both girls, and he says he just couldn’t feel right about leaving two young girls stranded by the side of the road. He tells us a little bit about what Jesus means to him, but in a way that’s lovely and explains why he stopped, not in a way that makes it seem like he might fix the tire and then murder us for being abominations of nature or something. So, we’re grateful.

As he pulls away, he says “Jesus loves you, you know.” He brakes to give us one last looksee. “Even people like you,” he adds.

And after he’s gone, I call out in that sing-songy Rainbow way, “We love you!” Mommy Buddha rolls his eyes and pulls out into traffic.
What I Know of Madness

The Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum

The minute we turn off Meathouse Fork Road, the Appalachian mountain roads go all one-lane and twisty. My night vision isn’t good, there are deer around every turn and switch-back, and locals who could drive this stretch of road blind are impatient behind me. But my friend Brad is kind. He just laughs a little when I say that this might be the scariest part of our planned ghost-hunting adventure.

By the time we arrive in Weston, WV it is good and truly dark and I can’t see far enough beyond the gleam of headlights to get my bearings, so Brad takes over as navigator.

“Which way should I turn?” I ask.

“Left,” he answers.

“And now?” I ask.

“And now?”

He guides us to a CVS, though how I don’t know. Something about the way the streets lay out makes sense to him in a way it doesn’t to me. I buy flashlights, because it’s only just now dawned on me that the old state hospital in which we’re about to spend the night probably doesn’t have electricity. We’ll be glad for them later, because—except for a break room and two bathrooms—it doesn’t.

The guy at the counter is in his mid-fifties, with the lilting accent of central West Virginia, and so I tell him where we’re going because I hope he’ll have stories.
“You’re doing the ghost hunting tour at the old hospital?” he asks, after I’ve just said we are. He doesn’t say asylum, like the website does, or mental hospital, the colloquialism with which I grew up in hills not far from here. The hospital—first, the old one we’re going to visit, and then the new one which took its place a little more than a decade ago only a few miles away—has always been the lifeblood of this little Appalachian town, and so the locals afford it as much dignity as they can.

“I remember when I was about fifteen or sixteen,” he tells us, “walking down the sidewalk beside the fence at the hospital when I should have been at school. There was this lady there, one of the patients, and she kept pulling up her skirt and her stockings.” He pantomimes a woman lifting her skirt up above her hips and showing off the tops of her stockings seductively. “I said, ‘Lady, I’m only about fifteen years old. You ought not to be doing that’.” He laughs. “But I remembered it all these years. Yes sir, I never did forget it.”

This may be the only true story we’ll hear tonight about the patients at the Weston State Hospital, now a “historic” and “paranormal” tourist destination operating under its original name: The Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum.

Arriving

Copperhead, a man with long red-grey hair in faded jeans, boots, and lots of faux-pagan jewelry, calls everybody out into the main hallway when it’s time for the tour to begin. “We got a few rules we need to go over first,” he says, his thumbs hooked into his belt loops. The rules are simple. Don’t take food out of the break room, because they’re tired of having to clean up after people. Don’t smoke except in the two designated areas;
outside through the doors behind us or on the second-floor balcony just off the old doctor’s quarters. No drugs or alcohol, even if you brought enough to share. He explains that we’ll be split into two groups of twelve. One group will start on the first two floors, the second on floors three and four. After an hour or so with our guide, we’ll be free to split up and explore those floors of the hospital on our own. After four hours, at 1am, we’ll switch floors. The tour lasts from 9pm to 5am. “And be respectful,” he says. “These ghosts were people. Are still people. Don’t provoke them.” Then he smiles a carnivival-barker smile and says, “If you want to know what I mean by provoke ‘em, I mean don’t act like Zak.” Everyone else in the crowd laughs. Brad and I look at each other. Neither of us has any idea who Zak is.

**The Guide**

Sarah, a short middle-aged woman in sweatpants and an OK Kitty scarf, tells us she drove for more than an hour to be our tour guide, spending pretty much all of the sixty dollars she’ll be paid for the night in gas to get here. When I ask her why she’d do that, she says she loves the building. And it is an amazing building, nearly a quarter mile long, with beautiful hand carved woodwork and unexpected beaux-arts touches. Sarah says it’s the largest hand-cut stone building in North America. Even this claim, when I try to verify it, proves illusive. It all comes down to how one defines largest.

“I read that the workers who broke ground on the hospital were ‘Negro convict labor’ (I make air quotes because I’m incapable of using the word Negro without them), slaves who’d been set free when West Virginia broke with Virginia, but who were then
immediately arrested for being vagrants and put to work by the new state,” I tell her. “Is that true?”

“Oh, God, I never heard that,” she says, shaking her head. “It could be. We don’t like to talk about the more unpleasant parts of the hospital’s history.”

**Floors 1 and 2**

The first ghosts Sarah introduces to us are Lilly, Ruth, and Emily. Lilly and Emily are both little girls, and both—they say—will come out to play with lucky ghost hunters. Ruth is an old woman, and the only impairment we’re told about is that she was confined to a feeding chair, a sort of wheelchair with a tray attached to the front. The guide suggests that sometimes visitors hear the sound of it going up and down the halls. We’re told she’s protective of the child-ghosts. A domestic haunting. There are music boxes in the rooms both girls are said to haunt; the cheap reproductions every little girl has with the plastic ballerina en pointe twirling in the middle. In Lilly’s room, there is also a toy box full of cheap plastic toys, which our guide tells us have been brought and left for the girl-ghost by visitors. Someone in our crowd says, “Like she’d even know what to do with toys from the twentieth century.” I want to answer, “There were children here until 1994, as patients,” but I’m still trying to behave, to blend in, so I don’t. Instead, I ask Sarah, “Were these real patients here? Do you know when and why they were here?”

“We don’t talk about patient history,” Sarah tells me. “That’s not what people come here for. Even on the historical tour, we stick to talking about the building, about the treatments, and about some of the notable staff.”
The only other named ghost on the first two floors is Jacob, an alcoholic who responds well to being offered whiskey. Which, of course, we’ve been told it is against the rules for us to have. And maybe it really is, because although there are many moldering and melted pieces of candy on the windowsills of the girl ghost’s rooms, there are no half-full whiskey bottles in Jacob’s.

After about an hour of this, Sarah lets us loose on our own, allowing us to wander the entire building—save for a few rooms whose doors are locked because the floors have become unsafe—unescorted. The building is 242,000 square-feet; most of the time we are too far away from the other ghost hunters to even hear them.

“This is the part that feels really transgressive,” I say to Brad as we wander alone down a dark corridor. “It doesn’t seem like we should be allowed to do this.” I open the door to a large bathroom with several toilet stalls, baths, and sinks.

“Yeah,” Brad says. “But I guess there isn’t much we could do to the place.” He shines his flashlight into a pile of debris in the far corner of the hallway.

I step into the bathroom. “You know, I was always too afraid to do this as a kid,” I say and then look into the mirror. “Bloody Mary,” I say and then spin around. “Bloody Mary.” Spin. “Bloody Mary.” Spin. No apparition appears in the mirror. I knew it wouldn’t, but for a moment there had been a frisson of fear in my belly, an echo of a younger me who was capable of believing in ghosts.

What I Know of Madness 1
I am in an unlit room, sitting on a rocking chair in front of a barred window, looking out over a darkened lawn. I wear a white cotton nightgown with flocking around the banded collar, and hold my mother’s old porcelain doll—the one she named Baby Brother—in my arms. His skull is bald and crazed with age, the paint that gave detail to his face long ago rubbed away. I have wrapped him in a white blanket, and I am singing tunelessly to him while I rock.

In this dream, one I’ve had now and again for twenty years, a series of doctors come into the room and insist Baby Brother isn’t a real baby, that I must put him down and come away, and I will be locked in this room until I do. I both know and don’t know the doll is not a real baby. That it is not my baby. It doesn’t matter. The idea of letting him go is a searing pain across my chest. Each time they try to pry him from my arms, I want to scream, the pain so strong it takes my breath away. It is unbearable and I turn my head to look out into the starless night.

I want to say, “I know he isn’t real, and it doesn’t matter.” I want to say, “This isn’t something you could understand.” But I can’t, because every time they walk into the room they reach for the doll, and then I have no breath for words.
What Lingers

For the first hour of the tour, I think that the most abject thing about the old hospital is that it still stinks of stale sweat and filthy bodies. But then we’re allowed to go off by ourselves, and the smell dies. When we get back together, I realize it’s one of the other tourists…a big guy in unwashed jeans who has been here before and who believes not
only that there are ghosts here, but that he has a special ability to find with them. He calls himself a ghost hunter with pride, not irony.

**The Lobotomy Recovery Ward**

The lobotomy recovery ward is not on the walk-through of the first two floors that Sarah led us on, but neither is it off limits, so we ask Copperhead to tell us how to find it. “I’ll walk you down,” he says. I try to ask him questions, but he’s got a salesman’s heavy handed way of answering that always turns the question back around to his own prowess as a ghost hunter. “We find the ghosts from talking to them, interacting with them, not by reading the records. But often, we can match the ghosts we find with someone in the actual patient registry. Like Jacob,” he says, referring to the one male ghost in the first two levels. “We found that there was in fact a Jacob here being treated for alcoholism, and that he was obsessed with talking about whiskey.” This is rural Appalachia. If there had never been a drunk named Jacob in treatment here during the more than 100 years the hospital operated, that would be the coincidence worth noting.

Lobotomies at Weston Hospital were most often performed by Dr. Walter Freeman, the doctor who “pioneered” the ice pick lobotomy. He traveled around the country in his personal van, which he called the lobotomobile, performing procedures at a number of institutions.

“When did they stop doing lobotomies here?” I ask Copperhead. A few yards ahead, he points to a plaque about Dr. Freeman, which says he performed his last lobotomy at Weston in 1967. “There, see, it says. 1967.” But I know this sign elides a more difficult truth. Dr. Freeman’s last lobotomy procedure at Weston was in 1967, but a
I know a woman who was the head nurse in the lobotomy recovery ward in the 1980s. I tell Copperhead this.

“That can’t be true,” he says, turning his back to me and walking on. “The sign says right there, the last one was done in 1967.”

Freeman was no longer performing the surgeries, but other physicians were. I don’t think Copperhead is lying, I just don’t think he knows very much about the actual history of the hospital. Or cares, and that troubles me more.

Brad and I have borrowed something called a “k2,” a meter that’s supposed to read electro-magnetic energy and thus identify the presence of ghosts. It looks like a television remote with no buttons; just a row of five lights: green, light green, yellow, orange, and red. Just what these lights mean is vague, except that the more of them that are lit up, the more it suggests the presence of a spirit. The whole time we’re in the lobotomy ward, all five of the lights on ours stay lit.

“What kind of activity do you get down here? Do the ghosts speak to you?” Brad asks Copperhead.

“No. I mean, these guys were pretty much brain-dead, so we don’t get much from them,” Copperhead says.
Figure 2  A Heart-Breaking Sign over a Sink in the Children’s Ward

**What I Know of Madness 2**

In my dream, the bars on the window blur, and I stare beyond the darkened lawn to a row of Bald Cypress trees. These twisted giants shielded my childhood. I remember playing in their towering ranks, hiding with Felicity when we were still small enough to stand among their knees and not be seen.
I am not at Cypress Manor, although these are my grandfather’s trees and not simply the same kind. I don’t know how they have come to line the lawn of this sterile place, with its white blankets, white paint, and doctors in quiet white shoes. I’m not sure if the trees are meant to keep me safely here or mark the border to the place I could go if I would just put down the doll. It doesn’t matter.

I hold Baby Brother in my lap and stare out over the darkened lawn at the silhouettes of these magnificent trees until the doctors give up and leave the room. In the quiet, I weep at the sweetness of being among the cypress again, and now it’s the pain of their beauty that takes my breath away. I can’t imagine wanting to leave this place, to ever again live beyond the reach of their long shadows. I laugh at the doctors for threatening to keep me locked in. If they want the doll, they should threaten to throw the door open wide.

I rock the doll, my lips against the warm, downy skin of his scalp. He smells of sweet milk and talc. I hum the song of the wind in the boughs of the trees, rocking back and forth in rhythm with their gentle sway.

The One Story They Claim is True

“Dean,” Sarah says, “was a mute. This story, we can document. This one, we know is true. His roommates hung him from the ceiling with a bed sheet and beat him, beat him real bad. One of them realized that they were going to get in big trouble, so they decided they better kill him. Dean was unconscious, so they laid him on the floor and put the leg of one of the beds on his head. Then they jumped up and down on the bed until they had pulverized his skull.” She pauses for effect. “Then one of his two roommates ran down
the hall to the nurse’s station and said that the ghost in this room had killed Dean. One of the men who did it, a man named Myers, just died at the new Sharpe state hospital a couple of weeks ago.

“When we first started coming through here, Dean was real friendly. He’d play with us and joke around. But over time, he got quieter and quieter until finally he just stopped interacting with us at all. We asked him if we’d hurt his feelings, or offended him. It took Copperhead a while to get him to talk to us, but finally he said no, we hadn’t hurt his feelings or anything. It was just hard for him to listen to us tell his story over and over again. So we asked if he wanted us to stop telling people his story. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I think it’s important for people to know my story. But could you tell it in the hallway so I don’t have to listen to it?’ And that,” says our guide, “is why we’re standing out here instead of in the room.”

Brad asks, “Does he communicate any differently with you than the other ghosts, since he couldn’t speak?”

“No, I don’t think so. What do you mean?” Sarah asks.

“Well, because he wasn’t able to talk in life. Like, how did he let you know that he didn’t want to listen to you tell his story anymore?”

Sarah is visibly flustered. “Well, Dean has never spoken directly to me. But I’m pretty sure Copperhead and some of the other ghost hunters were able to get his voice on EVP.” She explains that it’s a sort of tape recorder that can capture ghostly voices and make them audible to us.
I ask Sarah for the full name of Dean’s killer, the one who has just died, but she
doesn’t know. Later, I ask Copperhead. “Michael David Myers,” he says. This is the
name of the non-speaking serial killer who escapes from a psychiatric hospital to find and
kill his sister (and a lot of other people) in the movie Halloween and its nine sequels.

**Ghost Adventures**

Zak, it turns out, is Zak Bagans, one of the hosts of the show Ghost Adventures. I find
parts of a seven hour live broadcast they did on Halloween, 2009 on YouTube. A former
employee of Weston Hospital talks about Ruth, remembers her as a violent old woman
who would bang on the tray of her feeding chair whenever a man walked past.

Sarah had shown us the seclusion cells, told us that anyone could have a patient
put in one, that patients sometimes stayed locked inside for months at a time. That some
of them died. Near midnight, Zak locks three volunteers in the seclusion cells and then
starts yelling at a ghost he believes has said “fuck you” to the ghost hunters. Nothing
much happens. One girl says she felt something brush her hair, tug on her jacket. Zak
calls out to the ghost he imagines is there, offering to keep the girl locked up in the
seclusion cell for the rest of the night if he will only show himself.

I do a web search. Although fans have requested it, none of the many ghost
hunting shows have ever gone to a concentration camp.
Figure 3 According to the Ghost Hunters, the “Orb” in this Photo I Took is a Spirit

**What I know of Madness 3**

“I was in high school,” my father said, “and working in the afternoons, driving the truck to make deliveries for Dad.”
My grandfather was a grocery wholesaler. Not the grandfather whose cypress trees guarded my childhood, but my father’s father, who was the worst sort of bastard; mean and bigoted and dumb. Who never guarded anyone’s childhood.

“And I remember coming home from school. Mom was passed out drunk, and when Dad got home, he said, ‘I’m not doing it this time. Johnny, you’re going to have to take your mother up to the State Hospital. Just pull up and tell ‘em you’ve got Bonnie Einstein, they’ll know what to do with her. Lord knows they’ve seen her enough times before.’ And then Dad and I put her in the back of the truck, with all the empty pallets from the day’s delivery, and Dad went off to play golf.”

I think my father was drunk himself when he told me this story, in the first years of a decade-long bender that would end only when we, his adult children, committed him to a rehab facility. “I also had to go pick her up. Had to take her something to wear, because they just dumped the patients in these big wards, men and women together, and after not too long the clothes they were wearing when they were admitted would rot off their bodies. They didn’t give them hospital gowns or anything. Just left them in those big rooms, naked.”

Years later, when he tells me that I’ve made up this story, I don’t question him. I hated my grandmother—a mean old drunk with a sharp tongue and filthy mouth—and by then she’d been dead long enough that he’d taken to calling her *my sainted mother*. And he’s haunted enough without my insisting on seeing ghosts he doesn’t believe are there.
When I Lived in Manhattan

When I lived in Manhattan, we sat in East Side bars full of books and leather, smoking cigars and drinking Cosmopolitans. We wore our pearls without irony, our hair down long and straight, and our heels high.

When I lived in Manhattan, my mother used to say, “Don’t come back to West Virginia and tell us how much better everything is in Manhattan because we don’t want to hear about it.”

When I lived in Manhattan, Salman Rushdie was our Jay McInerney and we quoted his Fury like teenagers in love quoting song lyrics. The city boiled with money and the talk was still of start-ups, IPOs, interactivity, the unimaginable future that had just begun to begin. We carried worn copies of the paperback in our messenger bags and dog-eared the pages that told us we were changing the world.

When I lived in Manhattan, Joey Ramone wrote a song to Maria Bartiromo and, somehow, punk didn’t die. Although, shortly thereafter, Joey did.

When I lived in Manhattan, people began living with—rather than dying from—AIDS.

When I lived in Manhattan, I would scour the Green Market for fiddlehead ferns, morels, and ramps in early Spring, cook them up in omelets for my lovers, and talk about how
they tasted of home. I’d never actually eaten any of those things until I moved to Manhattan. In West Virginia, we ate our vegetables out of the can.

When I lived in Manhattan, the macaroni and cheese at Chat n Chew was all the rage.

When I lived in Manhattan, Patti Smith was everybody’s godmother.

When I lived in Manhattan, the hippest lesbians hung out at Meow Mix in the East Village. It was grungy and boho and all the girls were both younger and cooler than I could have pretended to be, so instead I tried The Cowgirl Hall of Fame where all the lesbians were already married to each other and just stopping by for hamburgers on their way to Lamaze class, so I moved on to the Clit Club at Mother where the drag kings all looked like Elvis and the only person who ever hit on me was a very drunk drag queen who seemed to think I came as a package deal with the attractive young man sitting beside me at the bar. I didn’t know that attractive young man so I didn’t really have anything to offer my suitor but at closing time we took ourselves to the Kiev for a consolation breakfast anyway. We became running buddies—hanging out at clubs like Save the Robots and The Limelight—until the night she met the man of her dreams in the bathroom at Candybar, changed into chinos, and moved with him to Brooklyn.

When I lived in Manhattan, most of my lovers were men.
When I lived in Manhattan, the skyline was still intact.

When I lived in Manhattan, certain folk back home said it was about time I moved to Jew York.

When I lived in Manhattan, I used to run across a B-list actress—an older woman who played mostly slightly dopey grandmothers—at the grocery store. In her cart, she would have laundry soap and ground beef and bags of apples and toilet paper and cans of tuna and boxes of pasta and the same brand of shampoo that was supposed to tame frizzy hair that I had in mine. We’d smile and nod if we passed in the aisles. On the rare occasion we’d pass on the street, we just kept walking.

When I lived in Manhattan, everyone liked to tell this joke: In a flat, Midwestern drawl, “They ought to build an island and put all you queers on it.” In voice full of joie de vivre, “They did, sweetie, and you’re standing on it!”

When I lived in Manhattan, I sent my laundry to the Fluff and Fold.

When I lived in Manhattan, nobody ever said to me, “You wear too much black.”

When I lived in Manhattan, we sometimes had champagne and caviar on toast points for lunch.
When I lived in Manhattan, I learned not to say my hair needs washing or the sink needs fixing, to say hollow instead of holler, and that nothing is ever up over yonder.

When I lived in Manhattan, I used to run into Soupy Sales at the bodega on the corner of 33rd and 2nd on a fairly regular basis. We would buy hotdogs and go sit on a bench and reminisce about West Virginia. He’d say, every time, “Man, these New York dogs aren’t nearly as good as Stewart’s hotdogs,” meaning the little local joint back home and not the national chain. And they weren’t. Then he’d shake his head and say “Look at us. Two Jews from Huntington sitting in New York. That’s not something you see every day.” We’d laugh, and then he’d pat me on the shoulder and walk home.

When I lived in Manhattan, we all knew the secret to the soup dumplings at Joe’s Shanghai but were willing to pretend that we didn’t and to accept them as a miracle of the city.

When I lived in Manhattan, I was for The Mets.

When I lived in Manhattan, and couldn’t take the swank bars any more but had outgrown the club kid clubs, I would catch a cab to the Meatpacking District and hang out at Hellfire, a dingy S&M club filled with chubby, middle-aged couples whipping one another and scarred ex-junkies looking to hook up with the PVC clad young women who were on their way to becoming junkies and were just there to earn a little cash. I was part
of a small gaggle of hipsters that sat at a corner table, swilling expensive vodka out of a paper sack and smiling at the elderly professor who walked around the club naked and masturbating, though not in an encouraging way, not in a way that would make him think it all right to come over and say hello.

When I lived in Manhattan, Rudy Giuliani was Mayor but Ed Koch was still Queen.

When I lived in Manhattan, a wolf prowled the woods in Central Park.

When I lived in Manhattan, the photographer Gordon Parks was my neighbor and some mornings I would ride down in the elevator with him and his date of the previous evening. He was in his eighties then; the dates—who always seemed to me to be different young women—mostly looked to be in their twenties. One day, having forgotten some paper or file, I rode back up with him after he’d said his goodbyes. “I’m just the right amount of famous,” he said, smiling. “I get to go home with the prettiest girl at every party, if I want to, and of course I get invited to every party.” He ran his fingers over his thick, white mustache. “But on the street, almost nobody recognizes me, so I don’t have to deal with that.” I smiled and nodded as the elevator stopped at my floor. I unlocked my door and grabbed the file or paper off my desk, over which I’d hung a copy of Gordon Parks’ American Gothic long before I knew he was my neighbor.
When I lived in Manhattan, a friend’s mother told me that I had almost no accent in English, but that listening to me say the blessing over the candles in Hebrew was like watching a Beverly Hillbillies Hanukkah Special.

When I lived in Manhattan, everyone was mad for curried goat.

When I lived in Manhattan, Alan Greenspan was our holy man.

When I lived in Manhattan, the last ad agency at which I worked held a lavish Christmas party with a special musical guest. We all worried, over the free lobster on the buffet and with glasses of Moët in our hands, that it might be the president of the company who had his own, not very good, garage band. But it wasn’t his band. It was an old man with a square guitar. I squealed, everyone else just look puzzled. I was a little surprised to be the only one at my table to recognize him when he came out on stage, and even more so when I was the only one who recognized him when he began to sing. “That’s Bo Diddley,” I yelled at them, incredulous. “Bo Fucking Diddley.” “Oh,” they said, and wandered back to the open bar.
Mountain Jews

We’re Mountain Jews, halfway between Reformed and Baptist.

—my brother Robert

This is a Distinctly American Story, But Not a Very Appalachian One

A.I. came to America from Linkuva, Lithuania, where his family lived on the estate of a Baron Hastings. His father, Joseph, studied Talmud, though family legend doesn’t account for whether Joseph was a devout scholar or just a bum. Either is possible. His mother, Sheva Baila, ran the baron’s dairy. We have a single black and white photo and so know that she was a stout woman with large hands and a broad face. Peasant stock, but shrewd. In 1886, she sent the fifteen year old A.I. to Baltimore so that he could make his fortune and send a little money home.

A.I. bought a hundred dollar peddler’s pack from the Baltimore Bargain House and moved to Greenbrier County in southeastern West Virginia. A horse-and-wagon peddler, he travelled through the small towns and hollows, selling sewing needles, suspenders, bits of lace, hair pins, and calico to the local folk. In Lithuania, he and the oldest of his siblings had joined the Baron’s children in their lessons with two British tutors, so although he no doubt spoke with a heavy accent, his English was good enough to haggle. The railroad was just beginning to reach this part of Appalachia and people needed the things he carried with him.

He did all right for a year or so, until his wagon got stuck in the ford of the Greenbrier River at Lowell. Unable to afford a new wagon, he opened a general store in the tiny town of Talcott, near the Big Ben Tunnel where twenty years before John Henry
had driven down sixteen feet while the steam drill only made nine. He did much better than all right once the railroad started bringing in men to work the mines. In 1891 the rest of family, including my great-grandfather Lake, emigrated to the US and settled throughout West Virginia. Most, like A.I., became shopkeepers, but buffered by his older brothers’ successes, Lake was able to graduate from high school and later went on to John Hopkins Medical School. He set up practice in Huntington, West Virginia, which was then a little bustling. A little fashionable. His sons went on to be doctors and businessmen, opening factories to build optics and manufacturing the heavy machinery needed to mine coal. My father joined the family business, as son-in-laws were expected to do, when I was born.

Ours is not a story of eeking out a meager living in the mountains. These were not hard times.

**Not Distinctly Appalachian Enough: Correspondence with an Editor**

“As it’s an anthology, previous work is good, and nothing need be too overtly Appalachian.”

And then, “My co-editor…loves your essay, but wonders if it’s distinctly Appalachian enough, which is exactly what I told you wasn’t absolutely necessary. (My apologies.) I dunno. Maybe he’s right. Have you anything else to send along?”

And so I sent along two more essays, both nonfictional accounts of my life in Appalachia and elsewhere. I never heard back from the editors.
The rejection pricks me in a way it wouldn’t have if the editors had just said, “Thank you for sending us your work, but it isn’t quite right for this book.” I’m angered by the idea that my work—essays written from a life spent mostly in Appalachia, informed always by being someone born and raised in West Virginia—isn’t distinctly Appalachian. That someone with a more expected version of the Appalachian story—one that speaks out of poverty, or a closeness to the land, or a certain sort of Protestantism—feels entitled to make that distinction.

I wonder, Can I be from here without being of here?

There Are Other Stories

I will tell you, “We first came to America in Lake’s generation,” but of course I had four great-grandfathers. One, a broken-down laborer from Peterstown, WV remembered only as being so soft-spoken that nobody can recall him speaking at all. One, a minister in the South who brought such dissension to his congregations that he had to denomination-hop. One, according to family legend, came to the U.S. from Ireland as an indentured servant and reinvented himself as a robber-baron. That I can find a birth certificate showing that he was born in the U.S. to parents who were also born in the U.S. doesn’t change the way we tell this story; now, we just also say, “Well, he was rich enough to afford to create a pedigree for himself.”

And, of course, I had four great-grandmothers. One, a woman named Gracie who was mean as spit and hid beer beneath her apron at night. One, a small-boned lady whose flowered china I inherited and through whom I am entitled to join the DAR (but, of
course, I haven’t). One—the one married to the minister—about whom I know nothing at all, not even her name. One, Lake’s wife, a stout woman with a broad face named Bertha who I come to resemble more and more with each passing year.

I tell you this so that you will understand everything that follows is made up of family legend. We are probably wrong about much of it, but it is what I know of who I am. When I say that we came to this country in my great-grandfather’s generation, I am choosing one origin story over others. Still, it’s true.

**Is this an Appalachian Christmas?**

Through the evening-lit windows, I could see the glow of the televisions, the Christmas tree lights, the crèches on the mantles. The fathers, lean and angular, wore khakis and cardigan sweaters instead of dark suits and starched white dress shirts. The mothers’ potholdered hands held pies and steaming platters of ham, not brisket and latkes for the Hanukkah feast.

I didn’t know these people. The three hundred block of Eleventh Avenue in Huntington, WV was unexplored country. I lived a world away, in the four hundred block. There was no real difference, the same brick houses sat back from large yards along the tree-lined boulevard. But I was only two weeks old enough to cross the street, to stay out until the streetlights came on, and this was the first time I’d walked this sidewalk alone, the first time I’d seen into the houses of strangers this way.

Through the glass of their windows, they looked like television families, I remembered thinking, the way families were supposed to look. I wasn’t yet old enough to
understand that families always, and only, look that way when we peer at them through lighted windows from a cold sidewalk. That from inside the house, all families are messy and complex.

There was a tree at my house, too, and presents. We are the kind of Jews who sing Frosty the Snowman and Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, drink eggnog, wait for Santa. But ours was a borrowed holiday and it never quite felt like we got it right. Always, buried in it, was the secret we weren’t supposed to tell our friends: Jesus wasn’t really the son of God, except perhaps in the way that we are all children of God.

There is a picture from that Christmas morning of me in a fairy costume, a child-sized ermine stole draped around my shoulders, a tiara perched precariously on my tangled brown hair. It was one of the many magical, privileged moments that made up my childhood. Under the tree, there is a fire truck big enough for me to drive my brothers around the yard while they made siren noises in the back seat. A wooden slide for the playroom. Baby dolls and picture books and games my father would cheat at to let us win. In my grandfather’s stable, my new pony whinnied in the dark. Or maybe that was the year before, or the year after. I can’t remember. So I cannot tell you what it feels like to be scared, or hungry, or in danger as a child. What it’s like when Dad is out of work or the baby is sick and there is no money for the doctor. But I can tell you how little it takes to make a six year old girl believe that she doesn’t belong where she is. And I can tell you how achingly sweet it can be to stand on the sidewalk in the cold of December and feel yourself apart.
How Would You Feel If Your Book Was Shelved Under Appalachian Writers?

During my defense, my MFA thesis director asked how I would feel if my books were shelved under Appalachian Writing.

“I’d feel great,” I said, “but I’m not sure if Sarah Beth would be happy about it.”

We all laughed. My friend, Sarah Beth Childers, writes excellent essays about growing up just a few miles from where I grew up, essays about her cigarette-smoking Granny, gospel singers in gravy-stained shirts, a father flicking cigarette butts into the community pool while his children swim, baby bottles full of Mountain Dew. They are lyrical and lovely and I admire them very much. But, although we grew up just a few miles from one another—walked the same streets, ate in the same restaurants, shopped at the same stores—these are essays I could never write. Her new book, Shake Terribly the Earth, is about a life lived both very near and very far from mine. The publisher says that she writes in a “thoughtful, humorous voice born of Appalachian storytelling.” And she does.

No publisher will ever say that about my writing. But is the fond voice telling family stories in the past tense the only one an Appalachian writer is allowed?

Is This a Story about Living in Appalachia?

Of an evening, my husband and I might sit on the back porch of our house in Appalachian Ohio, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer. He’d have just put in a fourteen hour day at work; I would have put in nine. There might be a deer nibbling the dogwood
near our back fence, or the coyotes might be calling to one another across the narrow ravine on the other side of our road.

“I love our life,” my husband would say. He always says this when we sit outside of an evening, smoking cigarettes and drinking a beer.

This sounds Appalachian enough, but we work at Ohio University, not in coal mines or auto-body shops. My husband is from Austria and laughs at me because I don’t know how to waltz. He has clipped, European consonants, though a year in Athens has begun to smooth them out, and wears good shoes. Ours is the poverty of graduate school, and so the purposeful sort that holds at its end a promise of tenure, retirement savings, and home ownership and not the sort that grinds families down from generation to generation. The neighbors are college professors and high school teachers and retired professionals. The guy who mows our grass has a bachelor’s degree in landscape architecture; the coffee at our favorite coffee shop is fair-trade and shade-grown. We live in the bubble of economic prosperity the university affords, and I’m not certain whether those of us in its boundaries live inside or outside of Appalachia.

Maybe Athens, too, is in but not of Appalachia.

Can I Even Write “Of An Evening?”

My sister says I don’t care to when she means I don’t mind. My brother begins a fair number of his sentences with Well, I reckon and if my father needs your screwdriver, he’ll ask if he can sorry it. But I spent years in childhood elocution classes—though we called is speech, so as not to sound too fancy—in order to smooth these markers of place
out of my language. I don’t know why my brother and sister didn’t go. Perhaps the teacher retired and no one took her place, or maybe our parents just stopped worrying about our accents. Maybe those extra years of parenting gave them bigger things to worry about.

I know what folk mean when they say *up over yonder* and *the baby needs feeding* and *no I never*, but these are not things I myself would say. When I was a child, I thought they were wrong. Now, they just seem to belong to other people and not to me. I worry that to say—and even more to write—them is an appropriation. That I’m stealing the language of the men who worked for my grandfather. Mine is the language of universities, grammar books, and years spent in New York.

**Is This an Appalachian Hanukah Story?**

I lived for most of my thirties in Manhattan, and for some of that time I dated a nice Jewish lawyer who took me out to his sister’s house in Long Island for holidays. They were Jews of a sort I’d never seen; they didn’t have Christmas trees or Easter eggs, they went to shul even when it wasn’t the High Holy Days, their conversations were peppered with Yiddish. I was a little in awe of them because of it.

On our first Hanukah together, I was invited to say the blessing over the candles. *Baruk atah Adonai* I began, and everyone started to giggle. *Eloheinu, melekh ha’olam.* The giggles became full-on laughter.

“I’m sorry,” said my date’s mother. “When you speak English, you don’t have an accent at all. But listening to you say the blessing over the candles is like watching a
Beverly Hillbillies Hanukah special.” She patted my arm, as if to say it was all right, and then her daughter took over the prayer.

And so maybe my speech isn’t so unmarked after all.

Maybe I could be an Appalachian writer if I would just learn to write in Hebrew.