



5-2016

She Said, He Said: The Gendering of Truth in Memoir

Angela M. Furioso

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/theses>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Furioso, Angela M.. (2016). She Said, He Said: The Gendering of Truth in Memoir. In *BSU Master's Theses and Projects*. Item 33.
Available at <http://vc.bridgew.edu/theses/33>
Copyright © 2016 Angela M. Furioso

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

She Said, He Said: The Gendering of Truth in Memoir

A Thesis Presented by

ANGELA M FURIOSO

MAY 2016

Approved as to style and content by:

Signature: _____
Dr. Kimberly Chabot-Davis Date

Signature: _____
Dr. Lee Torda Date

Signature: _____
Dr. John Kucich Date

She Said, He Said: The Gendering of Truth in Memoir

A Thesis Presented

By

ANGELA M FURIOSO

**Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies
Bridgewater State University
Bridgewater, Massachusetts**

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in English**

MAY 2016

The Introduction: *They Say...*

The study of fictive literature purports to be the study of the human condition, a way to examine how the literary art and artifacts we leave behind serve as records of the broad range of human life, emotion, and suffering. Creative nonfiction also taps into this central precept, seeking the human story in its purest form. Put simply, creative nonfiction is a true story told well; the writer roots the story in personal truth and uses the basic hallmarks of creative writing in order to shape the narrative. Here, the creative elements exist solely to engage the author in his or her own personal truth while reiterating a more universal truth for the reader. Thus, for the writers of creative nonfiction, the emphasis is not merely on the search for understanding the human condition, but rather the hunt of this understanding via personal experience; it is the quest for a truer truth. But this quest is not without its trials. Russell Baker in his discussion of his memoir, *Life with Mother*, synthesizes the difficulty of writing about one's own story; "The biographer's problem is that he never knows enough. The autobiographer's problem is that he knows too much" (Zinsser 38). Often when we are so close to the subject, we lose our ability to easily distinguish what is essential information or we falter on how to effectively convey the tremendous weight of emotions we connote with the memory. In this way, the creative aspect of this genre of nonfiction seeks not to embellish the narrative so that it moves away from the fact that grounds it, but serves more as a means of editing and structuring it into a powerful and a purposeful piece. The consummation of the art of writing and the truth of the personal experience produces a story that transcends the role of fictive literature; it is a story that is mine, is yours, and is ours. This procreative property is singular to the genre; we become our own source of literary inspiration - our own muses - and, in this fertile realm of memory and personal experience, our stories are born.

The history of creative nonfiction is nebulous to navigate; no one knows for certain when the term first began to make its appearance among the scholarly and academic masses, nor do people seem to know to whom to credit with its invention. Lee Gutkind, a professor of the genre and editor of the magazine *Creative Nonfiction*, describes the reactions of one of his snickering colleagues when he, in the 1970s, proposed teaching a course on the subject: “After you read all these books [of literature and poetry] and understand what they mean, I will consider voting for a course called creative nonfiction. Otherwise, I don’t want to be bothered” (Gutkind xxviii). By the mid-1990s, however, the literary trends had shifted and “an explosion” of creative nonfiction rocked both the publishing and academic world. Nevertheless, the moniker “creative nonfiction” is a modern label for a genre that is anything but new. Lee Gutkind who is identified as the “Godfather behind creative nonfiction” defines the adjective for us as “being indicative of the style in which the nonfiction is written” (Gutkind xix) - emphasizing the coercion of the facts into a narrative which embraces and adheres to many of the key tenets of good fiction writing: dialogue, description, plot structure, characterization, and emotionality, to name a few. The primary difference between fiction and creative nonfiction, however, emerges in the second part of the phrase; although creative nonfiction reads like fiction and although certain poetic and literary liberties may be taken in the crafting of the narrative, the distinction must always remain that creative nonfiction is, on some level, true.

But “truth” in writing is a loaded precept. In his “The Creative Nonfiction Police,” Gutkind discusses the difficulty some authors face when having to choose between the truth of the story and the literary choices they must make in order to execute that truth. To tackle this dilemma, authors then must ask themselves: what’s the most important truth I want my reader to derive from my story and what is the best way to get readers to understand it? In one anecdote,

Gutkind describes John Berendt, the author of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, who often teeters and dances the lines between untrue, partially true, and truth in his work: “Berendt made up transitions in order to move from scene to scene in his book. Most creative nonfiction writers will refrain from imagining and reporting that which did not happen, even in transitions, but Berendt was making the experience easier for himself and more enjoyable for his readers, a process called ‘rounding the corners’” (Gutkind xx). Thus, the question plaguing many contemporary writers of the genre stems from the moral and ethical dilemmas posed by finding a way in which to achieve credibility to the authenticity of the story without sacrificing compelling storytelling. When writers of creative nonfiction discuss “truth,” their definition often must rest, then, on how their individual literary conscience dictates this complex relationship between narrative and fact.

Gutkind further delineates his “checklist” for writers of creative nonfiction, highlighting the importance of striving for truth and treating the subjects of our writing with respect and affording them the opportunity to respond to what is written. He disagrees with Berendt’s tactics, warning writers not to “round the corners” or “compress situations of characters - unnecessarily” (Gutkind xxxi); he also warns against assumptions, surmises, and guesses - particularly in terms of characterization and remembered dialogue. Creative nonfiction narratives are linked to memory, which is unreliable in scope, but writers should then strive to be “as true to [their] memory as possible” when crafting their version of the truth (Gutkind xxx).

And truth, it is said, is often stranger than fiction. Certainly, by the rising popularity of the genre, many writers and readers share this proclivity and fondness for strangeness in the texts they read. William Zinsser, editor of *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, crystallizes this phenomenon by proclaiming the closing decade of the twentieth century as “the

age of the memoir,” suggesting that “Everyone has a story to tell, and everyone is telling it” (Zinsser 3). With this new interest in the “true” story comes a paralleled fascination with the grotesque and traumatic: “Today no remembered episode is too sordid, no family too dysfunctional, to be trotted out for the wonderment of the masses in books and magazines and on talk shows” (Zinsser 3). This all-too-human preoccupation with the sordid creates another problem for the modern creative nonfiction writer who feels pressure to out-dysfunction other writers of the genre. Certainly, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, an emphasis on memoirs such as Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club*, Jeannette Walls’ *The Glass Castle*, and Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*, which highlighted difficult and socially scandalous subjects like alcoholism, incest, anorexia, depression, rape, and drug abuse populated the market; however, while quality texts of the genre like the aforementioned list emphasized the protagonist’s ability to survive or overcome the horrific obstacles of living dangerously, most of these memoirs read as little more than “chronicles of shame and victimhood” representing “the dark side of the personal narrative boom, giving the form a bad name” (Zinsser 5).

The audience’s penchant toward authorial “true confession” over truth spawned several titles whose existence serves mostly to bring degradation to the genre. Zinsser distinguishes between the need for truth in memoir writing and the basic precept of the genre: “The truth is that memoir writing, like every other kind of writing, comes in good and bad varieties. That’s the only standard that matters” (Zinsser 5). As with Gutkind who cautions writers in the genre to carefully consider the morals and ethics behind truth-telling in creative nonfiction, Zinsser also reiterates that the issue at hand is not whether someone should or should not reveal what he/she chooses to; rather, the issue is far more simple: is it a good book or a bad book? Zinsser synthesizes creative nonfiction of good literary merit into two components: integrity of intention

and a careful act of construction. Trouble arises, however, when authors manufacture more than just an order to the chaos of partially-recollected events. When authors of creative nonfiction lie about the past - favoring the construction over factual integrity, the damage to the genre's reputation is undeniable.

However, despite the modern audience's staunch expectations of factual integrity, by considering our society's complex relationship with lying, we can glean greater insight into how we read and why we write. Societally, we tell little lies every day, and yet, as readers, we demand entire truth from our nonfiction writers. To complicate matters, we live in a society where any political soundbite can be instantly fact-checked; subsequently, we have a learned distrust to contend with beyond merely the integrity of a written piece. Historically speaking, good art - as we have already established - resonates because it "feels" true, mirroring accurately some aspect of the human condition. Nowadays, readers can be more cynical or suspicious of intentions; if you purport to tell us your life story, we want to ensure that you have provided us with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; and, we have far more access to information than previous generations to ensure that you do exactly that. In recent history, we have the cautionary tale of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* which most famously violated the "good-faith bond between the writers of autobiography and their readership" when Frey was - on national television as of guest of Oprah- defrocked as a rising nonfiction star and relabeled as an imposter of truth (Cardell and Kuttainen 102). Frey's highly publicized betrayal of this bond only serves to complicate the matter for contemporary writers of nonfiction who now must contend with both fact-checkers and other armchair detectives in their pursuit not for the altruistic sense of truth but for the self-satisfaction of being able to catch someone else in the lie. Humor memoirist David Sedaris notes that "ever since that business...[with Frey] fact checkers

are in overdrive. They've made my life miserable. Like, the fact-checker from *The New Yorker* will say, 'We talked to your father [...] he said the grandfather clock is made of oak [...] you say it was made out of cherry.' And it's not a *story* about a grandfather clock. It doesn't really matter" (Knight 80). Cardell and Kuttainen rightfully address Sedaris's use of the word "story" in this remark: "Sedaris's intention is to entertain and he does not see autobiography as anything other than story" (Cardell and Kuttainen 102). Interestingly, in a separate interview, Sedaris describes the details of the story as this:

For Sedaris, the most trying result of the brouhaha has been that the notoriously strict fact-checking department at *The New Yorker*, which publishes many of his stories, has, he says, "gone into overtime" verifying his work. His friends, relatives and even the residents of his Normandy village are frequently called to corroborate minute details. The trouble is, they sometimes have their own versions of events. After, for example, Sedaris referred to a walnut grandfather clock in his family home, his father told the fact-checker he thought it was cherry wood. The younger Sedaris quickly gave in: "I said, 'Fine, make it cherry!'" But he was in no mood to settle after the checker contacted his sister Amy to ask whether it was true that David paid her a dime for a chicken leg at childhood dinners. (Reginato)

Thus, although the type of wood used to craft the grandfather clock, therefore, was irrelevant to Sedaris because it possesses no consequential bearing on the story itself, to the media and audience obsessed with factuality, the grandfather clock's true composition has, in its own way, become the story - despite its varying details. Still, Sedaris's encounters with *The New York* fact-checker reveals an almost fanatical need to micromanage the authenticity of the piece regardless of the author's purpose. Therefore, while the universal truth of Sedaris's experience

may reside elsewhere for the author, for the fact-checker, it hinges on this particular attention to detail. Thus, while memoir is steeped in personal history or autobiography, the line between the real and imagined will continue to be blurred for writers like Sedaris, who considers his primary responsibility to his reader one based on entertainment value via personal experience, not slavish factual accuracy - even when the reader seemingly demands the latter above all else. For contemporary writers of creative nonfiction, the ethical debate of factuality over the pursuit of truth in a story centers on a modern reader seemingly convinced that one factual misstep or lie calls into question the integrity of the whole work.

For Sedaris, whose comic vignettes depend more on humor than on fact, the “realish” nature of his writing is not designed as a politically-charged statement on the genre or point of provocation but more an attempt to honestly communicate the heart of his story without, perhaps, a stringent attention to detail, an unflattering or cruel portrayal of his family, or a promised presentation of unquestionable truth. Writers use an arsenal of tools to highlight, embellish, exaggerate, style, organize, and craft ideas into a compelling narrative thread, and Sedaris seems to emphasize entertainment more than honesty in his depictions. It is a decision he presents to his reader in his author’s notes, admitting at the start of his collection of essays *When You Are Engulfed in Flames* that “The events described in these stories are realish” and “Certain characters have fictitious names and identifying characteristics.” The assembly of essays - which range from creatively tackling the dilemma of needing to make coffee when the water has been shut off to spending a small fortune in Japan in order to effectively quit smoking - relies heavily on the manipulation of commonplace situations and problems, which Sedaris masterfully manipulates into humorous essays based on his personal experience. Therefore, for Sedaris - who is often labeled a humorist or comic writer before memoirist- the truth of his art stems not from

the reality of his situations, his characters, or his words but more from the universality of his humor itself. He looks for the humor in everyday interactions and this search provides the sense of reality to his stories - whether they are entirely “real” or just “realish.”

Sedaris’s cheeky confession introduces another problem for both writer and reader. First, Sedaris buries his disclaimer for *When You Are Engulfed in Flames* in an author’s note “in the middle of what might be assumed to be the most authoritatively factual part of any book: its bibliographic data” (Cardell and Kuttainen 99). By doing this, Sedaris manipulates the relationship between reader and writer by ironically using the most factually-charged part of his text for his greatest confession of lying. He also does it in an arguably clandestine way. But what happens when the author more clearly and straightforwardly addresses the implicit lying happening in the text? Does it make the reader complicit in the lie? If we examine Leslie Rubinkowski’s search for truth through her grandfather’s prevarications in her “In the Woods,” we read yet another “true story about lies” (Rubinkowski 320). Rubinkowski further acknowledges that she lies to her reader, confessing to filling in forgotten details with “memory, the clumsiest editor of all” and yet she accepts this well-meaning parallel with her grandfather: “But in one thing I am honest: I accept that in some ways I am no better than my grandfather. Writers lie all the time, even when they deal in fact. We try to sell ourselves as natural born architects of polished sentences and balanced arguments when bias and doubt force and influence every word” (323). Thus, to get to the truth of the significance of her relationship and experiences with her grandfather, Rubinkowski is willing to take liberties with memory and detail, to bridge gaps in her story’s information (the location of a conversation, the exact words of her grandfather, etc.) with how she remembers them, not how they actually were. Does this disclaimer read more true than Sedaris’s because it alleges “a happier truth” than the violation

between reader and writer perpetrated by James Frey (and, to a lesser degree, Sedaris whose blurring of fact and fiction often dances an ethically dangerous line for the genre)? Do we want to believe Rubinkowski more or less when she declares simply, “I cannot lie” (Rubinkowski 329)? To obsess about the flimsy artifice of reality is to take a meandering trip down Carroll’s rabbit hole, but understanding a writer’s moral and ethical boundaries as they work toward credibility in their narratives is helpful in understanding this complex relationship among writer, audience, and truth in the genre.

As a memoirist I have to insert myself in the muddled union between truth and memory. To complicate the matter, my gender also factors into how the text is received because I must struggle with the historical interpretation of memoir as memory (and thus inherently flawed, biased, or inaccurate) and the longstanding tradition and stereotype of female storytellers who are not renowned for their truths, but rather their lies. The central question driving this thesis is hardly novel, but it remains unanswered and I’m asking it of the genre and of myself: What role does truth serve in memoir? What is novel, however, is the added and unstudied question: How is the role of truth in creative nonfiction gendered? Part one of my thesis will address these questions through a critical examination of the genre itself and those who study it. Part two of my thesis is a collection of short personal essays. The essays grapple with these questions on a personal level. This part of the thesis will be broken up into three sections: *She Said* (stories of the women in my life), *He Said* (stories of my father’s influences), and *I Said* (a creative examination of my writing style which emerges as a direct influence of these two competing factors in my life).

Part One: Literature Review

Untangling the Tangled Webs We Weave

Canonically, the history of memoirs begins with its father, Michel de Montaigne, a 16th century essayist and magistrate who pursued “the capacity to sift the truth” first in the local French courts and later as a writer (Lopate 44). While de Montaigne’s work owes its roots to Greek and Roman scholars and writers, it is de Montaigne’s “essais” which have come to define the genre as an earnest search for unity to the human experience, despite the myriad “range of human diversity” (Lopate 44). Interestingly, de Montaigne’s title - *Essais* - translates into either “attempts” or “trials.” And, for a former member of the court, this title is particularly apt. Still, the basic premise by which most courts are founded resides in the search for truth, and the memoir is, also at its most basic, an attempt to uncover, reveal, expose or honor that truth: “Rather than simply telling a story from her life, the memoirist both tells the story and muses upon it, trying to unravel what it means in the light of her current knowledge. [...] memoir includes retrospection as an essential part of the story” (Barrington 20-21). Thus de Montaigne’s *Essais* speak to the greater truth of humanity - the trials and tribulations of daily life which unite us all. Like the men who came before him - Seneca, Plutarch, St. Augustine - the confessional and personal nature of memoir purports to embrace that same simple and beautiful precept; the story of humanity, the story of man, begins with a search for truth.

In the search to delineate the complex history of creative nonfiction, we find ourselves repeatedly confronted with its fathers (and Godfathers). Montaigne in particular cites Seneca the Younger as a source on the modern essay: “Seneca was a prolific author of tragedies, dialogues, and orations, but his reputation as the founder on the essay rests on his letters, which both Montaigne and Bacon cited as inspiration and which remain his most attractive and accessible

work” (Lopate 3-4). Dubbed “moral letters” and written during Seneca’s final exile each possess a “homiletic, ethical, Stoic message” in which Seneca’s self emerges as fully complete and complex in structure. Seneca’s letters also emphasize a shift away from stylistic flourishes, highlighting clarity and brevity over embellishment, serving as a blueprint for a more modern, direct style of writing. In this way, perhaps, Seneca was able to tackle his own problem of the egotistical “I” - a clipped and humble style to contrast his criticisms of the world around him.

Like Seneca, often listed in the catalog of worthy essayists is Plutarch, who also shared a fondness for moral writing, serving as the catalyst for more modern writing pursuits and characterized by the search for a truer truth. Plutarch’s strengths as a writer were not merely in his subjects - which varied from biographies of noble Greeks and Romans to dialogues on literature, history, and morality - but predominantly in his ability to establish a personal connection with his audience: “Unlike the austere classics, again, Plutarch is a personal writer, and in the course of his copious works he tells us of his family and friends and reveals his tastes and interests so fully that we know him more intimately than we do any other Greek writer” (Lopate 16). And, with this reliance on the personal knowledge of the writer, Plutarch provides us with the hallmark of the genre: the reader becomes intimately connected with the writer’s experience. With this personalized tone also comes a sense of immortality; we understand Plutarch more through his writing and he makes real for us a time period that has long since transpired. His ability to repeatedly convey his emotions in a genuine and direct way serves as a model for many modern writers of the genre who likewise strive to have not only their voices heard but also the emotional weight of those words felt. No where is this better seen, perhaps, than in Plutarch’s consolations - letters of personal grief that have now been given public audience -which are often highly praised for their “genuineness of feeling and touching

directness” (Lopate 17). In one of his best known consolations, Plutarch writes to his wife upon learning of his young daughter’s death, employing a variety of techniques to help move his wife through the grieving process: “Do, however, try to carry yourself back in your thoughts and return again and again to the time when this little child was not yet born and we had as yet no complaint against Fortune; next try to link this present time with that as though our circumstances had again become the same” (Lopate 20). Here, Plutarch encourages his wife to return to a time before their daughter was born, to make a connection between a happier and more fortunate period and the current one marked by mourning. He also warns his wife against indulgent grieving, using the opportunity not only to provide solace but also to reprove those would partake in inappropriate displays of emotion. Thus Plutarch’s search for truth stems from his attempts to understand the universe around him not only through philosophical introspection but also through thoughtful confrontation with his personal sphere and the people in it.

If these fathers of the memoir have prevailed at anything it is in creating a humanistic depiction of history - a generous, if not entirely self-serving gift of self to help modern audiences humanize and navigate an often nameless and ineffable past. They give a face and a voice to that which we no longer understand as real. It is interesting to note, then, the link between these early forebearers of the genre and diplomacy - among the canon’s finest, Plutarch, Montaigne, and Addison (of the Addison and Steele writing duo) all served as diplomats - suggesting an early connection between the art of negotiating with people in a sensitive and effective way and the writing of personal essays. As the personal essay gained traction, the humanistic tradition also flourished, embracing everything from the harshly critical bite of social commentary to an individuals’s romanticized and spiritualized communion with nature. British writers Addison and Steele and Samuel Johnson were effectively able to deliver their moralist writing behind the

mask of snark, wit, and gossip, commenting more on the familiar than the personal. Johnson, for example, during his work on *The Literary Magazine*, wrote several haranguing essays critiquing the Seven Years' War, interspersed between producing collections of his personal essays and sermons (*The Rambler* and *The Idler*, respectively). While previous moralist writing always held with it the promise of reproof, these later British writers often relied on a more polemic edge in order to convey their truth, a task crystallized by Johnson in his introduction to his deceptively-monikered *The Rambler* when he asked, "that in this undertaking thy Holy Spirit may not be withheld from me, but that I may promote thy glory, and the salvation of myself and others" (Lane 115). Conversely, American writers Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson adhered more strongly to individualism and a focus on the "I" in nonfiction, connecting the art of writing not only to themselves but also to the nature of the world around them. The unifying thread for these men? Their writing reveals a relentless pursuit as well as a personal need to communicate this truth to their oft-public audience.

Of course, the "I" also introduces a problem with egotism in creative nonfiction. Inherent in the writing of memoir is a belief that one's own story is both a worthy subject of discourse as well as a valid source for introspections on the human condition. Henry David Thoreau, one of the most famous American essayists, tackles this subject on the first page of *Walden*, stating, "In most books the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking" (Lopate xxxi). As societally, it is often deemed impolite to talk about oneself, academically we as teachers often encourage students to write not in the dreaded first-person singular but in the detached and objective third person. In memoir, the I is a central character, but must also contend with the preconceived connotations of egotism latent in its usage. As such,

many memoirists and essayists like E.B. White also adopt a self-deprecating tone when writing in order to avoid a label of vanity: “I think some people find the essay the last resort of the egotist, a much too self-conscious and self-serving form for their taste; they feel that it is presumptuous of a writer to assume that his little excursions or his small observations will interest the reader” (Lopate xxxi). White continues, explaining when “discouraged” or “downcast” by his attempts at writing and his guilt about potential egotism, he found solace by returning to the nonfiction traditions of the past (he describes it more as enveloping himself in “the mantle of Montaigne”) as a way to validate his writing and his voice in the genre.

But this thesis is not only concerned with these fathers of creative nonfiction, and, if we must trace the origins of memoir to its earliest incarnations, it is imperative that we look also to its mothers whose voices often first emerge not in the form of the essay or memoir - which were paths generally regarded as belonging to the masculine realm of writing - but from the fictional scope of the storyteller. Myths, which so often reference or rely on the fusion of the real and the unreal, require their audience to believe in the heart of their story. From these early tales, the voices of weavers, of storytellers, emerge. If we look at the thematic pulse of storytelling and we acknowledge that so often survival and power reside at the center of these tales, we must consider classical women like the Fates, who weave the stories of our lives and our deaths, and the Sirens, who sing us sweetly to our doom. Classical audiences and authors appreciate the art of seduction as it applies to liars. Nowhere is this more evident, perhaps, than with the Sirens, who entice men with the promise of beautiful truth only to expose the myth, the lie, of masculinity. Here, the concept of fear is introduced; the men targeted by the Sirens’ song are easily seduced by the lie. The list of men who have escaped the Sirens’ charms is a short one; Odysseus - ironically one of literature’s greatest liars but from whose narrative account we must

derive our truth regarding the inherent nature of these women - is not only able to see the lie behind the seduction but also to survive the lie. Thus, the lie of storytellers threatens death, and in these murky waters, truth becomes survival.

This fictionalized interplay between “he said/she said” is expressed no better than considering the juxtaposition of Odysseus’s account of his encounter with the Sirens and a close-reading of Margaret Atwood’s slyly critical response from the siren’s perspective in “Siren Song.” In Book XII of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus recounts the sirens’ song: “Come closer, famous Odysseus, Achaea’s pride and glory - / moor your ship on our coast so you can hear our song! / Never has any sailor passed our shores in his black craft / until he has heard the honeyed voices pouring from our lips / and once he hears to his heart’s content sails on a wiser man...” (Homer XII.14-18). We, like Odysseus’s men who bind their leader “faster with rope on chafing rope” (Homer XII.24) describes a classic interlude with seduction - a hero’s temptation at the hands (or, in this case, the voices) of female temptresses who promise with “honeyed” tongues that which will surely lead to his doom. Despite Odysseus’s longstanding and complicated relationship with the truth in his own dealings with mortals and immortals alike, we take these words with authority. And this understanding of male authoritative voice extends beyond the realm of antiquated epic poetry; in today’s society, men’s voices are still perceived to be more dominant, credible, and authoritative than their female counterparts.¹ Nowhere is this clever manipulation of power dynamics more in evidence than with Odysseus’s interaction with the

¹ Consider Soraya Chemaly’s recent article “10 Words Every Girl Should Learn.” Chemaly points out that “Men speak more, more often, and longer than women in mixed groups” often with negative impact on the results garnered of this speech. Male speech is typically more disruptive and women historically have been prized for their obedience and their silence, despite the looming stereotype of women as avid “talkers” of inconsequential matters. As Chemaly states, “The best part though is that we are socialized to think women talk more. Listener bias results in most people thinking that women are hogging the floor when men are actually dominating. Linguists have concluded that much of what is popularly understood about women and men being from different planets, verbally, confuses ‘women’s language’ with ‘powerless language.’”
Source:http://www.huffingtonpost.com/soraya-chemaly/10-words-every-girl-should-learn_b_5544203.html

Sirens who are predominantly known for their alluring voices but whose voices are silenced and diminished in the broader scope of shaping Odysseus's heroism. From these early myths, the dichotomy between male and female storytellers emerges; if men's words - even when embedded in lies - intrinsically communicate truth, women's words - while potentially more alluring to listen to - ring in the threat of treachery, of danger, and of death. While not, of course, a literal promise, the implications have been dire for the voices of women, which have been so often historically distrusted and thus relegated to a secondary role. So, too, has it been for female writers in the genre of creative nonfiction.

Perhaps, with these allusions in mind, it is no easy coincidence that often in early classical literature women are so frequently linked to the central motif of weaving. We see this symbolism in the character of Penelope, Odysseus's well-suited wife, from *The Odyssey*, who feigns weaving a shroud for her father-in-law as part of a larger lie to her would-be suitors, and, in doing so, creates a seemingly-tangible, irrevocable link between the craft of lying and the art of weaving. In Atwood's retelling of the myth in her *The Penelopiad*, her protagonist quips, "The shroud itself became a story almost instantly. 'Penelope's web', it was called; people used to say that of any task that remained mysteriously unfinished. I did not appreciate the term web. If the shroud was a web, then I was a spider. But I had not been attempting to catch men like flies: on the contrary, I'd merely been trying to avoid entanglement myself" (Atwood 119). Here, despite her reputation for unceasing faithfulness to her husband, Penelope's predominant claim to fame in preserving her chastity stems from a fabrication, a lie, told to appease the suitors and free herself from bigamous marital entanglement. This classical connection between women and spiders extends beyond Penelope, enveloping other tragically hubristic females like Arachne, whose egotistical affirmations regarding her own artistic talent in weaving led to certain and

divine retribution. The spinning of tales connotes if not outright lying then at least a modicum of hyperbole. Like with the Sirens, once more women's stories are linked to mortality, sexuality, and autonomy, a way for women to exert power and talent, although the enterprise was often fraught with danger.

For women, the roots of creative nonfiction and memoir continuously emerge in these early mythic narratives. Even later incarnations of the female storyteller - most profoundly the archetypal Mother Goose, an elderly and imaginary author of fairy tales and nursery rhymes - typifies the gendered role of the female speaker, who more often than not manifests as a spinner of fireside stories, not weavers of truth. Mother Goose, whose roots - as literary critic Marina Warner purports - reside in the goddess Venus, is a repurposed and reimagined deity, once renowned for her power and beauty. Like the Sirens whose songs are deemed too threatening for their hearers or Penelope's shrouded web of lies which demarks a too-masculine cleverness, Mother Goose's existence subverts the threatening nature of Venus's sexuality and refocuses her as a gentle purveyor of palatable fluff for children. But there is an edge to the fairy tale, which Warner also accounts for: "The more one knows fairy tales the less fantastical they appear; they can be vehicles of the grimmest realism, expressing hope against all the odds with gritted teeth" (Warner). Ingrained in the horrors and diversions, the grotesque and the romantic, is a kernel of "the grimmest realism" in which these oft-female-centric stories are woven. Herein lies the nurturing maternal creative impulse - the necessary constructive craft of writing - which binds both fiction and nonfiction alike; an ability to weave hope out of the darkness in the most compelling of ways.

In this intricate way, the female-centric "I" differs from those early and aforementioned fathers of the genre who purportedly felt conflicted in writing their personal thoughts as some

ineffable authorial manifestation of superior subject knowledge and sheer egotism. For the female storyteller, whose words are rooted largely in mythical fiction and thus more prone to be interpreted as such, the speaker-self and the literary “I” are more creatively procreative, a sly method of engendering an intimate bond between speaker and audience where truth can flourish. Warner synthesizes this notion more clearly; “If you remember the pleasure of hearing a story many times, and you will remember that while you were listening you become three people. There is an incredible fusion: you become the storyteller, the protagonist, and you remember yourself listening to the story” (Warner). For Warner, then, an essential component in manufacturing this relationship is pleasure, which must be present for the other elements to transpire and the communion to happen. This symbiotic response also becomes one of the primary hallmarks of good storytelling; we long to feel a part of the stories we enjoy hearing, and, in doing so, we experience a communal bond with the speaker and the main character of said-story. In creative nonfiction, where the first-person speaker is often also the writer, this tripartite “I” reflects not only the voice of the storyteller and her narrative but also the emotional connection the audience experiences to the protagonist-writer. But certain central questions remain: how does truth factor in here? Can we still inherently trust a female narrator when the history of storytelling repeatedly paints women in either insubstantial or threatening lights? Can we trust a female storyteller from whose story we derive little pleasure?

Perhaps these rhetorical questions reflect why so little has been written on the subject of gender and truth in creative nonfiction. If we consider the motif of weaving in classical mythology more carefully, we see it extends beyond merely the ever-faithful Penelope; in *The Odyssey* alone, Kirke, Kalypso, Helen, and even Nausikaa are associated with the image, and, appropriately, these women are all also connected to Odysseus in personal (and often romantic)

ways. Helen, Kirke, and Kalypso in particular are weavers of forgetfulness, hoping to ensnare - as Atwood's Penelope hoped not to - men (or *a* man) in their webs - soft promises, sweet pleas, and soothing comfort are all masks for the weaver's true intentions. Extending beyond the realm of Homer's epic, weaving is linked to other ancient femme fatales like Clytemnestra, who - as part of her revenge scheme - weaves ornate crimson rugs for her husband to walk upon his triumphant return from war. In fact, in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, once the eponymous king has been murdered, the Chorus cries: "Oh my king, my captain, /How to salute you, how to mourn you? /What can I say with all my warmth and love? /Here in the black widow's web you lie, /Gasping out your life" (Aeschylus 1521-1529). The spidery and sinister nature of the female storyteller emerges in this myth; she is brazen in her art and dangerous in her deeds. It is no wonder, then, that the other form of female narrative - singing - also assumes perilous characterization in the form of sirens, bird-women who lure men to their deaths with false promises of beauty and love. And, so, a monster is born; at least in our understanding of the role of the female narrator whose origins belie an ominous tradition. As perceptions of gender shift, the female writer is no longer a fearsome spectre; however, we still often consider the craft of writing in these mythic terms. American author Annie Dillard likens the experience of writing one's memories in the highly fairytale terms of birthing a monster; "After I've written about any experience, my memories - those elusive, fragmentary patches of color and feeling - are gone; they've been replaced by the work" (Zinsser 157). Here, Dillard compares the process of creating a story to leaving a "changeling on the doorstep - not your baby but someone else's baby rather like it, different in some way that you can't pinpoint, and yours has vanished" (Zinsser 157). Her language reveals a conscious correlation not only between fact and fiction but also the maternal and the monstrous; this complex interplay typifies the search for truth in female narration. It is an

appropriately labyrinthine narrative web, and, to effectively ensnare her audience, it must be woven by someone with exceptional appreciation for the craft of storytelling.

Yet these stories of weaving and song are steeped in antiquity and fiction. While these classical women serve as the foundation for how women storytellers have categorically been received for centuries (as liars or as women masquerading as false authorities), they do not entirely explain how gender impacts the female memoirist and they certainly do not explain when the shift to developing and honing “true” female stories emerged. The earliest incarnations of these female nonfiction storytellers manifest as diarists and journal writers, educated and thus often noble women who delineated their critical observations of their society and selves in the private venue of personal writing. Of these women, one of the earliest examples we have is Sei Shonagon, a tenth-century Japanese “court lady” who kept “an inimitable journal recording her likes, dislikes, and the events around her” (Lopate 23). In her most infamous work *Pillow Book*, Shonagon catalogues lists which betray her judgments; in her list of “Hateful Things,” for example, Shonagon remarks with a perfectionist’s chagrin on a whole litany of social and personal improprieties. Of the titular “hateful things,” Shonagon includes the crying of a baby when one is about to hear interesting news, the “pushing forward” of a clever child or adult who interrupt when one is in the middle of a story, and even “a mouse that scurries all over the place” becomes a worthy avenue for her chastising finger (Lopate 25). Her emphasis, then, is on decorum - often citing the way people obey (or rather disobey) social standards and mores as provocateurs of hate. Her scrutiny at times marks Shonagon as a “terrible snob” but there is a frankness and thus a sincerity to her biting criticisms. Still, while a personal meditation, *Pillow Book* is no personal essay, no memoir; “it is a book length meditation on matters personal and in

its reclamation of the ephemera of daily life, it laid the groundwork for Japanese essay writing of the future” (Lopate 23).

While Shonagon’s influence on later writers is undeniable, she, too, does not traditionally adhere to the depiction of the memoirist. The point of creative fiction is not, as some of the genre’s critics fear, to overshare “mundane” details of personal life or, as David Foster Wallace once snarked in his syllabus for a creative nonfiction workshop at Pomona College, an opportunity for the writer to ““express herself” of whatever feel good term you might have got taught in high school.” It is communicative, not expressive, and, as Foster bluntly remarks, “an axiom of communicative writing is that the reader does not automatically care about you (the writer), nor does she find you fascinating as a person, nor does she feel a deep natural interest in the same things that interest you. The reader, in fact, will feel about you, your subject, and your essay only what your written words themselves induce her to feel” (Foster Pomona Syllabus). While a glibly marked response, Foster’s pointed words ring inherently true for female writers and audiences who often are stereotyped as writing about and reading about predominantly domesticated topics like child-rearing, fashion, and social manners. Perhaps, for these reasons, the field of female creative nonfiction writers initially was limited to noble women like Sei Shonagon or Maria Edgeworth whose genteel upbringings both paved the way for a more receptive audience to their educated and biting observations on life.

Edgeworth’s *Letters for Literary Ladies* provides a “worldly response to the eighteenth-century line of essay writing about manners, mores, and gender” in particular contrast to the harshly critical tone toward women adopted by writers like Addison and Steele (Lopate 145). Edgeworth’s efforts succeeded not because her readers felt a “deep natural interest” in her subject but because she was able to take the arguments against her gender (made popular again

by writers like Addison and Steele) and turn them sideways; “Edgeworth, seeming to agree at first with these male critics, actually puts the problem in a more subversive light: given the unfair disparity of power between the sexes, she suggests ‘unreasonable’ arguments become logical weapons for a woman to use” (Lopate 145). This paradoxical claim is a brilliant satire of her period’s impression and treatment of the female mind; Edgeworth employs a rational and logical argument for the use of illogic as it applies to the female writer and her audience. Still, despite her contributions to the development of the genre, Edgeworth seems plagued by the limited scope of her gender. In his *Art of the Personal Essay*, Philip Lopate introduces Edgeworth, praising her for her focus on the subject of the conversational arts, a subject Lopate notes that great male writers like Montaigne, Swift, Addison, Steele, and Hazlitt also share. However, Lopate furthers this effusion, praising Edgeworth for her “special sensitivity” - an all too female emotion - to the “nuances of argument and accommodation in speech while reflexively underscoring the conversational flavor of the essay form through her addresses to the reader” (Lopate 146). In broad strokes, Lopate sees in Edgeworth a mediator, a negotiator, a diplomat between her craft and her gender and gives credence to the female voice and her concerns, regardless of whether they are global or domestic in scope.

Like the study of the genre itself, female creative nonfiction writers emerge nebulously. Unlike Montaigne who is perceived as the father of the genre and Gutkind who earns the more connotatively foreboding moniker of Godfather, no clear mother figure emerges from the smattering of early female soothsayers, sybils and fairy godmothers of their craft who dared to expand the role of essayist and memoirist to be more inclusive - a figurative removing of the veil protecting audiences from the interior and often difficult lives of females. As the genre expanded in the twentieth-century, so, too, did the female writers of creative nonfiction. Perhaps Toni

Morrison states it best in her essay “The Site of Memory” when she claims, “The exercise is also critical for any person whose black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic” (Zinsser 191). Thus, the female memoirist’s voice embodies this complex fusion between its complicated and creative past and its potential for a more honest and embracing future. And, fittingly, prickly maternal relationships certainly provide excellent fodder for their fair share of contemporary memoirs: Jeannette Walls’ *The Glass Castle*, Mary Karr’s *The Liar’s Club*, Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*, Sue Klebold’s *A Mother’s Reckoning*, just to rename a small sampling of the hundreds of contemporary memoirs dealing with mothers. And this authorial search for understanding one’s mother makes sense: the child-mother relationship is often the earliest and most important in fostering a child’s socio-emotional, behavioral, and cognitive growth. Disruptions between that primary bond can lead to developmental delays, difficulty with emotional attachments, and other psychosocial issues; in other words, the very stuff of good storytelling. So, too, operates the dynamic between the fathers and mothers of the genre; while men like Montaigne provide the foundation for nonfiction, the mythical mothers of storytelling provide the foundation for the creative art of the craft. The symbiotic nature of not only creativity and truth but also of truth and gender are inextricably linked in the pursuit of authentic memoir.

Conclusion: The Alpha and the Omega

Of course, to broadly claim that all storytellers in the genre of creative nonfiction are liars is an oversimplification of a complex structural function of the genre, and lying - particularly the lies of narrators in memoir - embodies a deeper fundamental understanding not only of the significance of detail and plot but also a greater appreciation for the craft itself. The role of truth

in memoir emerges in its ability to weave the truth with the fiction - to make the lie compelling but retain the inherent integrity of the story because, “The needs of other excellences, such as mere accuracy, must follow the needs of drama in a kind of hierarchy” (Roorbach 12). After all, we write stories because we want them to be read and, as Coleridge poetically implores, the storyteller’s covenant with the reader has to do with “That willing suspension of disbelief.” As such, the border between fiction and memoir is constantly being breached and while fiction shouts, I am “circumscribed by what the reader will believe,” memoir retorts, I am “circumscribed by the facts” (Barrington 27).

I would argue, however, that the paradoxical nature of truth is the same in both genres; “facts or no, if [the] reader doesn’t believe you, you’re sunk” (Roorbach 11). The distinction between the two is really in the packaging. Because memoir presents itself as truth and our concepts of truth are so stringently tied to fact, this genre is more open to public criticism if the reader does not believe the contents of the package. Facts demand accuracy, but memoir is less inherently interested in fact and more driven by its pursuit of truth. To gift someone a piece of coal and tell them it is a diamond is a violation of an unspoken trust in the facts. However, the memoirist can convince its reader of the coal’s potential truth by using “Beauty--of form, of language, of meaning” to expose the diamond inside the piece of coal because, “The successful memoirist respects facts, uses them, [...] but knows that truth is different from facts, and greater than facts, and not always their sum” (Roorbach 10). Thus, the unstated agreement between memoirist and reader is a promise to deliver the absolute truth of a situation, a setting, or a memory - even if the avenues to that truth are paved in exquisite lies.

And my personal narratives have been shaped by the most exquisite liar I know: my mother. In “Lies My Mother Told Me,” I explore how even a creatively imagined narrative can

become a personal truth, an attempt to explain or paint a situation so that not only does the intended hearer benefit but also the storyteller herself. The essential truth of my childhood, then, centers around the myths my mother wove to protect us - me, from the brutal fights with my father, and herself, from coping with my childhood illness. But despite the inherent unreliability of my mother's stories and the inherent unreliability of memory itself, creative nonfiction - even those stories that emphasize the former over the latter - present the reader with an attempt to confront the fragmented pieces of an experience and derive a greater picture from their whole truth.

In the reading of creative nonfiction - and, in particular, the memoir - I have to clarify these statements regarding unreliability in narration; yes, certain details may be factually inaccurate or included to support the creative development of the story, as David Sedaris quipped about the wood in his piece featuring his grandfather's clock, but the central truth of the story must be present. Like with the detail of the ceramic rooster versus the ceramic cat in my grandmother's story "Leaving You in Stitches," these little shifts in detail do not betray the universal truth of the story; for my grandmother, the truth was in the message to my grandfather, not in the object she threw. Of course, in my grandmother's story, the violation comes after, in the form of her omissions, which, while a form of lying, helped reveal and explain certain uglier truths not only in my perceptions of my father and grandfather but also in the disconnect between the woman she appeared to be in her own story and the woman who I saw suffering in silence. In the broader scope of the genre, our inherent tendency toward distrust likewise does us a disservice - particularly after recent and previously delineated embarrassments to the genre of creative nonfiction perpetrated by James Frey. Thus, a contemporary audience might be inclined to perceive all purveyors of candor, frankness, and sincerity as mongering biases, propaganda,

and lies instead. How then do we teach a skeptical modern audience to appreciate the genre of creative nonfiction when so much of the text's truth depends on the way it is creatively sold to the reader?

As a storyteller, I am concerned with both the historical and the academic perception of memoir as "less than literature [...] as self-indulgent" - particularly stemming from its issues of unreliable narration (Roorbach 13). In memoir, memory is truth, and, in art, truth is a worthy objective. However, as we've discussed, in reality - that which memoir purports to be grounded in - memory is fragile, thus, too, is a memoir's narrative. Artistic license cannot excuse lying, but telling a story in your own distinct tongue according to how you remember it does not always suggest a lack of truth in the tale:

The memoirist keeps her reader engaged by being an adept storyteller. So, memoir is really a kind of hybrid form with elements of both fiction and essay, in which the author's voice, musing conversationally on a true story, is all important. (Barrington 22)

Because a memoir's voice is understood to be the writer's--the *I*--it serves the dual purpose of engaging the reader into a shared sense of intimacy while also appealing to the reader's voyeuristic tendencies, making them complicit in the narrative. Therefore, in their encounters with creative nonfiction, readers were unable or unwilling to distinguish "that the I itself is a construction [...] only capable of representing part of the writer at any given time" (Roorbach 10). We have seen how the "I" plays out in the early efforts of the genre's mothers and fathers, but my personal voice emerges as not only the byproduct of my parents' and grandparents' storytelling- their staunch adherence to both lying and honesty - but also my reaction to those styles of storytelling. It's easy to vilify the female voice in literature and writing, especially if you consider how it has contributed to the construction of my own narrative voice. As discussed,

so often the roots of female narratives are marked by lies. The women in my family are storytellers; we know how to weave a web worth listening to and we do it well, willingly sacrificing convenient truth for the grander scope of the story. Both my grandmother and my mother lied in their stories while my father sought truth. As we can see in my work, my father's truth is absolute and literal to the point of being harshly critical in his pursuit; My understanding of creative nonfiction follows these gendered dichotomies; in this form, we see the importance of appropriate embellishment to enhance a truth universally acknowledged and felt.

Perhaps, the memoir's recent rise in popularity can best be attributed to the changing nature of the audience then, and not in a change in voice - which historically has always been dedicated to the study of the true "I." Today, the reader embraces the precept that "the life of the *I* becomes the life of the reader, so no matter who is speaking, the successful true story is always the reader's story" (Roorbach 12). And this is a phenomenon articulated and shared by many readers and writers of the craft: the notion that we experience a communion with the writer when we read (or listen to) stories we enjoy, regardless of that speaker's gender, in so much as we care about the subject of which they speak. Or, more pointedly, we share in this communion because they have given us the opportunity to see our own truth in their words. This bond serves as the crux of my writing and my writing provides a space in which I can explore the characters created by my family's stories. Like de Montaigne, I try to make sense of my small universe and my role in it. Like my mother, I try to put the pieces together in a beautiful way, even if it reveals an uglier truth. As a female memoirist, I, too, am a liar. It's genetic. Or maybe historic. Definitely mythic. And that's where my story begins.

Part Two: My Memoirs

She Said...

Leaving You in Stitches

A cup of this. A pinch of that. Just do it to taste. Cook until it's done.

"It's a feeling," she would say, pulling a burnt meatloaf from the oven and taking it all in stride. "When you don't feel right, neither does the food," she winked. Then she leaned in close and whispered, "Let's smother this thing in ketchup. No one will even notice." Grandma could be downright duplicitous in the kitchen and I was happy to trail behind her apron strings. Cooking with Grandma was jazz music and cursing. It was a culinary masterpiece or a catastrophic mess covered in ketchup. Either way, everything she fed me left me starved for more and what I craved most was the way she put together a story. Like her cooking, her stories were done "to taste" and she always knew your favorite flavors. Mine was the time she gave my Grandfather stitches. This is how she always told it:

"It's 1959 and your Grandfather is bleeding all over the carport. He comes home from the base that night and tells me he's going out. 'Like hell you are,' I said. 'It's my night,' and I tried to hand off the baby, but he just stood back and smiled at me like an asshole and said, 'Okay. Whoever is ready first can have the night.' Now, in my day"--and this is where my Grandmother would lean in like she was telling you a great secret-- "women used to *dress* to go out." And she always punctuated that fact by pointing her index finger at you and then leaning back, waiting for you to signal that you were ready for the rest.

"See what he did? He knew. Your Grandfather *knew* that I would never win that wager and when he came out of the bathroom dressed to impress and headed for the carport I was so mad I could spit. I looked around the living room for something to throw at him. Can you

imagine? That's how mad I was! So, I grab that god-ugly ceramic cat his mother gave us. I mean really," and Grandma leaned in again, "the woman had no taste. So, I rush to the door and chuck it at him. Would you believe it? The friggin whiskers slice his hand right open. I see all that blood and I just know he's coming after me so, I push him through the doorway and lock him out. There he is, bleeding all over the place and begging to come inside and I'm shouting for him to go away. The man had to get our neighbor to take him to the hospital and he came home with stitches. *Five* stitches! Harold calls when they get back and promises that if I let your Grandfather back in the house, nothing will happen. I felt bad for the man. I did. Having to call his friend's wife like that. So, I open the door and there he is with his stupid face and his bandage. I looked him square in the eye and I said," and Grandma leaned in again and pointed her finger, "Don't you EVER try to take my night again."

The story would end with her raspy laugh--head back, eyes closed, open palm slapping against her knee. My Grandmother died when I was 21 and I cannot recall a week before that where I wasn't standing in her kitchen, willing her to tell me that story. Sometimes it was a ceramic cat she threw and sometimes a ceramic rooster. My Grandfather either smiled outright or smirked smugly when he claimed that whoever was ready first could have the night out. In either case, he never took the baby she was trying to hand off and I never heard anything else about that baby in the rest of the story. Her mother-in-law had bad taste, no taste, or just plain didn't care for my Grandma. To me, anyone not liking her was the same as having bad taste or no taste at all so, that was a wrinkle that never needed smoothing. My Grandfather had 5 stitches or 6, but a virgin to the story would hear that he had 8.

Regardless of the minor inconsistencies, certain parts of her story never wavered. She always leaned in and pointed in the same three places, women in her day knew how to *dress*, and

my Grandfather should have known better. But this is not his story. It's my Grandmother's and its costume changes never bothered me. As long as she stayed at the story's center it was a story worth hearing because, my favorite thing about the story wasn't the story itself, but the way *she* told it. Where she leaned in. Her finger extended in my face. Her embellishments. And of course, the best thing about the story is how the moral never matched the tale. The story is not a story about my Grandmother. The story *is* my Grandmother. Her morals never matched. She was cigarette smoke and Shalimar, a dirty martini and a Coors Light, high heels and the Jitterbug or house slippers and Pledge. The woman was dizzying and I loved being under her spell. But where I saw her magic, my father saw a witch and although her ever-changing details gave some indication of her sorcery, her omissions were hard proof.

It is 1959 and my Grandmother is trying to hand off her baby. Susan is 14 months old and she is not my Grandfather's biological daughter. A Navy man, my Grandfather was away on the ship for large chunks of time. Out of loneliness, out of drunkenness, out of spite--my Grandmother had an affair and got pregnant. Try as he might, my Grandfather had to admit that he didn't think himself capable of loving this child the way he loved my father. Grandma felt stuck. Grandpa left her and she wanted Susan to have two parents who loved her as their own and an extended family who didn't look at her with a disparaging eye. Grandma's uncle was a social worker and helped her to find a family willing to adopt Susan. So, she leaves my 8-year-old father with her mother and heads off to California, telling him that she would return in two weeks without his sister. Grandma didn't come back until my dad was 11.

Maybe because the California sun blinded her or maybe because his smooth dancing and sophisticated clothes reminded her of my Grandfather--my Grandmother got pregnant again within a year of arriving to give Susan away. She named the child, Mary, after her mother. Try as

she might, she couldn't bring herself to take this child back to Malden, Massachusetts. Back to a son that had lost a sister already and wouldn't understand this new sister. Wouldn't understand how my Grandmother could turn two weeks into three years. Perhaps she could convince him it was magic? But he had seen enough of her sorcery. Thinking my father in more capable hands or thinking that she had already lost him in a way--she remained in California, got on welfare, and raised Mary for a year, never calling home to tell anyone about her second daughter. Out of loneliness, out of desperation, out of excuses--my Grandmother gave Mary to the sister of the woman who adopted Susan. So, her two illegitimate daughters were raised to believe they were first cousins and though she returned for my father, he was raised to believe that she could--and might--abandon him at any moment. Susan was his proof. But this is not his story. It's my Grandmother's and it was done "to taste." A cup of this. A pinch of that. A catastrophic mess covered in ketchup. This is how she *never* told it:

Over the years, she pruned my Grandfather's resentment like a rose. She watered and fed it, wanting it to grow from the muck and blossom into something beautiful. Instead she bore the cuts from its thorns in silence, feeling she deserved them for tending her garden so carelessly. She allowed my Grandfather to name their daughter, Mary because she could not tell him there was already a Mary in California and I imagine her heart broke a little each time she had to say the name. She turned a blind eye to my Grandfather's 20-year affair. What could she say? A woman of the 50's with two illegitimate daughters and a promiscuous reputation--my Grandmother's return to Grandpa was about survival and she had burnt enough meatloafs to know that sometimes even ketchup can't salvage the meal. So, she moved into her own bedroom where she kept pictures of Susan and Mary in a box and probably looked on their faces in secret,

trying to assure herself that she had done right by them. That maybe they were living the life she had wanted for herself, somewhere in the sunshine with no dark corners to hide any shame.

And yet, she was happy. Inexplicably happy in spite of it all. As a Grandmother, she was handed a second chance and she ran with it, showering me with the attention my father needed as an 8-year-old boy. She gave me laughs and she gave me jazz. She taught me to cook and she taught me how to put together a story: Just do it to taste. Cook until it's done. "It's a feeling."

In 1959 my Grandfather was bleeding all over the carport. In 1959 my Grandmother was trying to hand off her baby. It doesn't matter which one I tell because, as long as Grandma stays at the center, it's a story worth telling. And it doesn't matter which minute details I change or omit because, the truth is the same: When people are hurt, they look for something ugly to throw at you.

Lies My Mother Told Me: In Chronological Order

Wide-Eyed

I was born with my eyes wide open. The doctors and nurses marveled at how I just lay there looking around while the other newborns were straining under the harsh, fluorescent lighting. Family members came from far and wide just to bear witness, leaning in close to coo and question. "What big eyes you have," they might say or maybe that was another story entirely.

A new father visiting the nursery was particularly taken with me. His attempts to snap a picture of his own daughter with her eyes open were all in vain and he asked my mother if he could take a picture of me instead. Apparently, the majority of his family lived out-of-state and he wanted to send them a memorable photograph of his latest accomplishment.

“They all sort of look alike at this stage anyways,” he negotiated. He and my mother shared a smile and then he sealed the deal by offering to send her some copies.

Over the years, I find myself returning to this story and each time I get to the end of it, it feels like I’m just at the beginning of something. It’s poetic, I suppose. Because, I am at the beginning of something. The beginning of me. In this origin story, my father is missing and my mother lets a stranger take my picture. That should bother me and I suppose it does. But, knowing my mother’s penchant for spinning a tale, I’m really not sure what is true about this story. The story of my first day in this world. I do know there are pictures of me wrapped in a blanket, seeming tiny and fragile. I also know that my eyes are--in fact--wide open, looking directly at the camera and daring you to lean closer. They are saying, “she has a story to tell,” and I decide I that I like this version of the truth. I can see now why my mother likes it, too.

Naked and Three

I’m a streaker. At least, that’s how my mother tells it. At the age of three, I crawled out of my crib, removed my diaper, opened the front door, and rode my red tricycle down the street. Our neighbor, Mr. Telerico, had to call my mother and inform her that she had a budding nudist on her hands. They laughed and laughed.

Growing up, my mother told this story to anyone with ears and no matter how many times she repeated it, its hilarity never seemed to wane. I found it annoying how I could never quite tell if they were laughing with my mother or just laughing at me. Certainly, the story explains a lot of my personality traits--inquisitive, independent, brave. But there are a lot of things about this story that bother me. First off, it’s untrue. I know you are probably doubting me right now, thinking to yourself, “how could she possibly remember something that happened

when she was three?" But you need to understand two things: this event was medically impossible and my mother is a liar.

At the age of three I was diagnosed as Failure to Thrive. I even spent about a month at Boston's, Children's Hospital, under observation. Besides a fond but fuzzy recollection of the puppet shows, I have no real memory of my stay and my parents rarely discussed it. If pressed, my mother explained this condition by telling me that Failure to Thrive just meant that I was much smaller in stature and weight than other kids my age. That I could be born this way. This was not one of her outright fabrications, but there are things she left out of her explanation. For instance, besides being smaller, FTT children are delayed when it comes to physical skills such as rolling over, sitting up, standing or walking. So, the odds of me climbing out of my crib, unlocking and turning the knob of my front door, and then reaching the pedals on my tricycle to ride it down the street are slim at best. I'm not a numbers person, but I'm guessing that on a scale of 1 to 10, the probability of this is at zero.

So why tell it? Believe it or not, the answer is in the condition. Medical causes for FTT include:

- Chromosome abnormalities such as Down syndrome and Turner syndrome
- Defects in major organ systems
- Problems with the endocrine system, such as thyroid hormone deficiency, growth hormone deficiency, or other hormone deficiencies
- Damage to the brain or central nervous system, which may cause feeding difficulties in an infant
- Heart or lung problems, which can affect how oxygen and nutrients move through the body
- Anemia or other blood disorders
- Gastrointestinal problems that result in malabsorption or a lack of digestive enzymes
- Long-term gastroenteritis and gastroesophageal reflux (usually temporary)
- Cerebral Palsy
- Long-term (chronic) infections
- Metabolic disorders

If you take a look at my medical records--you'll see that none of these apply. Luckily, there are alternate explanations. Other factors that may lead to Failure to Thrive are environmental. They include:

- Emotional deprivation as a result of parental withdrawal, rejection, or hostility
- Economic problems that affect nutrition, living conditions, and parental attitudes
- Exposure to infections, parasites, or toxins
- Poor eating habits, such as eating in front of the television and not having formal meal times

Treatment for FTT depends on the cause. In my case, treatment meant educating my parents about the necessity of a well-balanced diet and encouraging an improvement in family dynamics or parental behaviors. The truth is, it wasn't me the doctors wanted to observe. It was them. I'm not a numbers person, but I'm guessing that on a scale of one to ten, the probability of my mother willingly admitting this to anyone with ears is at zero.

What bothers me most about my mother's story isn't that it's fiction. I think it's easy to see why my mother wanted to replace the story of a one-month stint at Children's Hospital with the story of a spirited, "normal" three-year-old. What bothers me most about my mother's story is that I'm naked. I'm really not sure why this bothers me. But it does. Maybe it's because my nakedness makes me appear vulnerable. Maybe it's because I was so layered in my mother's lies growing up, that my nakedness seems the most out of place in the story. Either way I'm a naked, three-year-old in the middle of the street and my mother didn't notice that I was gone until our neighbor, Mr. Telerico called to tell her. They laughed and laughed.

Changing the Landscape

It's 6 a.m. on a Saturday morning and my mother is digging through our kitchen trash. I am 7-years-old. I don't know much about the circumstances, but I do know that I'm

uncomfortable. She catches me in the doorway before I can slink away and when she meets my eye I notice that she's been crying. Quickly, she wipes her face with the back of her hand.

"Damn allergies," she attempts a laugh, but it feels out of place so, I force a laugh too. Now we're both square pegs in round holes.

"Do you want to help me with a puzzle? It will be fun!" I nod my head and shuffle over in my Garfield slippers. My mother dumps the contents of the trash onto the kitchen floor and tells me to look for little slips of white-lined paper. She shows me the pieces she's already found and then encourages my participation by telling me that I can tape them together for her at the end, after she matches the words on the slips so that they form sentences.

"It's a letter," she pauses. "It's from Dad." Even at seven, I assume he ripped it up in anger. My parents fight all the time. For the mild fights, I hide under my sister's desk until the screaming and loud noises stop. For the worst fights, I sneak across to my neighbor's house and call the cops. For all the fights, I'm scared.

I'm rifling through banana peels, cigarette butts, egg shells, and soggy, unidentifiable objects. The smell is horrible, but I say nothing. My mother and I just sit in the trash--silent and focused. Sometimes one of our hands grazes against the others and every once in awhile I can feel my mother's breath on my cheek. It is frenzied, but I don't look at her. I can't. Maybe she's crying again. The cops might be able to save me from my father's anger, but they can do nothing about pulling me from the wreckage of her sadness. When it's all over, we've excavated 32 pieces of small, white-lined paper.

My mother has always been good at puzzles. She picks landscapes because, "They're the hardest." She never keeps them or frames them. She just puts them together with patience and care, then casually disassembles and discards them. I've always thought it a pointless endeavor

to toil over something so greatly and then dismantle it like it never meant anything. It's mostly a solitary activity, but once in a great while I try my hand at it. No matter how many times I jam the wrong pieces together, she doesn't correct me. For some reason, I hate her for this.

"All the pieces are green leaves. You can't even tell which is which," I whine.

"Yes I can," she replies, locking the pieces into their rightful place on the first try.

And now that she's putting together these squares of paper with ease--I begin to think of this pointless endeavor as an important skill. She finishes and I tape it all together onto a piece of construction paper while she smokes one cigarette after another until I am done.

In retrospect, my mother must think I'm illiterate. Or maybe she thinks I am just dumb. She certainly does *not* think that I will read the letter I am taping together, but I do. My Dad did not write this letter. His mistress did. It's not from my Dad, it's *for* my Dad. I don't know much about the circumstances, but I do know that my mother lied. This wasn't fun at all. Unlike her other puzzles, this one cannot be casually disassembled and discarded. For some reason, I hate her for this.

Down in the Dirt

Missy Bidwell was an unfortunate-looking creature who lingered around my 6th grade year like the smell of rotting garbage. She lived on the corner of my street and, at every turn, I was terrified of running into her. She seemed like the omniscient narrator to my misery--her taunts ringing in my ears long after I lay my head on the pillow each night.

"You're daddy's a stupid drunk. You know what else? His daughter is a slut." Usually, she emphasized her verbal tirade by throwing something toward my head with considerable speed and accuracy. If she was left without ammunition in her immediate vicinity, Missy proved resourceful, walking close behind me and giving me flat tires until the skin on my heels would

blister and break. Besides my stupid, drunk father, Missy was the only person I fantasized about hurting. After letting her myriad cruelties wash over me like a tidal wave, I would envision her being horribly maimed or disfigured by some spontaneous act of God. I was sure that He would see things my way and exact justice accordingly. Then again, my father's maimings were always on back-order so, I had no real incentive to believe that Missy would encounter any natural disasters.

There were so many reasons to dislike Missy Bidwell. Her insults. Her violence. Her filth. The way her family wore their dysfunction out in the open like they didn't know it was supposed to be hidden. But the biggest thing I disliked about Missy was my mother. She decided, with no real consideration for my feelings, that the best way to deal with Missy was to take the moral high ground. As though she were pulling the advice from a parenting manual littered with trite, one-liners she claimed we were not a family who "used our fists to solve problems." This roughly translated into eating Missy Bidwell's shit on a regular basis and licking my fingers as though I liked the taste.

The day that I ignored my mother's decree wasn't much different than the ones that preceded it. The only real difference was me. Instead of seeing Missy's anger I began to see my mother's weakness and I was determined to stamp it out by any means necessary. So, when Missy followed her routine insults by whipping a wiffle-ball bat toward my head, I jumped off my mother's moral high ground and into the mosh pit. My fists of fury rained down on her with relentless force. It was the first and only time I had made someone bleed. I liked it. When my friends pulled me off of her I had a clump of Missy's hair balled up in each hand. Unable to escape their protective clutches, I kicked dirt on Missy and ran home.

My mother slept in the afternoons before her evening shift, stocking toys at Child World. First, I had to wake her. Then, I had to admit that I consciously disobeyed her decree of non-violence. She didn't yell or curse at me the way I pictured. The way I wanted. She just stared at me. I had Missy's blood on my shirt, and my clothes were covered in muck and grass-stains. It occurred to me then that my mother wasn't seeing *me* at all, but the image of my father. His uncontrollable rage. His disappointment. Her blood on *his* shirt. I felt white-hot shame pushing at the back of my eyelids and I started to cry.

"No." My mother said. Her voice was flat and tinny. "You don't feel bad for Missy Bidwell so don't pretend that you do with those crocodile tears. You're only sorry that you had to tell me. I'm going to talk to Mrs. Bidwell and then we will discuss your punishment." As she left the room, her threat mingled with her cigarette smoke and hung over me in an ominous cloud.

Before my mother could reach the bottom step of our porch, Mrs. Bidwell came barreling down our driveway with a cigarette butt clenched between her teeth and her finger wagging. It seemed the yelling and cursing I had imagined as part of my punishment was put on reserve for my mother's confrontation with Mrs. Bidwell. They stood uncomfortably close--each woman waving her arms in anger, taking quick drags from a cigarette between bursts of chaotic energy, and then blaming the other for their daughter's dispositions. As my mother was prone to do, or maybe trained to do, she turned her back when the conflict was at its height and started her retreat.

"It's no wonder where she gets it from," shrieked Mrs. Bidwell, "everyone knows he beats on you!" And just like that, my mother's moral high ground crumbled beneath her feet and she slapped Mrs. Bidwell in the mouth and ran inside. Apparently the Bidwell's weren't the only

family in our neighborhood wearing their dysfunction out in the open. My mother felt the white-hot shame of it pushing at the back of her eyelids and cried.

I thought I kicked dirt on Missy that afternoon, but as it turns out, it was my mother lying there on the ground. What's worse was realizing I was no better than my father because, I made her into my victim, too. I stood there not knowing what to say and wishing she would just punish me already. I envisioned being horribly maimed or disfigured by some spontaneous act of God. But He was nowhere to be found and she just stood at the sink, peeling potatoes for the dinner she had to cook before leaving for work.

He Said...

Sins of the Father

Smile [though your heart is aching]

“Fix your face,” my father commanded. His anger tore through my sadness like a chainsaw through a stick of butter. I tried to do as he asked, but the more I thought about my face the more my mouth betrayed me--quivering and contorting itself against my better judgment. Squeezing my eyes into thin, paper slits to keep the tears at bay, an unidentifiable sound escaped. Something guttural and pathetic. He moved toward me and for a small moment, I thought he was coming to offer me comfort. Instead, he cupped my face and dug his fingers into the pits of my cheeks.

“Show me some teeth, God damn it,” his breath so close that my bangs fluttered at the push of each syllable. I cannot recall the exact fight my parents were having. I just remember that we were on our way to the annual family picnic and my father felt he had caught my mother in a lie. It escalated quickly and at some point on the drive to Sherborn, his hand was wrapped firmly around her neck. He did not actually choke her, but the threat of being choked was very

real. As an 8-year-old, I was particularly prone to crying when I was scared. My older sister and brother had grown past this impulse. As soon as we pulled in to Aunt Faith's glittering micro-mansion, my mother went from hysterical to placid without batting an eye. I looked to my siblings for exemplars and sure enough, they were sitting there smiling. So, I curled my mouth into a stage-smile, a blaze of gums. We are talking pink for miles. What I really wanted was to sob in my father's arms, but I stood there in his grip, flashing a perfect smile while his anger splintered like teacups being smashed into the asphalt.

My father had always been dedicated to the truth. Honesty and integrity were important to him simply because they were luxuries not available to him as a kid. He didn't place much emphasis on material successes or others' opinions. That may sound contradictory given that he's forcing smiles onto our faces in Aunt Faith's driveway, but my father knew from experience that tears don't erase pain. After all, he was the 8-year-old boy who sat on his grandmother's porch, waiting for his mother to return. It was a three-year wait and he most definitely cried a lot in the first two. When it got him nowhere, he made up his mind about crying. Tears were dishonest and he refused to sit idly by while I cried over things that were beyond my control or understanding.

Everything about my father was honest. His anger. His violence. His hurt. If he felt he was being lied to, he would get at the truth by any means necessary even when those means left scars. And if he felt his children were trying to dodge the harsh truths in life, it was his job to remind us. Life's not fair. People you love will walk out on you. The only thing you have control over is yourself. So, you better fix your face because, no one cares about your tears. They're selfish and simple.

When I tell this story, people are generally horrified. Mostly, they feel bad for me and

that's when I know that they've missed the truth. My crying that day had little to do with being traumatized by my parents' fighting or being afraid for my mother's physical safety. I had grown past that impulse. It was my father's sadness that scared me. What I really wanted was to sob in my father's arms and make him okay, but I just stood there in his grip, flashing a perfect smile. A blaze of gums. We are talking pink for miles.

Riding in the Car with Boys

I'm twelve-years old and I'm sitting in the car with my father. We're at a red light and the radio is off. It's kind of unbearable. The silence. The small space. The expectation of intimacy. Then his voice comes. It's loud and clumsy.

"Don't date boys who wear more jewelry than you." He says this without turning to look at me. It almost feels like he's not really speaking to me at all, but just thinking out loud in my proximity. Maybe it's because I'm going through puberty and he feels he has to impart some wisdom regarding the opposite sex. But, it feels more like he was forced to say it. Like someone, probably my mom, nagged him to "talk to her," and he is checking it off his list.

My father never talked to me as a child. Instead, he spent a lot of time talking *at* me. If my mother wanted this moment to have an impact, she should have started by getting him to look at me. Then again, there is a great difference between looking at someone and seeing them. Based on my father's own childhood, I don't think he was taught this so, I decide to appreciate his attempt. After all, it wasn't always this hard to be alone with my father. Sure, he was an angry man who drank too much and hit my mom too often, but he also had a great reading voice. As a little girl, he read to me from selections of Grimm's Brothers fairy tales and I loved pressing my ear to his chest and feeling the deep bass of his voice, the rise and fall of his breath, the cadence of the words as I drifted off to sleep. My father was the only one who read to me and

so much of my happiness was wrapped up in those moments where he wasn't angry or violent or disappointed. He was just a dad reading stories to his daughter and I was just a girl, lying safely in my father's arms.

Now we're sitting in this stuffy car while he talks at me about boys who wear too much jewelry. I'd rather press my ear to his chest and listen to him tell me a story. But I don't because, like the fairy tales he selected for me at bedtime, my father and I don't have a happy ending. We just keep moving forward and getting nowhere.

Death Becomes Her

The last thing my grandmother told me was a joke. I was standing by her hospital bed and she asked me to lean closer. When I did, she slowly and carefully lifted her hand and caressed my cheek.

"So beautiful," she whispered. "You look just like me." Then she died laughing. As the heart rate monitor rang out in a final, harrowing note my father dropped to the floor in a pile at the foot of her bed.

"I can be better. I can be better," he cried, rocking back and forth inconsolably. He had spent a lifetime building a wall between himself and my grandmother. A fortress of solitude. Her death blew down his walls as though they were made of straw. Others in the room saw a grieving son, but I saw an 8-year-old boy crying for his mother to come back by promising that he, "can be better." Better at what, I'm not certain, but there was certainly a change in him.

At her wake, people cried hardest when they reached my spot in the receiving line. Grandma's last joke was funny because of its truth. I was made in her image and no matter what I said to family members and other mourners they saw Jeanie's face saying it. This was most difficult for my father. I always wanted him to see me rather than just look at me but now my

Grandmother's face kept getting in the way. He stole glances at me throughout the funeral mass, hanging his head in shame when I would catch his gaze. When we were finally alone together, standing on line for the bathroom, I didn't know what to say. The weight of his stare was oppressive. Then his voice came and it occurred to me that it was the first I had heard it since the moment Grandma passed. It was loud and clumsy.

"I'm sorry," he cried. "I'm just so sorry." Sorry for what, I'm not certain. In fact, I'm not even sure if he was apologizing to me or to her. I wanted to cry, but I had grown past that impulse. Maybe it was the awkwardness of it or the expectation of intimacy, but the more I focused on trying to cry the more my mouth betrayed me--quivering and contorting into a stage-smile against my better judgment. I must've looked crazy because, my father stopped crying and just smiled back at me. When my Uncle Roland approached for the bathroom he seemed bewildered by our strange merriment.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm just so sorry for the both of you," and my father and I died laughing.

I Said...

The Question

Pat Sajak is smiling and clapping encouragements into the camera. The wheel is spinning. Spinning. Spinning. Here come the "uhhh's" and twisted eyebrows. The letter "T" spat out and over enunciated so that you can almost hear the tongue pressing at the back of her teeth when she forms the sound. *Tea*—hot and sophisticated in my nana's fine china. *Tee's*—shoved under the rim of my mother's cap as she steps up to the green, squinting into the sun that exacerbates her cancer cells. *T*—rocking back and forth under the city. Rows of strangers straining under the paradox of looking at one another, but seeing nothing.

These are the things that muddle in my mind while my virginity falls away from me as inevitably as a pencil rolling off a slanted school desk. So, when the question glances at me from under horn-rimmed glasses, in the midst of syncopated, rushed “girl talk” during lunch hour—my story is an invention. An incantation. A wistful day dream. A wish, ungranted. A reminder of the first and only time I felt regret BEFORE losing something. The fiction goes *sort of* like this:

College. Freshman year. My first boyfriend. We are on a weekend trip to the White Mountains. I’ve shaved my legs and packed some of Victoria’s secrets into my high school book bag. I feel sick. Uneasy. This is not his first time and I worry that my lovemaking will be inadequate. But he is graceful, generous, gentlemanly—he is whatever “g” word makes my audience swoon. Insert one that is to your liking. Because he called ahead, there are flowers and candles in the hotel room. He makes promises. Tearful “I love you’s” are exchanged followed by an outpouring of frenzied, desperate affections. Truth be told, it hurts a little, but it’s a beautiful pain—the kind you sort of miss when it leaves you. We spend the next two days in bed. Napping. Necking. Making plans.

This is where the story ends. Those that posed the question generally approve and then share their own. They are saying words, but it seems the sounds are coming from a great distance or from behind the thick wall of a neighboring bedroom. I am listening to what’s behind the words. A detail out of place. A tiny ball of lint in an expertly styled hair-do. Something, anything that shatters the pristine re-telling. I nod in the right places, but I’m wondering—*What is her fiction?* Of course, it’s next to impossible to decipher because, fiction is stealthy. It’s pathological. It’s a mogwai getting wet, giving birth to other mogwai. Bigger mogwai. Mogwai’s that leave more of a lasting impression than your tiny, cooing, fuzzy original story. I forfeit. I cannot know her truth. I’m too busy denying my own. It goes *something* like this:

The summer before college. Pat Sajak is smiling and clapping encouragements into the camera. The wheel is spinning. Spinning. Spinning. Here come the “uhhh’s” and twisted eyebrows. The August sun pervades the room from the curtainless window. The nubby fabric of the couch is leaving an imprint on the back of my bare thighs. His kisses are frenzied; desperate—nipping at my neck like fleas on my ankle—for survival purposes only. I wonder why we are not in the bedroom. *Don’t these things always happen in the bedroom?* His head bobs back to reach my blank stare. The question glances at me through heavy, wanton eyelids. I say yes. Or maybe I say nothing. Either way, the end result is the same. My virginity falls away from me as inevitably as a pencil, rolling off a slanted school desk. It’s gravity. I don’t want to be the only one of my future college friends not in orbit. Truth be told, it hurts a little—but it’s a beautiful pain—the kind you sort of miss when it leaves you. He is gauche, generic, gratified. He is whatever “g” word makes you regretful. Insert one that is to your liking.

I realize, too suddenly it seems, that your first sex is like Thanksgiving. A story I’ve been preparing for since 5th grade sex Ed with Mrs. King. Then it’s over in twenty minutes. I’m imagining the *Turkey*, the *trimmings*, the *time* spent—the letter “T”—spat out and over enunciated so that you can almost hear the tongue pressing against the back of the teeth when she forms the sound. This is where the story ends. Or perhaps this is where the story begins. Are you listening to what’s behind the words? A detail out of place? Fiction is stealthy. It’s a Russian nesting doll. There’s a truth inside the lie. Inside the lie. Inside the lie. It goes *exactly* like this:

The hot August sun pervades the room from the curtainless window. Pat Sajak is smiling and clapping encouragements into the camera. The wheel is spinning. Spinning. Spinning. The phone is ringing. Ringing. Ringing. Here come his “uhhh’s” and twisted eyebrows. A girl is on the phone and he thinks he is speaking in code, but his laugh has too much affection in it. One

hand on the receiver and the other hand in my bra. He is saying words, but it seems the sounds are coming from a great distance or from behind the thick wall of a neighboring bedroom. Ego boosted, he hangs up and shifts the attention back to me. His kisses are frenzied, desperate—nipping at my neck like a parasite—he wants to consume me. His head bobs back to reach my blank stare. The question glances at me through unblinking, ambivalent eyelids. I wonder why we are not in the bedroom. *Don't these things always happen in the bedroom?* Truth be told, it hurts a lot. I cry into his shoulder. He takes this as a compliment. The nubby fabric from the couch is leaving an imprint on the back of my bare thighs. I've been marked. A scarlet pattern of shame. He is going, going, gone. The “g” word that gave birth to all other “g” words. Bigger “g” words. “G” words that leave more of a lasting impression than your tiny, ugly, gritty original story.

I realize, too suddenly it seems, that your first sex is an invention. An incantation. A wistful daydream. A wish, ungranted. A reminder of the first and only time you felt regret BEFORE losing something. Those that posed the question generally disapprove and share their own. But none of that matters because; I am in the White Mountains. There are flowers and candles. Promises are made and then broken. And I know what you are thinking. *Is any of it real?* That's the trouble with stories. That's the allure and the danger. Memory is the siren song and you are willing to crash into the cliff side for a good story. So, he is graceful, gentlemanly, generic, gone. He is whatever “g” word makes you feel it's truth. Insert one that's to your liking. Or just start over. Listen to what's behind the words. A detail out of place. A tiny ball of lint in an expertly styled hair do. Strain under the paradox of looking at my story and seeing...*nothing*.

Works Consulted

Aeschylus. *The Agamemnon*. New York: Sagwan Press, 2015.

Atwood, Margaret. "Siren Song" from *Selected Poems 1965-1975*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1976.

Atwood, Margaret. *Penelopiad*. New York: Canongate, 2005.

Barrington, Judith. *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*--2nd ed. Portland, Oregon: The Eighth Mountain Press, 1997.

Cardell, Kylie, and Victoria Kuttainen. "The Ethics Of Laughter: David Sedaris And Humour Memoir." *Mosaic: A Journal For The Interdisciplinary Study Of Literature* 45.3 (2012): 99-114. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.

Didow, Jessica. "But What Is The Truth In Creative Nonfiction?." *Young Scholars In Writing: Undergraduate Research In Writing And Rhetoric* 3.(2005): 11-17. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.

Frey, James. *A Million Little Pieces*. New York: Random House Inc., 2003

Gutkind, Lee, ed. *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005.

Henderson, Bill, ed. *2010 Pushcart Prize XXXIV Best of the Small Presses*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.

John's Hopkins Children's Center. Home Page. 28 Feb. 2016

<http://www.hopkinschildrens.org/Failure-to-Thrive.aspx>.

Karr, Mary. *The Art of Memoir*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015.

Karr, Mary. *The Liars Club*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.

Klebold, Sue. *A Mother's Reckoning: Living in the Aftermath of Tragedy*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2016.

Lane, Margaret. *Samuel Johnson & his World*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975

Lopate, Phillip, ed. *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from Classical Era to the Present*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995.

McCourt, Frank. *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir*. New York: Scribner, 1996.

Nunez, Elizabeth. "Truth In Fiction, Untruths In Memoir." *Callaloo: A Journal Of African Diaspora Arts And Letters* 37.3 (2014): 499-504. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 30 Jan. 2016.

Reginato, James. "Butt Out." *W Magazine*. Conde Nast, Web. June 2008

Roorbach, Bill. *Writing Life Stories: How to make memories into memoirs, ideas into essays, and life into literature*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Story Press, 1998.

Sedaris, David. *Naked*. New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 1997.

Sedaris, David. *When You Are Engulfed in Flames*. New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 2008.

Tilden, Norma. "Nothing Quite Your Own: Reflections On Creative Nonfiction." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 33.6 (2004): 707-718. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 30 Jan.

2016.den, Norma. "Nothing Quite Your Own: Reflections On Creative Nonfiction." *Women's*

Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal 33.6 (2004): 707-718. *MLA International Bibliography*.

Web. 30 Jan. 2016.

Walls, Jeannette. *The Glass Castle*. New York: Scribner, 2005.

Warner, Maria. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. London: Vintage Books, 1994.

Zinsler, William, ed. *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1998.