

How Not to Write a Novel:
Essays on a Novelist's Relationship to Creative Practice,
Artistic Integrity, and a Novel that Resisted Being Written

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Abstract

This thesis is the record of a novelist in the process of not being able to write a novel. What began as an attempt to complete a draft of a novel became instead a multi-genre text and an autocriticism in which a fiction writer's process becomes the subject of study at the same time it generates a novel work of creative writing. This took what was once to have been a two-part thesis comprising a novel and an exegetical reflection on it into a unified text, in which the creative and critical form a kind of conversation about structure, style, artistic fear, and meaning. It combines theoretical explorations of genre and creative writing with investigation of my lived experience as a writer in the context of 2020-era cultural shifts and traces a writer's journey towards a personal framework for truth necessary to artistic practice. The purpose of this study is to track how my life experiences, fears, barriers, and relationships in the context of a destabilizing normative truth began inserting themselves into the project until it was transformed into a literary work that departed from the original intention in both content and genre. The resulting thesis takes the form of explorations in memoir and confessional writing, practices of Buddhism, psychedelic therapy, cultural analysis, photography, and samplings of endeavors to build a fictional world. As an illustrative rather than prescriptive guide for creative writers, this study offers access to in-process technical, psychological, and spiritual practices as a model for how fiction writers might increase awareness of their subject matter. It is a test of what happens to art-making in the face of external censors, formal resistance, and the obstruction of the ego. Ultimately, this study aims to illuminate, through a narrative structured by a chain of discoveries, the generative possibilities that emerge from an artist's surrender to the text she is writing. It serves as a craft guide, an autocritical reflection, and an artifact of creative process in the act of unfolding.

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I announced to my children Gray, Cora, and Madeline that I was “done with my dissertation” so many times Cora finally asked, “Mom, how many dissertations have you written?” Boundless gratitude for my children, parents, and sister, and their patience and love.

AI was used to review and finalize the bibliography. For my initial submission I used mybib.com to generate citations and ChatGPT and Consensus to cross-check citations, locate information for incomplete citations, and format a uniform bibliography, with mixed results. In the end I checked all citations by hand.

Declaration

I, Alden Jones, declare that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Introduction

Fiction writing is an act of invention. While a novel might draw from a writer's personal experience or even be wholly autobiographical, the conventions of fiction dictate that the self and the text are to be evaluated as discrete entities. In a 1875 letter to George Sand, Gustave Flaubert famously declared that when it comes to writers and their texts, "*L'homme n'est rien, l'oeuvre—tout* (The man is nothing, the work—all)" (Flaubert, 1993, p. 381); in correspondence over his lifetime Flaubert repeated the sentiment that the author should appear to never have existed at all, and went so far as to steadfastly refuse to be photographed, fixated as he was on erasing his selfhood from any discussion of his novels.

Such authorial annihilation is unimaginable in the 21st century. The Internet tore the curtains from the windows, and now access to public figures, including authors via social and other digital media, comes with the expectation that authors will interact with their readers from a personal standpoint or at least make public certain biographical information or social positions; readers and critics integrate this biographical information into their appraisal of the writer's text.

In a time when an author is inexorably entangled with their text, how does selfhood encroach upon not just the content but the execution of a novel, a supposed work of imagination that no longer exists separately from the writer's life? In what ways must an author examine how she has arrived at certain beliefs, develop boundaries and guidelines appropriate to the project and the writing process, and determine the scope of research necessary to the project's success? When an obstacle emerges between the plan for a creative writing project and its execution, what steps can a writer take to identify and remove the obstacle—or does she engage with the obstacle

itself, inviting it into the project? In this dissertation I use my own process of *not* writing the novel I intended to write to address these questions via creative practice.

Another key research question related to the novel form itself. Over a lifetime of reading and writing, I had come to see the novel as the supreme literary form. My early attempts at longform writing pulled me in the direction of memoir and nonfiction for various reasons, many of them practical—but I had never ceased to feel the pull of the novel as the true test of a writer’s abilities. While memoir involved an excavation process that required empathy towards oneself while holding oneself at a distance, the novel exploded the singular individual consciousness into a conversation across minds, reaching outward into territory that could only be recognized once explored. *Novel* suggested the creation of something that did not yet exist. Novelists are afforded the godlike powers (and responsibilities) to construct and animate an alt-art-version of our world and our human experience, moving between minds, daring to attempt psychological recreations of thoughts and experiences they have never had. As a reader, novels moved me the most; I knew at an early age that I needed to learn how to make them. I set about studying the mechanics of fiction, what Virginia Woolf describes as the piecing together of “the cotton wool of daily life” to unify the material of life into “revelation of some order” (Woolf, 1985, p. 72). I shared Woolf’s experience of the pleasures of collecting the scraps of cotton wool, the raw material of life experience and observation, and sewing them into meaning:

Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together...that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art (Woolf, 1985, p. 72).

I'd previously written and published a collection of short stories before immersing myself in the memoir genre, and I believed my return to fiction, the move from the deep self-interrogation of memoir to the expansive architecture of the novel, would come easily. How wrong I was to be.

In 2020, as I began my PhD in Creative Practice, I set out to plot a novel that had been brewing for many years with the objective of illuminating unlikely connections that invisibly bind human beings across geographical and immaterial borders. The narrative spark of the novel, *The Pleasure Seekers*, was the link between rave culture in the West and the ancient Sassafras tree in Cambodia, which in the early 2000s was targeted for destruction by illegal loggers for its safrole oil, a precursor for the rave-associated synthetic drug MDMA. Focusing on one case of the human and environmental costs of Western ignorance would inevitably lead to a more expansive set of questions related to the many ways we invisibly linked across geographical and cultural lines, and questions the association of pleasure with looting, plundering, or otherwise taking something that is not freely given. These ideas would be explored in the substance of the novel, and also in the process of writing a novel set partly in a culture to which I am an outsider; as creator, I must be aware of pleasures of narrative-sewing and to moderate these pleasures with an ethical, rational framework.

Along with the aim of illuminating harms caused by American appetites, I was also motivated by a personal desire to increase my awareness of how life unfolded for those living in Cambodia during the extremity of the Pol Pot years (1975-1979) and their aftermath, particularly for young artists left with no artist elders, and more generally for women and girls. These more amorphous questions would pack in around a plot examining the connection between the ancient Sassafras tree and the use of MDMA in the rave and club settings with which it is associated.

How does one recover from trauma of that magnitude? I sought answers to this question through imagined experiences and psychological inquiry.

As I explored narrative possibilities for *The Pleasure Seekers*, and as I began writing scraps of scenes and sharing them with readers, it became clear that the most interesting threads of the plot led deeper into Cambodia, a culture I had only briefly visited. I struggled with the confidence to create the deeply embodied Cambodian characters necessary to the story I wanted to tell in *The Pleasure Seekers*. My inability to extract myself from the text at first seemed like the problem; I became distracted by a swelling imperative to justify my interest in Cambodian stories. After a year of wrestling with a novel that resisted being written, a burst of confessional writing revealed that I could not extract myself from the story I had to tell: the draw of memoir and the pull of the authorial *I* became impossible to disregard in the context of the strain between my efforts and my subject matter. I had no choice but to follow it.

What began as a novel became the critical autobiography of a writer wrestling with the dynamic between artist and project and a search for the stability necessary to the endeavor of fiction writing. Nonfiction, the genre of self-study, lured me back to my areas of expertise in the areas of memoir and literary analysis, resulting in an autocritical record of a writer in a state of creative resistance, what she discovers within this resistance, and the process through which she integrates what is learned with her original artistic goals. It exists in a recent tradition of literary failures that generate reflexive narrative structures: Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage*, in which Dyer's inability to write a book about D.H. Lawrence becomes both the book and an examination of failure as its own form of knowledge; *Adaptation*, the film adaptation of Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*, which transforms into the story of screenwriter Charlie Kaufman struggling and failing to transform a plotless book into a screenplay; and further back to Samuel

Beckett, whose foundational advice to “Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better” (Beckett, 1983, p.7) is a creative writing mantra, and whose oeuvre illustrates the formal possibilities that emerge from narrative resistance.

I’d anticipated a thesis consisting of a draft of *The Pleasure Seekers* and a separate critical analysis of its creation. Instead, the project dictated its own configuration: as a multi-genre text, it includes confessional writing, fiction, memoir, notes from ketamine therapy sessions, literary analysis, Buddhist-derived methodologies for fiction writers, and photography, forming a record of the preoccupations, revelations, and solutions of a novelist as her process unfolds. The different forms of writing that constitute this thesis were not predetermined or planned; they appeared sequentially, as a chain of discoveries—each formal discovery appearing when the previous mode of inquiry told me what I needed to know. The resulting thesis is a map of the psychological evolution of a writer in engagement with the text as it evolves, illuminating the usually hidden process of the writer confronting challenges in artistic practice.

The process of piecing this thesis together was therefore less an act of composition and more the product of an attentiveness to creative process. In retrospect, I was able to identify the logic that had governed choices made intuitively in the moment. I approach this logic as autocritical: each genre, as it appeared in-process, was the temporary apparatus most capable of addressing the particular stage of the project, at the same time it was the mechanism by which I turned analytic attention to the self and creative practice. The literary analysis of Chapter 3 and Chapter 5 deploys critical tools developed over twenty years of critical, creative, and pedagogical examination of exoticism, cross-cultural fiction, and feminist literary critique. Chapter 5 considers the body a primary source of knowledge. The production of knowledge arises from physical presence in Cambodia in Chapter 6, and the ego-dissolution subsequently

required manifests as notes from assisted psychedelic therapy and as memoiristic self-reflection in Chapter 7.

As a contribution to the discourse adjacent to autotheory, a genre of literature that incorporates creative writing, criticism, and formal experiment modeled in various ways by writers such as Maggie Nelson, Renée Gladman, Chris Kraus, Claudia Rankine, Wayne Koestenbaum, and Anne Carson (Fournier, 2021), and as a means of furthering the critical-creative, metacognitive approach to craft I developed in writing *The Wanting Was a Wilderness* (Jones, 2020), I use autocriticism as a methodology in which the practice of writing is critically and personally reflexive, an approach in which the writer uses theoretical frameworks to examine their own experience while simultaneously using their experience to test and complicate theoretical frameworks. While elements of autoethnography appear in the chapters that emphasize cultural diagnosis through personal reflection, the central critical apparatus of this thesis is the in-process autocritical analysis of the interactions between the self and creative practice. It functions to illuminate how a writer imagines, prepares, labors, fails, and then recovers from failure, and considers what that failure made possible.

The thesis, in its final form, functions as a guide for fiction writers—not in the form of a prescriptive how-to manual or template, but as an illustrative record of what happens when a writer confronts her material and discovers that the conditions under which she intends to write are too unstable to support the intended project. It offers specific tools useful to a writer, such as a methodological approach to testing one’s moral alignment with one’s material, and encourages writers to invite their own constraints and blocks into their process.

Chapter 1 is a confessional that contextualizes my writing project in the fraught political era during Trump’s first presidency and Covid lockdown in 2020. Written four years after the

events of 2020, it attempts to trace ideological development during the era's norm-upending cultural shifts. With hindsight, this confessional identifies a central obstacle in my creative practice: due to my involuntary resistance to a mounting moral orthodoxy, but eager to support justice and to remain in good standing with my community, I was destabilized as a thinker and creator, unable to trust my own mind. I struggled to reconcile the rising dominance of normative truth over the objective truth I had been trained as a thinker and scholar to trust. By inviting the reader into my psychological landscape I hope to clarify the impact of a writer's context on the way an idea comes into material being, and what happens to this process in the face of external censors.

In Chapter 2 I return to the origins of the novel and its fundamental vision. To identify and interrogate avoidable errors in craft that accompany lesser efforts of cross-cultural fiction, in Chapter 3, I investigate the successes and failures of the novel *American Dirt* as a reality test and cautionary tale for white American writers crossing cultural lines. Identifying related pitfalls is a helpful practice for a writer undertaking a similar author-subject dynamic, but avoiding them is a separate practice; in order to better align myself with the ethical goals of my work, I set forth the Noble Eightfold Path as a guideline for writers to check their ethical alignment with their subject matter with particular consideration to ethnocentrism. By following an ethical guide derived from a belief system present in my worldview as well as the world of *The Pleasure Seekers*, I considered myself prepared to begin the writing process; but even with this permission, practice resisted all but the most basic notes and outlines.

Chapter 4 documents the early groundwork for *The Pleasure Seekers*, including timelines, exploratory scenes, and plot points. I incorporate wrong turns, including following an instinct to send my characters to Cuba, a foreign setting I moved in comfortably. Thoughts on how these

early fragments might inform future architecture or clarify questions of plot are woven through these early drafts. Still, while the plot advanced in one area of content, the novel in its holistic form continued to repel its writer.

A breakthrough occurred in the form of an outpouring of memoir, “You Are Beautiful,” which comprises Chapter 5. After an event I experienced just as Covid lockdown lifted, I followed a compulsion to record it as something unrelated to my novel. I quickly became aware that the lure of nonfiction had overpowered the novel’s conception altogether, and that the writing that emerged in confessional form signaled a definitive pivot in the project: the story I was telling was that of a novelist unable to face her novel. With new subjectivities in place after the confessional experiment, I investigated variations of memoir, autofiction, and autobiographical fiction as potential containers for the ideas that had previously repelled their recording. This chapter includes literary analysis of these related genres, with attention to historical resistance to stories of women whose critics asserted they confessed too much.

In Chapter 6 I recount my return to Cambodia, where I experienced personal revelations in addition to gaining invaluable knowledge to apply to *The Pleasure Seekers*. As we traveled in and around Siem Reap, my guide Narin told me stories of growing up in the 80s, after the Khmer Rouge had fallen. Much of what Narin told me would wind up, with his permission, in the novel’s plot. During an excursion to Kulen Mountain, I experienced an initial shift in reclaiming my own truth as trustworthy and stable.

Upon returning to the US, I sought a way to reconcile these findings and finally eliminate creative blocks. I must offer a content warning here, and to emphasize that I am a citizen of and wrote this thesis in the United States, where the use of certain hallucinogens, including ketamine, is legal and sanctioned in the context of psychiatric therapy. While it might be argued that

psychedelic therapy is a form of research in the context of a novel project with the hallucinogenic experience at its foundation, I began a series of ketamine therapy sessions not as a research methodology, but as a forum in which I might pose questions related to my creative practice in an effort to integrate my research findings. I collect these notes in Chapter 7.

Towards the end of my project efforts, a surge of activism fractured my professional and social communities, contextualizing the forces that had been at play during my initial attempt to begin the novel, and allowing me to conclude the reckoning I'd spend four years unearthing: An ego death was required in order to reclaim the imaginative powers required of a fiction writer and trust in my own truth. To define the concept of ego death in the context of creative writing, I draw on three genealogies of the term: the Buddhist proposal of the dissolution of a fixed self as a precondition for clear perception (Bodhi, 2000, pp. 901-903); therapeutic ego dissolution associated with psychedelic-assisted therapy (Pollan, 2018); and authorial self-erasure in the tradition of Flaubert and Barthes.

This thesis contains an apparent paradox: as I seek immersion in the creative process, I first propose that turning to the stability of the *I* of a confessional first-person point of view dislodges resistance and restores trust in the creator-self. This appears to contradict the conclusion that ego death, the awareness that there is no fixed sense of *I*, proves the ultimate solution to my creative resistance. But the ego that needed annihilation was not the confessing self; it was the self as authorial performance. The more I wrote as a confessing *I*, the less I composed for an imagined antagonistic reader, and the more I was writing from the unguarded standpoint from which fiction must also be generated. Once fully situated within the text as a character and participant with an authoritative voice, my author-self dimmed. In this way, the autobiographical approach was a step towards the obliteration of the ego—the dissolution of the self being, as Bodhi noted,

the precondition for clear perception, which is a precondition for writing well. This proved a revelatory synthesis, with potential applications to not only to the authorial anxieties associated with cross-cultural representation, but to the banal, inevitable anxieties all fiction writers must confront.

This thesis began as attempt to write a novel, and in the end the novel does not exist. The method of autocriticism, when applied to the finished text, located an explanation for this absence in three areas. The first factor was the prioritization of normative truth that emerged in the years leading up to the time I attempted to launch the novel. Artistic permission was, during this time, determined by identity, and identity not only discouraged writers from writing outside their personal knowledge, but determined what a writer was even allowed to imagine. For a writer already attentive to questions of cultural representation and exoticism, this climate did not clarify ethical obligations so much as replace them with an environment of surveillance. I began to lose trust in my own mind. The second factor was the question of form. After a year of attempting to muscle a fictional narrative into existence, the eruption of memoir first seemed like a distraction; but I soon understood it as the story's instance on a form that could contain it. I had to stop resisting and allow disparate forms and genres to mingle. The third factor was my inability to extract myself from the work. A fiction writer must dissolve her ego to inhabit and animate invented characters, and also to engage in the creative act without attachment to outcome and without fear. Fear dominated my process and guided the narrative until I was ready to confront what needed destroying.

The reframing of the unwritable novel's resistance as productive as opposed to failure draws on multiple literary and theoretical predecessors. My previous critical memoir *The Wanting Was a Wilderness* argues that obstacles a writer encounters in the creative process are

not external to the project but intrinsic to it, creating their own formal container, and producing it as the writing unfolds. This echoes the claims of Keats' negative capability, and Donald Barthelme's assertion that

the not-knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated direction, there would be no invention. (Barthelme, 1997, p. 287).

The argument for generative failure perhaps most applicable to a culturally conflicted queer writer and her failed/unwritten novel comes from Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*. "Under certain circumstances," Halberstam writes, "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being" (Halberstam, 2010, p. 2). Halberstam sanguinely frames "failure [as] also unbeing, and...modes of unbeing and unbecoming propose a different relation to knowledge" (Halberstam, 2010, p. 23); failure creates the conditions for alternate manifestations of success. Seen through this lens, the essays, fragments, confessions, fictional attempts, and literary analyses here are not, as they may seem, artifacts of a novel that failed. They are what the failed novel, when offered the freedom to assert itself, and according to its own logic, came to be instead.

Chapter 1: How (Not) to Start a Novel

A Novel is an Answer to a Question

On some level, every work of fiction is a story of the writer's present moment. A novel set hundreds of years in the past is "more likely to register an exact truth about the writer's present than the exact truth of the past" (Canby, 1927). The same could be said for point of view in fiction: a Cambodian character imagined by an American writer such as myself, for instance, may well reveal more about an American worldview than a genuine Cambodian perspective. When I began *The Pleasure Seekers*, I was cognizant of related limitations on and challenges to an author's inventive empathies, but also eager to test these limits in an effort to maximally embody my characters. I considered an ongoing awareness of my position in relation to my subject matter the primary duty of this project.

I neglected, however, to consider shifts in the greater cultural context that occurred in the decade between the genesis of *The Pleasure Seekers* and my effort to begin the project; I did not evaluate the degree to which a text is a product of its author's lived context, and how my particular artistic, social, and political context would conspire with customary writing obstacles to undermine the project's momentum. I would come to understand, via writing in various exploratory genres, that the novel as originally envisioned was discordant to the moment and my state of mind to the degree that it refused to be written at all. It would ultimately become a bigger story than the novel form could hold. In order to understand the shift from novel to essays or autocriticism that transpired midway through this process, it is necessary to understand the

political context as well as my particular circumstances as an artist and educator in the year 2020, which set the stage for the project's first phase.

The Conditions

It was finally time to take it on—the first novel. Thus far I had published a volume of short stories and two works of memoir, but the novel form had, from childhood, been my highest ambition. The one I had in mind had been gathering in my mind for twelve years, and in that time had grown into a mountain of tumbled ideas and images and desires, some of them related to a geography I'd only just begun to know, some bleeding into such fields as religious thought, the history of war, and brain chemistry. I sought support in the form of a Creative Practice PhD and prepared to undertake an interdisciplinary creative writing project, a difficult one I'd set up for myself, but one I was confident I could write.

The Pleasure Seekers was the rumbling of story about raving in the US in the early 2000s and the environmental destruction taking place at the same time in Cambodia. A material thread united these two distant situations: with the Khmer Rouge landmines sufficiently cleared in the 2000s, illegal loggers and poachers began to enter the inadvertently-protected forest to claim its rarest, most high-value trees, plants, and animals to sell on black markets (HALO, 2024). Ravers in New England rolled on the love drug MDMA, unaware that the ancient Sassafras trees were quickly disappearing from the Cardamom mountains as loggers felled them (Milne et al., 2023, pp. 160-172), burned their wood, distilled their oil, and sold off their oil to producers of MDMA, which was ultimately shipped to the West.

I had a few characters in development for *The Pleasure Seekers*, but no idea what was going to happen to them or what they were going to do or what lessons they might leave us with. I had only odd connections, unexpected links forming in my mind, building and turning and sometimes locking into chains. The connection between Western pleasure and exploitation of

resources and labor in a poor and faraway place such as Cambodia projected a clear central moral inquiry, identified at the outset, of how the pleasures of the wealthy come with invisible humanitarian and environmental costs, and offered a novelist the work of deepening the study of invisible interconnectivity, animating this study through character and imagined experience. It was a project with potential to raise awareness: my own through creative practice; and my reader's via transmission of information via the pleasures of story.

I also had the most important thing a novelist needs: a persistent and mysterious fixation. During my travels as a professor on Semester at Sea, teaching while on a ship circumnavigating the globe in 100 days, I spent three days in Cambodia, and later, I felt an endless whiplash of astonishment, of having to look back and look back again. Where had I just been? Did I see everything I thought I'd seen? What I'd seen and learned during my short time in Cambodia fit in no available slot in my understanding of the world.

If this place was this mystifying, and this universally Buddhist, and drenched in recent trauma so unique and so extreme it affected every single citizen of Cambodia in a way that was now intrinsic to Cambodian identity, how did I know so little about it until now? A story had already opened; I recognized that I stood in a place filled with stories that needed telling.

Something I can only describe as *holy* opened in me there as well, a part of me I long considered closed. I was raised Episcopalian with illustrated children's Bibles that made early Christianity seem like fables—sometimes instructive, sometimes confusing ideas to be entertained; I did not believe anything in those stories actually happened. Since I'd heard that the real adult Bible was 100% literally true, probably from one of my Catholic friends, I assumed the storybook versions of “bible stories” were adaptations or tales based on Biblical tenets, until I asked the wrong question in Sunday school and lost my spiritual innocence. The Sunday school

teacher read, then summarized, the story of Moses and the Burning Bush from the real adult Bible. In the story, she said, God appeared (I was confused if he emerged from the bush itself or was hiding behind the bush) and talked to Moses and they had conversation about something that God needed to tell Moses. I lost the thread of their conversation because I was flummoxed by the improbability of God and Moses having a conversation at all, as if God was hanging out with a normal man standing next to a regular bush that was for some reason on fire.

“I thought the Bible was true,” I said to the teacher.

“It is true,” she said, looking concerned.

“That story can’t be true,” I said. “God doesn’t just come down and speak to people.” I had asked my parents about this several times. No, they confirmed, no matter how much you pray, God will not reply directly. I had tried. My parents were firm that it would never happen, and though I generally trusted my parents, I also thought the Sunday school teacher might know more than they did on this subject. But she took my confusion for confrontation.

“If the Bible says God spoke to Moses, then he did,” the teacher said, now with irritation in her voice.

“So, God speaks to some people, just really lucky people, but not everyone? Or God used to talk to everyone during the Bible days and now he doesn’t anymore?” Immediately upon asking the second question, I became suspicious of whoever wrote the Bible. It seemed convenient that only in *their* time did God appear in the flesh like that, that only *their* stories of God could not be questioned.

The Sunday school teacher regarded me with exasperation and moved onto something else. I was five or six years old, surprised by the reaction of what I later understood was not a teacher but a random volunteer tasked with occupying children for the duration of church service. But I

was usually a teacher's pet, and her response stung and confused me. Why hadn't she been able to answer my questions, and why did my questions anger her? I marked it to return to later, something to resolve, and though I would later try to recover my Christian faith, it was already, as of that day in Sunday school when I was five or six, too late.

This anecdote means to illustrate some things that will become important later in the story: that I have a stubborn resistance to cognitive dissonance that goes back to my earliest years; that when asked to believe something I do not think is true, my natural reaction is distrust, not compliance; that I remember things, in a visceral and embodied way, not only as they happened, but how they felt at the time, which will be pivotal as I attempt to tell the story of the novel that remains unwritten. For the moment, what is important is that I do not recall a time when I did not consider religion suspect.

Walking through the temples of Cambodia, standing in the very place where 11th century Hindu devotees chiseled intricate visual narratives into the rock I could still touch with my hand, I felt a connection open, an acknowledgment of the lives lived out where my body was now. My thinking mind jammed and I was left with my senses. I was part of an organized tour, and the pace was breakneck. I discovered that in two and a half days, you might witness temples so impossibly stunning you emptied yourself out and made room for whatever they offered, in a country where a tour bus might take you from such a temple to a school the Khmer Rouge repurposed as a torture center (Tyner, 2017), where you might enter a room to see a bare bedframe and a sign explaining the torture methods that occurred upon it, followed by rooms of photo galleries where you stare at the resigned faces of the women and men in the state of being documented by a Khmer Rouge photographer just before their executions, and then you might be led to a field of shallow mass graves near a tree used specifically to bash the heads of babies and

young children when Khmer Rouge soldiers deemed it wisest to murder an entire family (so as to save bullets, and so as to make sure no one came for revenge), and now shocked into a zombie state, you might walk mouth agape through the gates of the Killing Fields to see musicians blinded by the Khmer Rouge playing hand-made instruments of wood and wire and hoping for tourist tips before color pulls your vision up and you're looking at the most vibrant orange-purple sky and marveling at the beauty of it all as you hear a sharp sob, your own unexpected inhale, for what happened here, so not-long-ago, and for not having known, and there is a river that flows both ways and boys on boats constantly throw nets into it, and you are in a boat and you are floating in it, and little girls beg in packs, and children everywhere ask you questions you don't understand, and monks swish by with serene smiles bleeding into indifference, and then find yourself among more crumbling ruins where trees shoot giant roots down temple-sides like tentacles and carvings centuries old are exposed and proximate for any tourist to touch, and other monks follow you, and want to talk to you, where nothing is ever roped off, where you can walk to the lip of a cliff and no one will stop you, where you can shoot a rocket launcher if you pay someone twenty dollars, where there are still signs warning of landmines on the sides of the road, and those warning signs are reproduced on t-shirts for tourists to buy at the Russian market so they can boast about the dangers they braved in Cambodia, where one's will means something different than it does in a place with strong governmental protections, where I felt both acutely American and also perceived myself to be vaguely foreign, where I sensed immediately I belonged, but I couldn't see how. *How?*

The answer was the novel.

But the novel was a book that would not open. I had chosen a particularly hostile time to try prying the possibility of it open into material existence.

How (Not) to Start a Novel

It was October, 2020. The United States was four months into Covid lockdown, and two months into a reckoning with anti-Blackness and racial disparity in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder by a white Minneapolis police officer. In my Boston neighborhood, as humans hunkered down within the boundaries of private property, rabbits proliferated and hopped on urban lawns while foxes howled in the early dark, and deep into the night fireworks and noise explosions sounded. For a while no one in the city wanted to call the police on anyone else, given what the Central Park birdwatcher and George Floyd had confirmed about police violence and racism in our world, and so the deep night detonations in my racially diverse Boston neighborhood seemed part protest, part indulgence; it was hard to know which way they leaned.

In my personal world, life was not bad. Though often stir crazy, I mostly felt grateful to be at home all the time with my young children with none of the stress of places to be. The release of my third book, *The Wanting Was a Wilderness*, launched with a month-long virtual book tour. My children, still at an age of wanting to be at home with their parents, did not suffer the way older kids suffered during lockdown. They were in Kindergarten, 1st grade, and 4th grade, and I wasn't terribly worried about them falling behind in school or lacking social interactions. Family felt sufficient. But from outside, the firecrackers and honking horns made the unrest of society omnipresent in a Bostonian's mind. Occasionally my children and I walked to the rotary linking Roslindale to West Roxbury or to Rosi Square to show our support for Black lives; the protests continued through the spring and the summer. Since gathering physically was heavily discouraged, we turned to the Internet to socialize, and to understand what new behavioral guidelines would emerge from this reckoning. I was among the outraged,

calling for social justice, demanding resistance, and dismissing anything coded as right-wing with a disgusted scoff and a wave of my hand. It was *us* against *them*, and both sides considered theirs moral and the other's depraved.

I was pleased with the leftward shift and the widening of the conversation in the years leading up to 2020. Privilege and racism and hegemony were in the conversation now, at the center of it, where I had never imagined they would reach. I had just hit my twentieth year as an adjunct professor at Emerson College, where I taught creative writing and an array of interdisciplinary and literature courses, including Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. I loved the classroom and considered it a place of genuine exchange (Johnsen et al., 2009): I provided knowledge and the frameworks with which to integrate new knowledge; my students informed me of neologisms, culture shifts, celebrities to note, and building movements. While working on creative projects involving exoticism or travel or photography or queerness, I was able to test out ideas in class discussions, to get feedback from this rising cohort of adults, and to include them in a sophisticated conversation of emergent ideas. I had once been a frustrated left-leaning young person trapped in a conservative environment, and college was the place I'd found my people: intellectual, inquiring thinkers who leaned left because that was the direction intellectual reasoning carried those who could separate emotion from intellect, as I saw it. So I stayed in academia. I have been here all my life.

In the mid 2010s, as the center of our culture continued to slide slowly to the left, racism rose as a critical shared concern (Hil, Lyons and Thompsett, 2021). As we moved further into our national racial reckoning on one side and a resistance to it on the other, suddenly the world seemed insolvably polarized. Beliefs to agree upon as a culture—normative truths—shifted so fast that disorientation was inevitable. *New Yorker* writer Jia Tolentino described 2017-2018 as

“a period during which American identity, culture, technology, politics and discourse seemed to coalesce into an unbearable supernova of perpetually escalating conflict, a stretch of time when daily experience seemed both like a stopped elevator and an endless state-fair ride” (Tolentino, 2019).

During these years in which the right supported Donald Trump and the left reacted in rage and disgust, major institutions, laws we counted on to be immovable, and words themselves were redefined or repurposed. This approach to truth as unfixed occurred on both the right and the left (Andersen, 2017). Our new president lied every single day, and the US Councilor to the President reframed his lies as “alternative facts.” Liberal facts, Trump said, were “fake news.” The truth itself had become partisan (Sittidumrong, 2024; Wilber, 2024). On the left, demands were made to reframe racism and other oppressions so that truth was in the hands of the oppressed, whether or not it precisely lined up with the facts. There was a push for more normative truths—ideas we decided, within our separate factions, to agree upon—to eclipse objective truth.

I did not believe that truth was partisan, but I did believe that one’s psychological needs had a way of obscuring objective truth. Certain presumptions needed to be unlearned en masse, as in persistent racist ideas about Black Americans. As assumptions were challenged it was sometimes difficult to know where to land, and how to measure which beliefs were worth maintaining and which required revision. The turmoil of the time, then, was not just political polarization; it was also inside our minds.

“Throughout this period,” Tolentino wrote, “I found that I could hardly trust anything that I was thinking. A doubt that always hovers in my mind intensified: that whatever conclusions I might reach about myself, my life and my environment are just as likely to be diametrically

wrong as they are to be right” (Tolentino, 2019). Under these conditions in which even a brilliant thinker like Tolentino doubted her own conclusions, my side became consumed by justice efforts that increasingly demanded quick adoption of radical revisions to the status quo. I observed, like Tolentino, a growing distrust of my own thoughts.

In the following sections, I recount the years leading up to Covid lockdown and early attempts to start writing the novel, not to justify the beliefs I deliberated at any point during this time, but to track the evolution of my artistic obstacles as I wrestled with the growing unease I experienced as an academic and an artist in an area that came to represent the wider cultural expectation of uniform moral agreement. For me, this new non-negotiable imperative made teaching difficult, and *The Pleasure Seekers* impossible to begin.

Art, Education, and Justice

The years between 2013-2016 were among my most gratifying years of teaching. Students arrived at college with more knowledge of power and privilege than they ever had. Care was taken with issues of race, gender, class in class discussions. Conversations deepened. We acknowledged the hard truths of inequality, even if we were complicit—especially if we were complicit. Class groups often felt like families. We were united in our efforts to contribute to a more just world. Between 2016 and 2020, all of this abruptly changed. Politics entered the classroom. Justice efforts came to require constant moral surveillance. There emerged the unspoken rule that as far as morality went, we all had to agree.

I willingly put aside any hesitations about orthodox thinking, because I wanted to serve justice. I assumed the blanket anti-bias efforts would include a brief period of orthodox agreement and the suspension of certain standards as we collectively worked to balance what had previously been egregiously unequal. I was an active participant, in support of a reversal of privilege that suppressed the voices of the privileged and prioritized those of members of oppressed groups.

But soon these efforts cast a pall over the classroom, as language policing became a core maxim of anti-bias. Classrooms functioned, ideally, as experimental spaces to test theories and make mistakes; a growing default mode of self-silencing began to interfere with student learning as well as my ability to coherently present my course material as I dodged emerging sensitivities. The associated combativeness also interfered with learning; it unnerved students when a classmate showed anger when confronting their professor and other students, and quieted those

less political students who immediately recognized it would be way easier to passively agree than to actually discuss something that might lead them into shame.

We had entered a new, unexplored zone of surveillance: what Black feminist scholar and activist Loretta Ross called a “circular firing squad” among liberals (Ross, 2019). The high alert for problematic course content grew, professors were reported for comments or course materials, and students began calling each other out for the smallest infraction of morality. In this atmosphere of checking one’s privilege (Maltz Bovy, 2017) and questioning authority, I noted adaptive behaviors, not all of them productive.

I saw constant nastiness towards out groups and put-downs passed off as justice. Online this happened excessively (Rathje et al., 2021); it also became standard in conversation to mock oppressor groups for humor. This happened frequently in class discussions, and while I once probably encouraged similar mockery while teaching Gauguin or Flaubert, it seemed to be getting more personal between the students themselves. Some side effects of this were easily observable; for example, in our hyperprogressive art school community, that a not-insignificant number of young people were claiming certain identities as a reactionary move to acquire marginalized status, which was now the primary source of social capital.

Who could blame them? The 2020-era blanket, insistent reversal of privilege had done a number on the psychological state of young people who were just coming to understand themselves and the world and who wanted to be good people, at the same time it was encouraging blatant bullying and reinforcing that bullying by framing it as righteous. This cohort formed their sense of self around avoiding socially toxic identities to the degree that they could. White teenagers during this time became desperate to distinguish themselves from previous generations of white people (Paslay, 2021). I believe that for some their mental health depended

upon it. I didn't have an issue with young people taking a radical stance or claiming an identity available to them for social or political reasons (Campbell and Manning, 2014). What I had a problem with was the insistence it was undeniably *not happening*—and that I should not trust my own mind if it came to any other conclusion. But I trusted my own mind. Increasingly, I was forced to toggle between contradictory sets of beliefs: the ones I considered true based on logic, previous study, and observation, and the ones that didn't exactly feel true but that I was compelled to believe if I wanted to be a good person.

I began having persistent memories of my early years working in Cuba, where before I'd known better, I asked a new friend some probing questions about her life and her opinions of Fidel and she looked at me nervously while pointing from her ear to the microphones she imagined in all corners of the room. The room was her own kitchen and her concern was not unfounded. In fact, my friend had been a little annoyed at my inquiry: when questions were dangerous you didn't ask them. This complete avoidance of certain topics was common in Cuba, where surveillance was real and where expressing the wrong truth was grounds for any number of life-altering punishments without any due process. That my subconscious was delivering these memory flashes to my present context was definitely important information.

Harbinger

Back in 2008, I experienced a flash-forward of where this was headed while driving with a friend who had recently moved to Boston from Portland, Oregon. She sat in the passenger's seat as I stopped at a red light behind another car, a red Audi. Just as the light turned green and the driver in front of us began to accelerate, a Black man on a bike shot in front of his car. The driver stopped short and honked. I gasped as the biker swerved and narrowly avoided getting hit, felt the panic in my own chest and my foot press more tightly down on the brake. My friend said, "Asshole!" I understood she was talking about the driver of the car.

"He had a green light!" I objected.

"He almost hit a biker!" she said. I had the sense that his race was also a factor in her defense. The Audi driver appeared to be a white professional type. Had the biker been a white banker bro on a mountain bike, I doubted my friend would have an opinion on the matter.

"The biker shot out in front of a line of cars right after the light turned green for them. How is that the driver's fault?"

She paused, surprised. "I guess I always side with the biker over the car," she said.

I understood her desire to align with the side she considered the less advantaged, but was taken aback that she believed in suspending rules serving something as basic as safety for some people but not others. There was another thing that bothered me about this interaction: within the frameworks I used for teaching and scholarship in the area of exoticism, my white friend's orientation towards the Black biker was a racist one. Just as primitivism was the other side of the coin of ethnocentrism (Todorov, 1993), excessive deference to a person based on their race was just another display of condescension predicated on the white person's sense of superiority

(Jones, 2013). A white person assuming a person of color should be exempt from following a very basic traffic rule, as if he were not an adult capable of making responsible decisions, was paternalistic. Yet the reason she had performed an act of what I considered racism came from a belief that it signaled the opposite: her anti-racism. Though this moral tangle would have been difficult to address with my friend, it was exactly the kind of thing we discussed in the Exoticism in Literature and Art class that I taught once or twice a year, a glorious workshop of ideas in which we analyzed the aesthetic manifestations of power in cross-cultural literature and art from Christopher Columbus to Paul Gauguin to Marguerite Duras.

Around that time, the college became embroiled in a very public Title IX lawsuit. In the aftermath of the media attention, an adjunct faculty union rep wrote an email to his constituents, advising us to remove any controversial or potentially triggering content from our course materials, because “if a student finds any reason to complain about you, or brings a Title IX lawsuit because your course content felt unsafe, the college will not protect you.”

I gasped. Not because the college would not protect me—as an adjunct, I was well aware of my disposability to the institution I served—but because the union-proposed solution was to sanitize our curriculum. Regardless, eliminating potentially triggering material from creative writing and WGS curricula could not be done. I would have to teach what I taught and tread a trip wire. I fell into line with protocol changes to the degree that I could, because that is what an adjunct does, and because apparently, if I were even accused of crossing a line, I could lose my job. And/or be personally sued by a student—another possibility that had never before crossed my mind.

End of Conversation

The communal slip towards ideological conformity felt inevitable and unstoppable in the years leading up to 2020. But those at the top appeared to be on board. Many professors did alter their curricula. The news media and social media discourse reflected what I experienced in the classroom. While it was certainly not the only one, my institution did not act to protect its educational mission, though both at the time and looking back years later I see no option for institutional pushback that would not have resulted in student and social media rioting. Good-faith pushback was futile. One contrarian tweet could end a career (Elkins, 2020). As all the many other adjuncts, I was left to process emerging pedagogical interferences on my own. My obligation was to my students and their minds. Institutional efforts made in the name of protecting their minds—such as the scrubbing of our syllabi—were not making them better thinkers, nor were they in the service of art, the purported mission of our institution. But still! It was in the name of justice and care. But also! I was having trouble ignoring the red flags.

In the spring of 2020, a handful of Feminisms students spent the semester arguing that all feminist movements were white supremacist garbage: First Wave feminists were all horrible racists; Second Wave feminists were the worst of all with their inexcusable gender essentialism. Betty Friedan was a homophobe. Margaret Sanger was a eugenicist. The majority of students were quiet and cowed. When the topic of transgender participation in gender-separated sports came up during a student presentation, I thought, certainly even the vocal activist students would agree it was a topic worthy of discussion in a Feminisms class. We tentatively poked at the knots of this issue until one student erupted in outrage.

“I DON’T understand what the ISSUE is,” she said. “Trans women are *women*. Trans men are *men*. *End of conversation*,” she said, and the room went silent.

As I stared at this student I experienced an instantaneous unfolding vision of how this would all play out. Like so many other shibboleths of the moment, “end of conversation” showed very little interest in reality testing or even imagining how such arguments would function in the material world. This trajectory was not going to end well for trans people. The most extreme activists were grabbing for whatever they could reach in the inertia of this permissive moment, and the right doesn’t seem to be paying much attention. But when the left uncritically cheers on a trans woman who goes onto win a major event in women’s sports, I thought, the right will rub their eyes and blink a few times and take a closer look, and they will lose their minds when they realize what’s been going on. If we didn’t guide the conversation towards a reasonable place, the political right would come after the entire enterprise.

To me this outcome seemed absolutely certain if we did not correct course. But as a white cis woman, I had no right to these views, even as a professor of Feminisms. And we were not allowed to discuss the nuances of such topics if we wanted to serve justice, even in a class called Feminisms. This refusal to debate supposedly protected marginalized people from harm, but in this and many other cases, it seemed those were the people destined to pay the price for our silence.

Not long after this class ended, I decided it was time to start the novel I had been thinking about for years. By this time I operated by constantly performing self-audits on my identity in relation to others and an ongoing, acute accounting of my immense privilege—white, American, able-bodied, upper middle class, and credentialed. I was currently bound by these attributes. I was going to have to take another look at the novel I wanted to write and my relationship to it.

*

As an author, I was not so different from the students I'd witnessed finessing themselves into safe social positions. I, too, calculated the risks and rewards of any statements I made, and I gathered the cotton wool of what would become a novel carefully, considering each possible offense, every reason for rejection. I would have to maneuver the plot into the correct ideological position, one that my identity justified. This effort did not necessarily preclude sincerity, I reasoned. There were many paths *The Pleasure Seekers* might take; why not write it as a political novel? The kernel of the novel had always suggested a justice narrative, and raising questions about privilege and morality was my inclination as a writer.

Even so, every idea I let loose in my imagination bled instantly into banned territory. My imaginings, the novelist's private unspooling thoughts, became dominated by this concern; I began censoring my plot.

Resurrection of the Author

Under these conditions, when identity determined what you were allowed to think and say, Flaubert's insistence that the writer must disappear from her text faced a compulsory reversal. I, the author of a novel about to be written, might try to erase myself from the novel, but any such attempt to die an authorial death would be followed by an instant and unwanted resurrection: my personal identity in relationship to my creative work demanded ongoing justification. As Zadie Smith lamented, "The old—and never especially helpful—adage 'write what you know' [had] morphed into something more like a threat: 'Stay in your lane'" (Smith, 2019). I could not escape my position, which was determined by my body and its experience in the world.

A century after Flaubert declared his work everything and his life nothing, Roland Barthes argued that a text's meaning was not derived from the author, but by the reader's lived experience interacting with the text, declaring that "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes, 1967). While Flaubert wanted his work read without the contamination of biographical details, Barthes's interest was in the reader's freedom, a release of the tyranny of authorial intention. But at this point in 2020 Barthes's theoretical death was out of bounds. I could try all I wanted to obliterate my presence in the text, my identity as its author, but I would inevitably be held accountable not only for every sentence on the page but for every possible interpretation of every sentence on the page and possibly off the page as well, which would inevitably be judged on identity alignment. Flaubert and Barthes suggested art was only possible if the artist released the art to others so that its meaning could be determined; now I felt required, as author, to place myself between the text and the reader, predicting, controlling, and managing all possible interpretations in advance.

What paralyzed me as I began my first attempts to write *The Pleasure Seekers*, then, was the knowledge that I was responsible for what I could not and did not wish to control, something I considered outside of the novelist's contract. Barthes insisted that "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text," but in the current context, limits on the text were being set in advance, before the making of it: I felt compelled to pre-limit my imagination to navigate an evolving map of hazards. But art was supposed to be reckless.

Under these conditions I set out to write my first novel, and under these conditions it became a novel I could not launch.

For months I confronted the cliché of the blank page. I considered Hemingway's famous piece of advice: *All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know* (Hemingway, 1964). But my sense of truth had been so destabilized that I could not write a true sentence because I was no longer sure what was true.

Imaginative Intrusion as a Necessary Practice

From its earliest stirrings I'd been aware that this project came with ethical peril; wrangling peril and fear and confusion into art was the point of the creative undertaking. Cringing from truthful expression out of fear of reprisal equaled artistic failure: fear was something an artist walked into, not fled. I knew, beneath my reaction to the 2020 climate, that abandoning this project was not the ethical choice.

As a memoirist, I often sought grounding in James Baldwin's crystalline articulation of the function of nonfiction writing as a process of discovering, and then wrestling into order, one's own unwanted knowledge (Elgrably, 1984). This required coopting the minds of others, even in his nonfiction. "Notes from a Native Son" forced Baldwin into the mind of his father, not with the goal of recording his father's hatred of white people, but to think as his father did about himself in relation to the white people who inspired his hate, despite the inevitable accompanying psychic pain (Baldwin, 1955). This work involved scene and character building more closely associated with fiction, such as imagining and animating entire scenes in which his father interacted with white people that Baldwin knew only from his father's retellings. Baldwin's need to reconcile race-based conflict required him to access the minds of people even more alien to him than his father, as in "Stranger in the Village," in which he recounts staying in a Swiss village where he was the only Black person in town; to fully understand how he is viewed in this small, all-white community, he penetrates the stranger's mind as deeply as his artistic consciousness permits—to understand the particularities of Swiss racism, he had to experience it himself, inside the mind of a racist (Baldwin, 1953).

The function of such imagination, the intrusion into the mind of someone unknown to the author in any intimate way and who might even be hostile to the author, is to exercise empathy without excusing harm. In his construction of white characters, even the most racist among them, Baldwin does not demonize them or frame them as an enemy to be defeated; instead, he (perhaps perilously) engages with the beliefs of someone whose mind he might rather not know, but which he absolutely must understand. This approach allows Baldwin to clarify not only racist beliefs, but the costs of holding them. Baldwin's willingness to travel into the darker corners of human psychology has drawn readers across identities and belief systems. This was a goal, and a willingness, I shared.

The story of *The Pleasure Seekers* was lodged in me and rumbling, still, with early life, and if a story is in you, it finds its way out. I was not ready to turn away from the initial intention of the project and would continue to try to muscle my way into the novel as originally conceived, firm in the belief that good fiction is inherently transgressive in its attempts to move beyond the boundaries of the self. The solution, I decided, was to write with such unimpeachable empathy, and to research with such a hunger for accuracy, that the resulting work would bear its interpretations.

Chapter 2: How to Avoid Writing a Novel

Writing fiction is an act of possession as much as creation. One of the novelist's vital skills is the ability to inhabit a character different from oneself with fullness, with dogged fascination in alternate psychologies (James, 1934). The novelists I admired most made the wildest leaps into the minds of others: Henry James, William Faulkner, Toni Morrison. The original challenge of *The Pleasure Seekers* involved opening my mind so completely to everything I might need to know about quotidian life in Cambodia, about the Pol Pot years, about how life went on after the Khmer Rouge fell, about the forests and the loggers, about the air and the land; it required believing that I could absorb enough with my senses, that I might learn enough through talking and reading and study, to build an imagined world that felt true to someone intimate with the material. I planned to equalize the setting of the United States and the setting of Cambodia in my construction of the novel. I would have to start looking into possible ways to return to Cambodia.

If I fumbled the project on the level of cultural representation the rest would not matter. I reviewed the project from its earliest origins and attempted to realign myself with its original goals in an effort to begin.

Origins of the Novel, part 1: Cambodia

The story I sat down to tell in 2020 first surfaced in 2006, when I sailed as a professor on Semester at Sea. I boarded the M.V. Explorer in San Diego with a backpack and a duffel bag, not a single connection to anyone on the ship, hired via a brief email exchange with a dean compelled by my Exoticism syllabus, ready to sail around the world for 100 days and forget all about my stagnant life in Boston. On this voyage I found myself arbitrarily in Cambodia.

I was 34 and in limbo, having spent the past two years trying to repair my life after a catastrophic breakup. When the offer to teach on a ship that sailed around the world came in I immediately began making phone calls. I gave up my lease, boxed up my belongings, and stored everything I owned in my parents' basement indefinitely. I didn't care where the ship was sailing. I prepared the classes I'd teach on board and otherwise boarded the ship blind, having managed to secure all my visas but forgetting about items such as malaria pills, no thoughts of bringing along a guidebook for any of the ten countries we'd be visiting; I'd go anywhere, was ready to follow any shiny possibility to redirect my life.

What I really wanted at that point in my life was someone to love and make a life with. I wanted to have children and to make a home. Ten years earlier I might have been looking for a country to fall in love with, a place to make a new life for a while; that was my nature as a chronic traveler, but I had a separate, and more urgent, need now. I met someone on the ship, the person I would eventually marry. We traveled from Japan to Burma to Turkey to Egypt to Croatia, each new port an adventure on our way to going home and starting a life together in the States. Out of all the countries we visited, only Cambodia hit me like a hallucinogen that refused to leave my bloodstream.

If my life had not called me urgently toward a different destination, my return ticket would already have been purchased, my job possibilities researched, before we'd left the ship. How was it possible that I'd understood nothing, absolutely nothing, about a history like the one I'd just started to understand and that now had me in its grip? A passion forms a cloud, blurry-edged, but taking the shape of something: a writer sees narrative that needs to be unrolled. If the fixation sticks around long enough, she starts gathering the cotton wool she'll need to sew into something whole.

Origins of the Novel, part 2: MDMA

In the early 2000s I had my first personal experience with MDMA. Ecstasy had been described to me as the love drug, a feel-good party drug, a temporary blissful experience. I was told it made you like everyone and enjoy dancing, running your hands through someone's hair, and (horrifyingly to me at the time) techno music. I took Ecstasy for the first time with someone with whom I was deeply in love. My experience was more profound than anticipated. I was not interested in dancing or light trails; I was interested in a sudden emotional clarity that reformed my world and filtered out emotional obstacles sourced from various fears I wasn't even aware I carried around as a habit. I beheld the person I loved, who was baseline wracked with anxiety, and saw a calm on her face I'd never seen before. On MDMA, awareness of how much anxiety I carried with me under normal circumstances transformed that anxiety into curiosity. I was able to sit with *what is* without reacting or attaching an emotion to what I perceived. When I experienced an unpleasant sensation or encountered a person I didn't think I liked, instead of allowing emotions to rise and overtake me, I thought, "It does not feel good to be near that person. I'll simply move away from them." I felt no need to judge the sensation or the person in question; no defenses rose. I spent the night staring into the eyes of my beloved, sharing a new closeness in the absence of fear. I had the sense that what I was experiencing was not entirely ephemeral. I was learning something true about the world: my worries were a choice.

Having practiced yoga for a few years by that time, with teachers who had studied in the spiritual traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism, I recognized a state of mind that had been described to me but that had felt so unattainable that I never thought to pursue it: a state of emotional non-attachment, an ability to accept events, the experiences of others, and the truths of

other people without judgement, fear, or personal investment. I felt for the first time in my conscious existence the ability to *be* in the moment, and to accept whatever truth I encountered without reaction or resistance. Unlike other intoxicant experiences, my early experiences with MDMA provoked revelations about my life that did not dissipate when the drug wore off. I realized I had approached a Buddhist state of non-attachment (Aronson, 2004), and I exited the drug state with a certainty that I could maintain this approach in a non-altered state.

Conversation, however, was not an effective vehicle for communicating these discoveries in a way those who hadn't shared my experience wanted to entertain. Attempts to introduce this idea to someone who considered MDMA a street drug were met with ironic smiles (*so you saw God when you were on drugs, uh huh*) or disapproval. With its Schedule 1 designation in 1985, United States regulatory entities branded MDMA as a potentially dangerous partier's drug (Mithoefer, 2010), the domain of reckless youth. In 2020, the DEA's official page on MDMA still read: "MDMA is a Schedule I drug under the Controlled Substances Act, meaning it has a high potential for abuse, no currently accepted medical use in treatment in the United States, and a lack of accepted safety for use under medical supervision" (United States Drug Enforcement Administration, 2022). And though MDMA has its origins as an empathogen and therapy aid (Shulgin, 1986), and at the time of writing is used in clinical trials to treat such conditions as PTSD (Mitchell et al., 2021), it is currently abused and associated with club culture and the music festival circuit, which is more about enjoyment and escape (Passie, 2023) than self-awareness or spiritual access.

A novelist carries cloudy ideas inside her that won't resolve, gathering them into a narrative that searches for a resolution. The assurance I had of my positive first experiences with MDMA, and the reluctance of others to engage with the possibility of its benefits, has been one

of those things I have carried with me and turned over for many years. My investigations led me to the work of MAPS and the Harvard Divinity School during the writing of this project, and through these organizations I met others—academics, scientists, religious practitioners—who were investigating in this area, and learned how much interest there was in reclaiming MDMA as a psychological tool, and even a spiritual one (Doblin, 2002, p.185). This discovery intensified my desire to make this information available for others and to shape it into a narrative that might engage reluctant minds. Like the conversation in my head set off by my first experience in Cambodia, my first experience with MDMA came with an urge, perhaps a call, to gather and integrate knowledge.

Forest of Ecstasy: The Link

These seeds found soil when in 2008 I stumbled upon the Vanguard documentary film *Forest of Ecstasy*, which originally aired on the now-defunct Current TV network (*Forest of Ecstasy*, 2009). *Forest of Ecstasy* alerted me to a surprising side effect of landmine ubiquity in Cambodia: because the Khmer Rouge had placed thousands of landmines to wall themselves into the forests after their fall, they had inadvertently protected enormous swaths of forest. Things grew in the Cardamom Mountains that did not grow anywhere else in the world, much of which had high value to foreign markets, especially once the nearby forests of Vietnam and Thailand were depleted by logging and poaching. The film told the story of Cambodian officials locating illegal logging operations in Cambodia. They led the journalist to a camp where men had built, by hand, a working distillery in the jungle. All of this destruction to support recreational drug use in the West.

In hindsight *Forest of Ecstasy* reads as environmentalist propaganda. The journalist's focus on MDMA leverages a presumed anti-drug sentiment from its viewers in efforts to activate outrage; in reality safrole oil is used for a variety of products, among them perfume, pesticides, and holistic medicines (Coppens, 1985, pp. 19-25). This angle, with its link between deforestation and illegal street drugs, was effective in raising awareness of this particular tree: by 2008, international pressure from groups such as Fauna & Flora International and after goading by the international public, Cambodian officials took action against illegal logging by seizing and burning 1,278 barrels of safrole-rich oil distilled from protected trees (MacKinnon, 2009). The Australian Federal Police, who aided in the burning, calculated that this quantity of safrole oil could have produced the equivalent of 245 million ecstasy pills with a street value of 7.6

billion Australian dollars, placing the significance of the achievement on the income denied MDMA distributors (Blickman, 2009). This shifts the emphasis off the holistic impact of deforestation, placing the safety of Westerners at the center of the narrative, and ignoring the bigger story of massive ecological destruction in the forests of Southeast Asia, often to bring those elsewhere our most basic comforts. Why were Westerners motivated to take action against a tree destroyed for a pleasure drug—while remaining largely indifferent the many ancient trees being systematically felled to become flooring or furniture?

I came to understand that a larger story of post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia was the story of these forests, and that the Sassafras tree might bring some attention to the wider ecological battle currently being waged on Cambodian people and land (Kong et al., 2019). The further into my research on wars and occupations, the abandonment by foreign governments of an entire nation of people living in concentration camps, and the inescapable corruption under which Cambodian citizens have lived since, the more my story was fueled by the conclusion that *the world owes Cambodia*. At the very least, the international community owes Cambodia its attention. For the next few years, I would commit to giving it mine.

Creative resistance remained high. I wasn't sure how much meaningful work I could do without returning to Cambodia. I began researching funding possibilities and fellowships. It might take some time, but I'd find my way into the story. I had plenty of research to do in any case, so I may as well get started. I drowned myself in books about Cambodia, films set in Cambodia, searching out the work of Cambodian writers, learning what existed in translation, taking notes, gathering story.

I enter the cave. Qualitative research begins. I read some books and watch some films. I take some notes. I watch and wait to see what will happen.

Drown in Others' Narratives

It had been a while so I watched *The Killing Fields* again. I sought stories beyond the Khmer Rouge era, which seemed to account for most of the content in books and films set in Cambodia. There was *First They Killed My Father*, based on the book by Luong Ong. I'd read that before, along with *When Broken Glass Floats*, another first-hand account by a child survivor of the Khmer Rouge. I searched various terms and watched whatever popped up in a search: *Rick Stein's Far Eastern Odyssey* about Cambodian food: fish amouk, made with lemongrass, dried chilies, garlic, galangal (similar to ginger), kaffir lime leaves, toasted peanuts, coconut milk, palm oil. The fermenting of fish sauce, the toasting of Kampot pepper (Pritchard, 2009). The flavors felt distant. I needed to be in Cambodia to engage meaningfully with the quotidian and sensory details. I read history books and searched for contemporary Cambodian-American writers—a memoir was coming out by a lesbian grappling with her Cambodian mother's rejection of her gayness, Putsata Reang's *Ma and Me* (Reang, 2022). I pre-ordered it.

I had decided early on that I didn't want *The Pleasure Seekers* to dwell on the topic of the war in Vietnam. We had enough Vietnam war stories, though I did have a special place in my heart for *Apocalypse Now* after teaching it alongside *Heart of Darkness* for fifteen years. The people of Cambodia deserved a story that was not the usual sideshow (Shawcross, 2002). That the US bombing of northern Cambodia produced the Khmer Rouge was well documented, but I doubted it told the whole story. Throughout my research I searched for connections between my Cambodian setting and characters and their American counterparts. The American military's secret operations in Cambodia were not as well documented—perhaps I could uncover a plot-

friendly secret op story that had never been widely shared. I spent many hours on Reddit boards reading the threaded memories of veterans.

Before long I was deeply immersed in the war in Vietnam and could think of little else.

I watched the Ken Burns Vietnam War documentary through three times. All the staples of the genre, I rewatched, *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Hamburger Hill*, *Born on the Fourth of July*. I searched for self-published first-hand accounts by veterans, the unfiltered narratives born of a need not to make art or serve a moral, but to record what happened. I became interested in the stories of those who volunteered for service in the early days of the war, idealists who believed it was the right thing, and the pride of being a soldier. This itself was an interesting finding: how many first-hand account of serving in Vietnam during the war emphasized pride and brotherhood instead of the shame and regret I expected—though I supposed a war veteran consumed by shame or despair would be less likely to write a book about it. I started to wonder how these early volunteers felt as public opinion changed. Might a soldier secretly maintain his earlier beliefs that they had done the right thing by going in, while pretending to go along with the wider culture’s criticism of the war? If he came to the realization that he had been misled, if his trust in his government was lost, what would be the emotional cost? And what if you were actually a really good soldier? What if it brought out the best in you? What if you knew this was the most *you* you’d ever be? Could you secretly maintain your pride?

I seemed to have accidentally found another route around the setting of Cambodia. Eventually I was going to have to face my fear.

It seemed wise to closely consider a cautionary tale, a writer whose mistakes might prove a guide for what not to do as a white writer whose subject matter treads abroad. The obvious case study was the 2020 publishing disaster *American Dirt*.

Chapter 3: #ownvoices and the Noble Eightfold Path as Guide

#ownVoices and Creative Permission

The question of permission, determined partly by the author's connection to their cultural subject matter, became a collective quandary among writers and readers by 2015, when the social media hashtag #ownvoices was coined on Twitter by Corinne Duyvis. As reported in a study by

Publishing Research Quarterly,

The hashtag #ownvoices mark[ed] a significant disruption to the relationship between the publishing company and its readers, signaling a public debate about an author's rights to write cross-culturally, and the rights of readers from marginalized identity groups not to be subject to limited or insensitive representation (Rutherford, Johanson & Reddan, 2022).

An uproar ahead of the 2017 Whitney Biennial over "Open Casket," a graphic painting by white artist Dana Schutz of Emmett Till's ruined face, emblemized the #ownvoices movement:

The backlash began even before the Whitney Biennial opened. "Who is the audience for this painting?" wrote artist Devin Kenny, wondering why this painting of black suffering by a white artist was going to be included in the exhibition. "What action is this work purportedly, and actually doing? Does it inform? Shock? Build connection? Help a new audience understand either emotionally or intellectually the complex set of factors all falling under the umbrella of white supremacy, sexism, and anti-blackness that led to this young person's death?" On March 17, the opening day of the Whitney Biennial, dozens of protesters took turns standing in front of Schutz's work to block it from view (Larson-Walker, 2017).

I considered Schutz's choice of subject matter of questionable taste, but also noticed that I had moved towards a more skeptical position, feeling resistant to calls for censorship, whereas if "Open Casket" had debuted to applause in 2001 I might have brought it into my classroom as an egregious example of appropriation. The question of whether a white writer can or should write the Other had not changed; my position within this conversation had. How much did I need

to revise my own praxis of writing across cultures—my practice for over twenty years, during which time I have arrived at my own ethical guidelines through academic study as well as creative practice, and most of all through travel? What did the moment require from its artists, and what did my novel require from me?

The moment required an elevation of voices previously unheard. It also required a psychologically nuanced approach to the human condition that might be filtered through identity, but not beholden to it. In my own experience as a writer but primarily as a reader, the related failures are often identifiable lapses of empathy. Brandon Taylor offered his thoughts on such failures in 2016:

I am not sure that problematic stories are always the result of a moral failing. I think that the trauma that marginalized people feel when they read problematic stories about themselves is real. I think watching an author strip away your humanity or flatten the complexities of your life and your experience into a couple of sentences meant to prop a secondary character is an awful thing. But I do not think that the author sets out to do that. I think that we must be able to hold two things in our mind at the same time. We must be able to honor the trauma that marginalized people feel when a story does violence to them and we must also be able to discern the cause of the story's failure. (Taylor, 2016)

While I do not agree with Taylor that a story in which a culture is stereotyped does violence to a reader from that culture, I believe it signals a work's technical and artistic failure, and I consider it disrespectful. Empathy for one's characters, even one's antagonists (Voigt, 2018), must be a fiction writer's central directive, and the author is responsible for interrogating the limits of her empathy as a simple matter of respect (Salesses, 2021, p. 28).

As I began the PhD program in which the novel was to become the study, my central research investigation involved curiosity about how my empathy might shift between characters of my own invention. I agreed with Taylor that "You can't write [fiction] if you can't empathize. Solipsism is anathema to good writing. Harmful writing happens when an author's empathy

becomes limited in scope” (Taylor, 2016). Such writing usually manifests as ethnocentrism, which restricts empathy based on cultural identity or difference.

As a traveler, writer, and teacher, locating and resisting the blinders of ethnocentrism has been the core of my inquiries throughout my professional career as well as my life as a traveler. As coined by William Graham Sumner, ethnocentrism in its modern usage is “the technical name for this view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it” (Sumner, 1906, p. 13). Of course, the tendency of authors to reinterpret foreign cultures through the assumptions of their own societies has shaped literary representations of the Other for centuries. An early critique of European ethnocentrism was voiced by Voltaire in *An Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirits of Nations* (1756), who noted the limitations on the European imagination of foreign customs: “we carry our prejudices, and the spirit of contention along with us, even to the extremities of the earth” (Voltaire, 1756). Despite globalization and ever-increasing connectivity, in a contemporary world shaped by inherited power imbalances of imperialism, Western authors continue to struggle with ethnocentric blind spots, as the *American Dirt* discourse proved.

I have previously defined exoticism in the context of literature as “the representation of one culture for consumption by another” (Jones, 2007) and argued for authors engaged in literary exoticism to regularly interrogate their cultural biases and to hold themselves to high scrutiny when it comes to representations of other cultures (Jones, 2013). Though artists will always be constrained to some degree by the culture-bound values of our native context, we can approach culturally foreign material with awareness of the related limitations, and attempt to transcend them through empathy, study, and the practice of self-awareness. Tzvetan Todorov proposed a possible approach:

We might at least try to imagine such a creature, who would try to find a rational basis for the fact that she prefers certain values to others; she would even be particularly vigilant with respect to those aspects of her own tradition that struck her as universal, and she would be prepared to abandon what was familiar to her in favor of a solution observed in a foreign country or arrived at by deduction” (Todorov, 1993, p. 2).

Todorov named this optimistic alternative to ethnocentrism “critical humanism” or “nonethnocentric universalism,” terms I have adopted and used as guidelines for a literary approach to the foreign that honors shared humanity while respecting cultural differences.

Literary exoticism sometimes manifests as primitivism, which can be harder to identify and might have a trickster element to its presentation, such as the distraction of lush language or a plot which results in the triumph of the vulnerable which masks its underlying objectification. Primitivism can be a reaction against ethnocentrism—a dominant-culture author’s attempt to flip the script—but ultimately it is an equivalent failure of empathy. As described by literary critic Maximillian Novak, in its classic form, primitivism is

the idealization of a way of life that differs from our own in being less complicated, less polished, and less self-aware. It may be found in an abstract state of nature, in the countryside where the influence of the city and the court has not been felt, in some land distant from the corruptions of western Europe, or in the historical past. (Novak, 1997)

Cultural idealization that has the intention of elevating the nondominant culture as inherently superior to the author’s own flattens in the same ways ethnocentrism flattens. Primitivism is associated with reverence for a humanity less tainted by the evils of civilization and often takes the form of a Noble Savage archetype, but as an orientation it can apply to any culture considered less developed, less dominant, or whose citizens are perceived as more innocent. Like ethnocentrism, primitivism is a generalizing tactic that denies agency to the subjects involved (Torgovnick, 1990, p. 4). As if in defiance of ethnocentrism, the primitivist author romanticizes the foreign culture (hooks, 1992, pp. 38-39) and endows its characters with sympathetic traits

and defends them as she builds her narrative, privileging them with positive outcomes in the plot and soliciting the reader's reverence; but these characters are ultimately props serving a moral objective that operates from a lack of sophisticated engagement with the culture represented. Unfavorable attributes of the culture are overlooked and nondominant cultures are idealized beyond reproach while characters representing the author's own tainted culture must pay for their sins. Primitivism can be more covert than direct ethnocentrism, and often comes accompanied by a sense of righteousness on the part of the author, which dissuades self-inquiry. Examples of literary primitivism are found in the writing of Paul Gauguin; Arther Golden's novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*; and Kathleen Stockett's novel *The Help*.

I believe many cross-cultural works of fiction fail not because of a collapse of empathy, but from insufficient self-reflection and self-analysis before the writing process begins. Assurance of one's good intentions potentially obfuscates an author's understanding of the research she must do to build a complex fictional world that acknowledges the real experiences of those living in the culture. Primitivism often feels like an offering of respect to a culture viewed as beneath one's own—but a primitivist writer reveals it is she, in fact, who operates on an assumption of superiority.

Taylor concludes that it is a practice of the empathy, speaking to the usefulness of confessional writing, the most interrogative of writing about *self*, as a useful source of knowledge production:

There is no special secret to writing about people who do not look like you. There is no technique that you need that is different from writing about *self*. If you can write *self*, you can write *other*.... If you cannot write *other* without the assistance of a dedicated team of marginalized people to check your every sentence, then you should likely interrogate the writing that is about *self*. (Taylor, 2016)

Self-interrogation is more often considered the terrain of memoir or essay than fiction, and I wrote at length about approaches to self-analysis in the context of memoir writing in *The Wanting Was a Wilderness*. I now recognized a key difference in self-analysis as it applied to genre: in memoir, your responsibility is to yourself and the others whose stories you tell; in fiction, you create the parameters of your responsibilities—and my idea of *The Pleasure Seekers* created an expansive set of responsibilities, which required a suitable approach to self-analysis as a research method.

American Dirt as a Case Study

Countless contemporary novels serve as cautionary tales of cultural appropriation, specifically as failures on the part of white authors who impose their perspectives onto non-white/non-American characters, while their good intentions or disinterest prevented them from addressing gaps in their knowledge. John Updike's 1994 novel *Brazil* was described by reviewer Earl Rovit as a "cartoon fable" set against "the background of lush hothouse Brazil with travel-guide stops in Rio, São Paulo, Brasília, and the jungle reaches," the "social texture of Brazil...rendered as [an] unpersuasive caricature" (Rovit, 1994). Gregory David Roberts's 2003 cult novel *Shantaram* was beloved by readers while critics blasted its white saviorism and romanticized version of Mumbai: "the 'natives' exist in the background or through the tour bus windows, India and its people merely a set and props for Lin's journey to enlightenment" (Badami, 2022). These offenses have not been limited to white, Western writers: Afghan-born Khaled Hosseini, author of bestselling novels *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, was accused of reinforcing Orientalist frameworks and pandering to a Western audience, "simplifying Islam and reinforcing Western imperial narratives" (Khan, 2025) and even engaging in "Self-Orientalism" (Khan, 2025) which I have sometimes referred to as autoexoticism. But while critics noted ethnocentric limitations of such fictional works, if sales were any indication, such novels found large, approving audiences.

Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* (1978) helped to usher in a higher scrutiny among literary critics around Western writers' tendencies to Other members of an exoticized culture. The practical application of these critiques to the publishing industry accelerated in the era of #ownvoices and the rise of identity-based activism. In the 2010s, literary writers of color

including Brandon Taylor, Alexander Chee, and Daniel José Older published on the topic in literary and popular venues such as *LitHub* and *Buzzfeed*, offering both critiques of the power dynamics involved in fictional representation and advice for writers engaged in the practice. Like Taylor, Chee and Older argue that writing outside of one's own cultural position is not an unacceptable practice, but that white writers who choose such material should hold themselves to account, emphasizing attention to craft and self-knowledge as the key to writing the Other. Older writes of the self-reflection that privilege requires:

For all the time spent talking about “writing the other,” we neglect the very real problem of writing the self. Privilege survives by invisibility and silence. Privilege also blinds us to who we are and how we are perceived in society... You may have no idea how others perceive you, especially if you are uncomfortable conceptualizing your own power. This kind of obliviousness in a writer jumps off the page. (Older, 2014)

Quoting fiction writer Junot Díaz, Older notes that one of the first things a writer in a position of privilege—in Díaz's case, a male writing from a female perspective—is to understand that “the baseline is, you suck” (Fassler, 2012). To effectively write women, Díaz first must interrogate his maleness in relation to women, and failure is expected. But, Older concludes, “[t]he fact that you will mess it up is not a reason not to do it” (Older, 2014). Noting his own missteps as a writer, he suggests you “challenge yourself to do it better and better every time, to learn from your mistakes instead of letting them cower you into a defensive crouch. The net result is you become a better writer.”

Alexander Chee offered a set of three questions for white writers to ask themselves if they are concerned about taking on material outside of their own cultural context: “Why do you want to write from this character's point of view?...Do you read writers from this community currently?...Why do you want to tell this story?” (Chee, 2019). He emphasized the writer's real-world relationship to the community the writer intends to represent, warning: “if you're not in

community with people like those you want to write about, chances are you are on your way to intruding” (Chee, 2019).

Perhaps Jeanette Cummins could have avoided the fallout from *American Dirt* if she had asked such questions of herself and considered her potential intrusion before or during the writing process, but unfortunately for Cummins, *American Dirt*, a story that might have been celebrated just ten years earlier, emerged in the heat of 2020 just in time to become the literary catastrophe of the era.

The *American Dirt* debacle was right up my alley. I’d been straw-manning books like *American Dirt* for years in my Exoticism class. I agreed with criticism of the book before I read it, on principal—learning that the decorations at her launch party had a brutally insensitive barbed wire theme, along with a viral, searing review by a Mexican-American author, was, I thought at the time, more than enough evidence that this book was an egregious work of cultural appropriation.

American Dirt tells the story of a mother and son from Acapulco, Mexico, whose family is murdered by a cartel and who join the migrants traveling to the United States in search of safety (Cummins, 2020). Cummins, a white American writer, approached *American Dirt* with, as she wrote in the author’s note, the intention of raising awareness of and humanizing the realities of migrating to the United States through or from Mexico. (Cummins, 2020, p. 383). Shortly after Donald Trump became US president in 2017 and instituted cruel penalties for migrants seeking entry to the US, the attention on border crossing, wall building, and detaining migrants at the border became a political lightning rod (American Immigration Council, 2025). Migrant children and their parents were cruelly separated and detained at the border. Once again American policy

proved its heartlessness and cruelty. A contemporary narrative that attempted to humanize the experience of crossing into the United States from Mexico was certainly something that might increase understanding of asylum-seekers. A major problem with *American Dirt* arose from how it was marketed (Miller, 2020): the *American Dirt* team aggressively circulated a blurb comparing *American Dirt* to John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, framing it as a work of literary fiction to be read by generations, when Cummins had written a thriller more accurately classified as popular fiction.

When it comes to cultural representation there is an important distinction between subgenres literary fiction and popular fiction. The distinction is stylistic, but also mechanical: Jeremy Rosen argues that the labels genre (popular) fiction or literary fiction “refer not to the presence or absence of certain genres, but to relational subfields of production, circulation, and reception” (Rosen, 2018). How a novel is sorted sets the publisher's expectations of its readership. When opening a book marketed as popular fiction, a reader does not assume the facts within will map onto our real world. Plot is paramount. Characters are frequently typed as good guys or bad guys in service of a brisk and suspenseful plot, and the reader generally knows how to feel about them: their association with goodness or badness confirms, rather than challenges, the reader's status quo (Cawelti, 1976). These craft choices signal to the reader that a story is intended to be an enjoyable escape from reality; whereas literary fiction engages readers in an exchange that forces them to fill in narrative gaps and to search for meaning “among a spectrum of possible meanings” (Bruner, 1986), popular fiction more often puts meaning in the writer's hands.

Literary fiction promises the reader a more dynamic psychological experience. Beth Ellwood writes, “engaging with literary fiction is thought to be active; it asks readers to search

for meaning and produce their own perspectives and involves complex characters. Popular fiction, on the other hand, is passive; it provides meaning for the readers and is more concerned with plot than characters” (Ellwood, 2020). Different psychological expectations arise from the genres. As described in a 2020 study authored by psychologists Emanuele Castano, Alison Jane Martingano, and Pietro Perconti,

The literary type pushes us to assess others as unique individuals, to withhold judgment, to think deeply. It is important, but it can paralyze us in our attempt to navigate the social world. The popular type reinforces our socially-learned and culturally-shared schemas (Castano, Martingano and Perconti, 2020).

This difference in psychological expectation becomes important when assessing the criticism of *American Dirt*. Once *American Dirt* was marketed as a “contemporary Steinbeck,” Cummins was set up to aggravate readers who came to *American Dirt* expecting nuanced, deep insight into a complex multi-national phenomenon, or a realistically complex human response to being in one, when what she’d written was a thriller with stock characters and a predicable moral message.

For contrast, an uncontroversial example of this stylistic application in popular fiction is the 2023 novel *Hello Beautiful* by Ann Napolitano, Oprah’s 100th Book Club pick and a *New York Times* bestseller. The premise of *Hello Beautiful* is childhood neglect painted with a wide brush: due to a tragic event that coincided with his birth, a child’s parents are unable to love him. William never receives a hug, a word of encouragement, or any form of love whatsoever from his parents for the entirety of his childhood. No one in their community—the affluent suburb of Newton, MA—seems to notice the relentless neglect. Somehow, despite the abuse and isolation, William grows up to be a star athlete with a heart of gold. Napolitano may misrepresent a typical upbringing in Newton, MA and shrugged off developmental psychology, but readers do not come to *Hello, Beautiful* for a concrete reflection of their world; the draw is the moving

experience of witnessing someone emerge from severe neglect to find love and a family. Hyperbole serves to intensify that experience for the reader. This was the genre in which Cummins wrote, but in contrast to *American Dirt*, *Hello Beautiful* was written by a white American author mostly about white Americans, releasing Napolitano from the scrutiny of her ability to render characters Other to her with nuanced complexity. Though the characters of *Hello, Beautiful* and *American Dirt* were similarly rendered, will never know if *American Dirt* would have fared better if positioned as a thriller. *LA Times* Critic Jess Row noted the misstep on the part of Cummins' publicity team:

Cummins' publicists...wanted "American Dirt" to become *the* story that defines this era, distilling the conflict into a handful of archetypal characters: Tom Joad. Ebenezer Scrooge. Kunta Kinte. Jo March. Uncle Tom. They wanted to create a consensus narrative with the power to shift public opinion toward a new, more compassionate moral order. (Row, 2020)

The problem with this proposal: the story in *American Dirt* did not reflect the experience of those who had actually lived through the migration process. Nor did its setting reflect actual Mexico.

Those unfamiliar with Mexican culture will not necessarily feel the dissonance created by a falsely imagined version of a real place, but a reader who expects a literary depiction of setting, character, and cultural behavior, particularly a reader from the culture described, is likely to lose footing when asked to see Mexico through unrecognizable, often stereotypical, manifestations in the service of plot. I, a white American who has spent some time in Mexico, paused over Cummins' depiction of a well-off family's quinceañera, described on the first pages of the novel as a casual backyard barbeque. That Cummins does not have first-hand knowledge of something as standard to Latin culture as a quinceañera reveals that she must know little about Mexico; it signals no one on her editorial team knew much about Mexico either, or that they didn't really care. As Row put it, "it's clear no one involved in publishing this novel was interested in the

richness of its psychology or the way it evokes the lived experience of contemporary Mexicans. The novel is supposed to go for the jugular: terror, fear, panic, rage” (Row, 2020).

In her widely circulated take-down of *American Dirt*, Mexican-American writer Myriam Gurba recounted her frustrations with the book:

Cummins plops overly-ripe Mexican stereotypes, among them the Latin lover, the suffering mother, and the stoic manchild, into her wannabe realist prose. Toxic heteroromanticism gives the sludge an arc and because the white gaze taints her prose, Cummins positions the United States of America as a magnetic sanctuary, a beacon toward which the story’s chronology chugs.

México: bad.

USA: good.

I pinched my metaphorical nose and read.

Cummins bombards with clichés from the get-go. Chapter One starts with assassins opening fire on a quinceañera, a fifteenth birthday party, a scene one can easily imagine President Donald Trump breathlessly conjuring at a Midwestern rally, and while Cummins’ executioners are certainly animated, their humanity remains shallow. By categorizing these characters as “the modern bogeymen of urban Mexico,” she flattens them. (Gurba, 2019)

Cummins had shown her hand in her author’s note, exposing her presumption of a white, non-Mexican readership that informed the making of *American Dirt*: “At worst, we perceive [migrants] as an invading mob of resource-draining criminals, and, at best, a sort of helpless, impoverished, faceless brown mass, clamoring for help at our doorstep,” she writes. “We seldom think of them as our fellow human beings” (Cummins, 2020, p. 380). This particular them/us is a noted feature of primitivism and ethnocentrism: “The ‘we’ is necessary to expose a shared illusion: the illusion of a representative primitive ‘them’ as opposed to a monolithic, unified, powerful ‘us’” (Torgovnick, 1990, pp. 4-5). *Vice* writer Constance Grady points out the obvious racism and bias at the heart of this position by simply restating it: “*American Dirt* is explicitly

addressed to non-Mexican readers by a non-Mexican author, and it is framed as a story that will remind those readers that Mexican migrants are human beings” (Grady, 2020). Cummins’ statement was not only ethnocentric and racist, but out of step with the times, and those who agreed with Gurba thought it was time for such authors to pay with their reputations.

Many celebrity writers offered early support for the book, including Sandra Cisneros and Stephen King; Oprah Winfrey gushed “Ugh, I love it so much” as she announced *American Dirt* as an Oprah’s Book Club pick (Martin, 2020). The backlash began quickly after its release. After filing her *American Dirt* review with the *New York Times Book Review*, Lauren Groff famously demanded it back last minute—presumably after catching wind of the backlash—and removed the original high praise for the book, replacing it with a scolding:

Fiction is the art of delicately sketching the internal lives of others, of richly and believably projecting readers into lives not their own. Writers can and should write about anything that speaks urgently to them, but they should put their work into the world only if they’re able to pull off their intentions responsibly (Groff, 2020).

Nesrine Malik extends her criticism beyond the novel’s content to Cummins’s craft and ultimately the publishing industry:

The entire publishing industry does genuinely have a problem with telling stories of the “other,” but that issue isn’t one of cultural appropriation. The problem is that publishers, broadly, are only interested in such stories when the protagonists are flat-pack characters that can be assembled quickly into a neat stereotype that fits comfortably into the white, mainstream readers’ worldview. Thus, a smash-hit story about Mexicans must be about cartels and migrants and tortured brown faces on the lookout for the deliverance of a border...the quality of writing does not matter. A problem with these “flat-pack” characters is how effortlessly they stand in for and confirm the values of the dominant culture in order to appeal to the widest possible audience. (Malik, 2020)

As Todorov proposed with his discussion of nonethnocentric universalism, an alternative approach exists. In *Orientalism*, Edward Saïd similarly spoke of a possible post-Orientalist

future: “Perhaps the most important task of all would be to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective” (Saïd, 1978, p. 24). The question *American Dirt* begs is: How does a writer know when she is improperly oriented to her subject matter? How might Cummins have prepared for or rerouted her novel as it progressed to more responsibly build the story she wanted to tell about people who weren’t like her, set in a country where she had never lived? If privilege comes with built-in blinders, how can an author be sure she is observing both her subject matter and her relationship to it clearly?

A framework to test a creator’s proper alignment with her project was available in a form that influenced my novel project as well as my life: the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhist ethics. During the years I imagined my novel, I had settled deeper into a personal ethics informed by Buddhist thought. Approaching artistic practice with a framework derived from Buddhist ethics felt appropriate to me as a creator and to my novel with its own Buddhist ethos derived from personal interest and the setting of Cambodia. This would be a method of more closely identifying the failures of *American Dirt* as well as one of preparation to move forward with my own project with thoughtful and proper orientation. Empathy is not easily measured, and a methodical process of identifying related breaches is a helpful if inherently imperfect tool for a writer of cross-cultural fiction. A writer should abjure the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and primitivism in favor of Saïd’s post-Orientalism or Todorov’s nonethnocentric universalism: judgment based on standards acquired from considering various cultural approaches and arrived at through reason—complex truth, in other words, rather than the normative truth of ethnocentrism.

Attention as a Practice of Ethics

The application of Buddhist practice to literary practice is not a new idea. In *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, David L. McMahan traces how Buddhist concepts of mindfulness and the observation of ordinary experience influenced and/or interacted with Western literary modernism, citing Virginia Woolf and James Joyce as writers who create with a metacognitive awareness that echoes Buddhist contemplative practice (McMahan, 2008). A notable voice in the field of Buddhism and creative writing is Dinty W. Moore, who wrote of a Buddhist-inflected approach to literary practice in *The Mindful Writer: Noble Truths of the Writing Life* (Moore, 2012) in which he argues that the disciplines of Buddhist practice—sustained attention, non-attachment to outcome, compassion for the self and others—map helpfully onto the experience of writing, and may offer strategies to help a writer find the page. Moore draws on the Four Noble Truths to address the typical struggles of a writer’s interior experience, offering practices to use in the face of resistance. I agree with Moore that “one need not be Buddhist, of course, to be mindful and alert. In fact, seeing how often non-Buddhist writers offer advice that seems entirely compatible with what I encounter in my Buddhist studies reinforces all that I have come to believe about the convergence of the two” (Moore, 1997, p. 9). These ideas in the context of American literature have been further developed by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff, who established Buddhist literary criticism as a recognized scholarly field. Their two-volume SUNY Press series *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* (2009) and *Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-First Century* (2011) considered how contemporary writers such as Gary Snyder and Maxine Hong Kingston integrate Buddhist principles into their creative work.

The application specifically of the Noble Eightfold Path to creative writing practice is, to my knowledge, a previously unexplored expansion on these ideas, and a departure from the previously central question of *how do Buddhist practices help a writer write?* The question I seek to resolve with the Eightfold Path is *how do Buddhist ethics help a writer assess whether she is in sound ethical alignment with what she is writing?* This distinction offers a methodological approach of particular value to those writing across difference.

The Noble Eightfold Path as a Guide for Writers

The Noble Eightfold Path is among the most foundational teachings of Buddhism. It was first articulated in what is understood to be the Buddha's first lecture following his enlightenment, in which he proposed a middle way between extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification (Bodhi, 2000). Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the foremost contemporary scholars and translators of Pali Buddhist scripture, explains its foundations: "the essence of the Buddha's teaching can be summed up in two principles: the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. The first [identifies] the problem of suffering, its arising, its cessation, and the way to its cessation. The Noble Eightfold Path is the practical means for achieving that cessation" (Bodhi, 1999). The Eightfold Path consists of eight interconnected concepts: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Though they may first read to the Western mind like sequential steps toward a final conclusion, Bodhi emphasizes that these eight components are meant to function as a single integrated practice; like the cotton wool of a novel stitched together to make a coherent and intertwined whole, each element of the Noble Eightfold Path informs and scaffolds the others with the objective of integration.

An ethical orientation that aims for truthfulness, compassion, and the avoidance of harm to others—demands on a writer in general, but particularly when there is risk of ethnocentrism or primitivism—makes the Eightfold Path a fitting framework that can be applied beyond its religious context. Engaging with the Eightfold Path is a means of systematically questioning whether one's perceptions, motivations, language, actions, and livelihood are genuinely oriented

toward the well-being of others, and whether they are distorted by self-interest or unconscious bias.

As with its spiritual origins, a secular adaptation of the Eightfold Path should be considered an ongoing practice and not a one-time checking of boxes. A writer must return to these questions throughout the novel's development, just as someone practicing meditation and spiritual mindfulness must continually return to the mat.

The following eight subsections consider each component of the Eightfold Path as it applies to the ethical demands of cross-cultural fiction. In each section, I offer a brief, general application of the element in question to literary practice, followed by an assessment of how well the element was honored in the case of *American Dirt* as a test case, then briefly posing the question to myself and my alignment to *The Pleasure Seekers*. Diagnosis followed by self-examination is a practice in the spirit of the Eightfold Path (Bohdi, 2000, pp. 13-14): if you apply an ethical framework to others, you must be prepared to apply it to yourself with an equal amount of skepticism. As a memoirist, I am adamant that a personal essayist or memoir writer must be able and willing to turn judgment towards the self as readily as one does to others involved in the story and in equal measure. The negotiation is perhaps more complex in the generation of a novel, where the author—if Flaubert were to have his way—may not explicitly appear or be known at all in a literal sense. But the author's intentions must be similarly evaluated, because the author, as its creator, continues to exist in every fiber of the story.

The Eightfold Path is adapted here as a practical tool for a specific purpose related to creative writing craft. I do not claim to be an expert in Buddhist ethics or religion. The value of the Eightfold Path in this context is its systematic method of identifying the kinds of failures that arise when an artist approaches an unfamiliar culture without sufficient humility; it offers a

means of identifying these insufficiencies so that the artist may then correct them. The Eightfold Path attends to the concerns voiced by Taylor, Chee, Older, and others in the #ownvoices era as a vehicle for the dominant-culture writer to consider, with genuine curiosity, whether she is observing not only her subject matter clearly, but herself.

Right View: Seeing Clearly (through cultural bias)

Right View emphasizes seeing things with unclouded vision. For a writer, this means approaching a subject with humility and without preconceptions or stereotypes.

By focusing on the exotic or sensational aspects of an unfamiliar culture, writers can fall into the trap of diminishing or degrading the culture and its members. This is a failure of Right View.

Rather than seeing a culture holistically, exoticism clouds the writer's perspective with assumptions rooted in one's own culture, often shaped by colonial and ethnocentric histories.

Right View requires an active effort to engage beyond surface-level differences that may at first charm for their unfamiliarity. It requires listening to the voices of those who live there if one is writing fiction set in the contemporary era, and resisting the urge to highlight what seems strange or Other to thrill a reader unfamiliar with the culture. Always seek the point of view of your character before you imagine a reader whom you serve: this is an element of Right View.

American Dirt failed to achieve Right View. Cummins' vision was guided by uninformed American expectations of what it means to be Mexican, and how her characters might serve a thriller plot. It solicited emotional responses based on stereotypes.

Right Intention: Writing with Integrity

Right Intention addressed the motivations influencing one's actions. This involves approaching the subject matter with a sincere desire to understand and represent authentically, rather than exploiting it for personal gain. Why did I want to write a story set in Cambodia? Why couldn't I stop thinking looking at the photos I'd taken in Cambodia? Was I intruding on someone else's story with this novel? These were questions I would ask about right intention in *The Pleasure Seekers*. Later, ketamine therapy will help me clarify my answers.

In Cummins's case, her central intention appeared well-meaning—it is admirable to want to shed light on the plight of migrants—but the more cynical critics wondered if the book's primary goal was to tap into the commercially viable “trauma memoir” market and the American appetite for narratives about suffering and survival of the disadvantaged. Errors arose from unconscious bias and the compromising craft rubrics of genre fiction. Right Intention compels writers to examine their motivations deeply and honestly: am I seeking to understand or to exploit? Am I guided by compassion and truth, or by the desire for acclaim, or to be viewed a certain way by others? In posing these questions to myself as the writer, I recognized my alignment to Right View in efforts to guide my story and my creative practice via compassion and truth, and to be aware the call of the ego. I could not chase acclaim; this is an ethical guideline as much as a practical one. Knowing this would not make it easier to execute.

Right Speech: Language in service of accuracy and clarity

Right Speech, in a literary sense, refers to the language and voice a writer uses to convey their characters and their world. This is a base issue of craft. The *right* words and the exact

representation, not approximations, are demands of creative writing generally. This may be specifically applied to craft elements, such as dialogue: has the author observed many hours of conversation and spent time in the context she expects her characters to know? In the case of *Right Speech*, I will seek a Cambodian reader to review the speech (and psychological accuracy) of *The Pleasure Seekers*'s Cambodia characters.

Right Action: Ethical Engagement with Subject Matter

Right Action emphasizes ethical behavior in all actions. As applied to creative work, this principle can be seen as a call to engage ethically with the subjects or characters. This involves rigorous research, consultation with people from the culture in question, and a commitment to avoiding exploitation or harm. My efforts in this regard have included reading Cambodian authors and books on the subject of Cambodian history, reaching out to Cambodian and Cambodian-American writers and artists, travel to Cambodia, YouTube roulette, watching videos such as daily news reports played over a video tour of Phnom Penh filmed in the morning from the handlebars of a moped, studying Buddhism, chanting and praying, befriending Khmer-American writers, and questioning my motives constantly, almost detrimentally. This alignment check is an ongoing practice.

Right Action would have required Cummins to immerse herself more deeply in the lived experiences of Mexican people, perhaps by spending more time in the country absorbing the details of daily life, engaging with Mexicans living in Acapulco, posing questions pertinent to the project, and listening to or soliciting their stories. However, she demonstrated a sincere interest in the details of the migration process thoroughly and showed Right Action in her commitment to present the mechanics of the migration journey accurately.

Right Livelihood: Respecting Cultural Labor

For a writer, Right Livelihood refers to making a living or gaining materially in a way that does not harm others. When writing about cultures that are not one's own, this means acknowledging the intellectual and emotional labor of those who contribute to the project, whether directly or indirectly. It also means being mindful of the potential impact of the work on the communities it represents.

Mexican and Mexican-American authors in particular bristled at the unusual degree of attention and financial backing tendered to *American Dirt* while stories by Mexican and migrant communities rarely saw such institutional backing. Right Livelihood encourages writers to reflect on the broader literary ecosystem and consider how they can fortify disregarded points of view. Right Livelihood is a wild card, however, because a writer's income is not stable or guaranteed. In my case, I have never made any significant money from writing, so it is difficult to consider it a factor in the creative process. I can only align myself with Right Action and hope that Right Livelihood follows. For Cummins, her million dollar advance and thriller sales expectations should have encouraged her to consider this ethical guideline more closely; Cummins's financial gain and the publisher's extravagant spending on its promotion contributed to the negative response of the public, especially in contrast to the economic reality of the migrants she characterized.

Right Effort: The Discipline of Research and Reflection

Writing outside one's cultural experience demands considerable effort in the form of research, reflection, and self-critique. This thesis is, on one level, a document of my Right Effort.

Right Effort calls for diligence, persistence, and a commitment to firm ethical parameters. This means work and a willingness to moderate one's position and one's plot appropriately, and to maintain an awareness of one's impact.

Right Mindfulness: Attention to Cultural Milieus

Right Mindfulness calls for awareness in every moment of artistic creation and reflections in reviewing one's materials, checking or considering how one's actions might impact others. As always when seeking to represent a fictional version of a concrete locale, writers must remain mindful of the power dynamics at play, including between subject and reader. This includes being conscious of how their work might perpetuate stereotypes or contribute to cultural appropriation, and how the artist's position might offer privileges the artist should decline to use if they come at the expense of accuracy.

For Cummins, greater mindfulness might have meant recognizing the weight of writing about such a politically charged and sensitive topic as Mexican migration. It also might have meant stepping back and asking if she might need further inquiry into the Mexican-oriented lens. At the least, Cummins might have sought awareness of her project's place in the wider cultural discussion not just in the US and Mexico, but in the conversation that transpires between works of literature.

Right Concentration: Focus on the Aggregate Project

I think of Right Concentration as the fabric of the book when considered as a whole. Is the book solidly conceived, am I using my mind as a centrifugal force to pull all the threads together in a way that is organic and does not compromise any of the parts?

It is a gamble to undertake a project that threatens to trigger ethnocentrism in an era when such behavior is quickly and publicly punished. Perhaps the use of a spiritual tool is a form of spiritual bypass, falling back on religious or spiritual tenets to avoid the difficult work of self-interrogation in a punishing atmosphere. That is possible, but I find my own thought cynical—only something to be noticed and noted. Overall the Noble Eightfold Path serves as an effective tool for the ethically minded writer, and a way to work through the anxiety of the writer's inevitable self-doubt when it comes to confidently entering a fictional world and creating it with intention, awareness, and care.

Research as Resistance

While research and contextualization supported my creative conviction, they did not help enough to face the novel; they eased my uncertainties but did not erase them. If you write from a place of uncertainty it will show. I did not trust myself—so of course I could not expect my reader to trust me. I had considered the ethics of my position, the centrality of empathy, the cautionary tale, the systematic checking of one's moral alignment. I had data and research on how to start a novel. It was still not enough.

Research, as any researcher knows, easily transforms into procrastination—a way to buy time as a writer faces her dread.

Chapter 4: Notes on a Novel: Outlines, Timelines, and Drafts

Novelists are commonly divided into “plotters” or “pantsers.” Plotters begin a novel with extensive outlining; they plan, they map, and then fall upon the frame they’ve built with their messy character energy, the element that can’t be planned, once their framework is sturdy and tested.

Pantsers write by the seat of their pants. I’d written stories this way, and there is much to be said for hitting the vein when it comes to voice—if voice is locked in and you know what the character wants, you can write the whole story by following the character’s desires in a process of discovery. I liked the spontaneity of this approach in the context of short fiction. A novel was more structurally layered, too unruly in size to arrange on intuition alone, particularly a novel of the scope I was attempting. So I set out to outline and plan.

I craved momentum, the pull of the story itself; I envisioned characters, but I couldn’t get them to move.

So I’d push them, starting with James, the character I felt closest to. He was my first character to materialize. I hadn’t wanted to get into Vietnam War territory, but once my film binge lured me there I found myself lost in it, wanting to stay. James’s father as a soldier in the war became possible. That he’d been secretly in Cambodia became possible. That he secretly loved who he was in Vietnam, and hated having to hide it when he returned. Some compelling parallels between drafted American soldiers in Vietnam and Cambodians under the Khmer Rouge offered themselves. Absolute tests of one’s humanity—learning, and then living with, the horrific acts you’re capable of, how far you’d go to survive. The secondary protagonist of this part of the story, Caro, began to show herself. I couldn’t decide which way to take her—was her

perspective important, or was she a foil for James, known only externally? Since she was white and female, like me, whatever I chose for Caro would reflect something I felt about myself.

I would begin plotting the US-side narrative. I researched funding opportunities to go to Cambodia and applied to fellowships in Cambodia and the US. I knew I'd have to spend time in Cambodia before I could plot out more than brush strokes on the Cambodian side. I knew the novel began in the forest with the Sassafras tree. I'd mark that at the beginning. Maybe if I generated details and events, a voice would follow and a story could be told.

First Summaries and Timelines

Prologue: Outskirts of Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Samnang's cousin gifts her a camera. She knows he is involved in illegal/dangerous work and that is where the camera comes from, but she takes it.

PART ONE

Chapter 1: The Vale, Western Massachusetts, USA.

James. He has known his classmate Carolina (Caro) from a distance, but the year they turn 13 they form a bond that begins with common music interests, but quickly becomes physical. They begin a secret relationship that will ebb and flow throughout high school.

Chapter 2: The Vale

James and Caro carry on with their "best friendship" but only show their closeness in each other's homes. We come to know James's home life. His father died when he was 7 in a motorcycle accident and at that time he and his mom Ellie moved in with James's grandfather, the writer Calvin Archer. Calvin is very well known as a working class, veteran writer. His novel *Honor and Doubt* is considered a WWII classic and is part of a large body of celebrated work. He was tapped to start a veteran's writing center at the public university. There are always college students at the house. In this chapter James and Caro eavesdrop on a workshop he's leading. A student is talking about his time in Vietnam. James suddenly remembers a heated discussion he overheard between his father and grandfather when he was 6, in which Tommy argues for telling a story of war that Calvin warns him not to tell. "No one wants to hear about how being a soldier in Vietnam was your best self," he says. "You can't own up to being a good killer. You have to show you're ultimately against the war in Vietnam. Now if not then." They

drink heavily as Tommy tries to explain the story he wants to tell. Remembering this, James suddenly becomes interested in what his father went through. Caro comments, “It was a shitty war. Baby killers. Bombing innocent people. That’s all.”

Chapter 3: The Vale

High school. James and Caro are known to everyone as an unlikely couple of “best friends.” She dates an upperclassman and checks out for a while, but is always around at least from time to time. *Heart of Darkness* is assigned. What the fuck even is this book and why are we reading it? thinks James. “He uses the n-word without apology. Isn’t that all we need to know?” The teacher is no good. James complains about it to his mother, a PhD in Lit drop out, and she says, “You know, that was your father’s favorite book.” James finds his father’s copy on the bookshelf. Next to it is a thin notebook full of his father’s notes. They tell a story of torment, of violence perpetrated, of pleasure in it, and James understands finally that his death was not an accident. “I cannot pass on my darkness to my son,” he writes. James is shook.

Chapter 3: The Vale

James sits to read and understand *Heart of Darkness*. He finds some essays written by English professors in the library and we see some of his literary analysis. We read some of his father’s notes. We see James grow more interested in solving the mystery of his father.

Chapter 4: The Vale

College looms. James has been in love with Caro all this time, and Caro comes and goes; finally, he falls for a younger girl and Caro is suddenly jealous. James and Caro begin to experience friction from their class differences that James has always been aware of, but Caro has not assigned much importance. She can go wherever she wants. They are both ambitious. He will go to the Public — that has always been his only choice. It is where both his parents went, and his

mother's sister, everyone in his family. Caro insensitively suggests he go where he wants to, that's what everyone should do, don't they have loans for that? Caro, whose father is a professor at the Ivy, gets into Pomona, Columbia, and UPenn, but chooses the Ivy close to home. You see they are going in different directions, but aware they will not escape each other.

When Calvin dies during James's second year of college, James discovers his grandfather has been hiding significant amounts of cash. After raising him to resist the rich kids around him and stay loyal to his working-class roots, as Calvin had, it turns out neither of them were as poor as Calvin led them to believe.

It's as if he's taken that German pistol off the wall, put a bullet in it, and fired it, opening a hole into the ceiling. "Haha," he'd say. "All this time and all this conversation about something that wasn't even true!" The opposite of everything was true. His trust in what he knew was suddenly shaky. In looking for something to hold onto that makes sense, he finds the local rave scene and pursues a life of pleasure.

Timeline

1920: Calvin Archer born

1946: Tommy, James's father, born

1950: Ellie, James's mother, born

1966-8: Tommy enlists in Marines, serves in Vietnam

1972: James born, Carolina born

1979: Charles Thomas dies by suicide when James is 7; James is told it's a motorcycle accident

1981: Samnang born

1985: James and Caro begin their relationship in secret

1988: James reads *Heart of Darkness*; becomes obsessed with understanding his father
1990: Samnang's neighbor shot and killed by KR; family moves to outskirts of PP
1990: James enters the Public University, Caro enters the Ivy
1992: James discovers Schopenhauer while taking a class at the Ivy
1993: James's grandfather, the famous Calvin Archer, dies and his hidden fortune is revealed
1996: Samnang meets a foreign photographer, starts her interest in photography
1998-2000: James is floundering in grad school, enters the rave scene
2006: James goes to SE Asia in search of understanding his father? Or is it Buddhism? He's not sure

Getting something down on the page is better than having nothing down on the page. These early notes and outlines gave me something to work with. I would continue to like the gun-on-the-wall reference and maybe build on it. The thrilling possibilities of *Heart of Darkness*; I could invent academic literary analysis and Tommy's voice in notebooks discovered and read by his son—ok, ideas. Progress.

Attempts to create workable scenes took me further into a complicated relationship between James and Carolina. Fixated on the character of Carolina as a “beautiful girl” archetype, I followed narrative trails that veered far from my original geography and intention. I became overexcited about fictionalizing the infamous New Jersey water park of my youth, Action Park, a place of unmatched teenage lawlessness.

The following are various attempts to define my characters and refine the plot, to organize a timeline, and to find an entry point into a narrative current. These exercises ultimately

brought awareness of the deceptively stubborn membrane between outline, or plot, and narrative, or the dream world of the novel. The former might be achieved through muscle. The latter may be coaxed or prodded, but if it does not come willingly, it will not sing for you.

Character Building, Scenes and Notes

Part one: the worldly world / In which concerns are local and personal

James's **initial goal**: Small goal: to win over Carolina, the girl he "saves" from freezing water at the unsafe water park where he works in summer. Big goal: To crush it in school and get his PhD and live out the goals that his mother wasn't able to fulfill.

- James's **psychological and/or moral need**: To please his grandfather, the famous hypermasculine writer Calvin Archer, whose compound James and his mother moved to when James's young father died in a motorcycle accident. He needs to achieve what his mother wasn't able to because she sacrificed her own ambitions for him. But also to figure out how to be himself in this family context, since he is drawn to the not-super-masculine—Calvin dislikes James's music, how he dresses, his friends, etc. (80s New Wave feels.) Caro emerges to encourage his self-fulfillment, mostly by modeling it herself, but James's moral need is tied to a working class ethic which Caro does not share. He wants to figure out how to both be happy and his authentic self and they seem to be at odds.

- James's **identity and essence**: Until he merges with Caro his identity is very linked to his family. Caro challenges this by encouraging him to sing in the school chorus and he also discovers a love of dance, which will not go over well with his grandfather so he hides it. Everything about his identity explodes when his grandfather dies and he learns, after choosing

the nearby public college to save his family money, that his grandfather had secretly hoarded enough money to keep him and his mother set for life. Now, his essence? What is it? He thought it was going to be “working class kid makes good.” Now he’s floorless, and Caro has gone onto college and become a raging, theory-reading, 3rd wave feminist (it’s now the early 1990s) and they grow apart. In looking for some floor, he falls in love with a much younger girl named Hazel, and with her discovers chemical happiness in MDMA and rave culture.

• **what’s at stake:** We’re seeing them by Part 2: without the constraints of being broke he isn’t able to achieve his goal of crushing school and finishing his PhD and getting a professor job before he’s 30. He no longer knows what to want. Crisis. Drugs stop working. Maybe Buddhism will work? He makes plans to go to Asia and discovers that his mother and grandfather had kept an even bigger secret from him about his father’s time in Cambodia, and how his father really died.

In Part 1: James, 1980s, somewhere vaguely Western-Mass-ish

It’s the summer before his junior year of high school and James has a job at Thrill Mountain. Thrill Mountain is an ad-hoc water park frequented by the kids from the Valley, known for its lack of safety rules and adult supervision. The place is basically run by teenagers and now James is, uncomfortably, one of them. He’s surprised to see Carolina there, a girl from his new high school—she is from the Town, and the fancy kids are usually not allowed to come to Thrill Mountain. When Carolina jumps off the Tarzan rope and James jumps into the freezing mountain water thinking she needs help, they meet in an oddly confrontational way, but soon become interested in each other. She is Spanish, he is weird, and they become an odd but attached couple whose closeness grows over music, academics, and sex. She rebels against her conservative Spanish parents as he grapples with a stressful home situation, presided over by his

alcoholic famous-writer grandfather who does not care for James's un-masculine interests and appearance.

James is striving in school to make up for his mother's sacrifices and lost opportunities. She'd been studying for her PhD in English Literature when James's father was killed in a motorcycle accident, leaving her to care for her young son; she dropped out of her program, moved with James back to her family compound outside of Town, and took a job at the private high school so that James could go there. His grandfather, renowned short story writer Calvin Archer, hates him going there — hates anything that smacks of class privilege. James accepts his fate and despite wanting to go to the better college, winds up at The State, while Carolina, the wealthy daughter of a professor, slides into The Ivy. Shortly after they start school, James's grandfather dies, and it is revealed that he had secretly hoarded away enough money to keep James and his mother set for life, and James's whole world is turned upside down when he receives his unexpected inheritance.

Part 2: James and Caro, 1980s and 1990s, same setting

This section starts at the same point as Part 1 and we get Caro's version of events.

Eventually we arrive at college where James is losing his bearings, unable to reconcile his new station in life with everything he has been raised to believe. Though their schools are close to each other (they are modeled after the five colleges and this town is a fictional hybrid of Pioneer Valley and north Jersey) they grow apart and start following their own paths: Caro is becoming a kind of feminist revolutionary, at least within the safe confines of her college. James meets Hazel at the natural foods grocery where they work, and with her and her friends, finds the rave scene

and falls madly in love with Hazel, who is in love with him but also deeply unsure about being with James.

There are a bunch of raves and there is a lot of Ecstasy and there is a lot of music, sex, and a bubble of happiness that James works very hard not to pop. Of course, it pops.

One night James and Caro run into each other at a party. She gives him an earful about the ethical problems with doing drugs. “Ecstasy is made in a lab,” he tells her. Caro’s gotten very interested in critiquing abuses of power. We have learned from her version of events that she had jumped in that cold water at Thrill Mountain that day as the result of persistent sexual harassment that no one seemed to think needed to stop, and her life has been filled with that. This has led her to study power dynamics in an academic context and she’s on track to either burn down the world in the best way, or burn something down that she regrets—she’s filled with anger. She discovers that MDMA is indeed made in a lab, but the precursor, safrole oil, has to come from somewhere. One of the places is the mountains of Cambodia. They fight about it. Hazel breaks up with James. He crashes. He tries to find the happiness he’d found through drugs and music but now these artificial happiness-generators only push him further down.

Part 3: Samnang, 1990s, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Samnang knows that she and her family are alive because some of her family members were on the wrong side of the autogenocide of the 1970s—her northern cousins were Khmer Rouge. No one talks about it. Now one of her cousins brings her a camera, presumably traded or stolen from a foreigner, because he knows Samnang has wanted to become a photographer. Nearly all Cambodian artists were murdered by the Khmer Rouge, and occasionally foreigners come to

volunteer is centered around PP, and Samnang has learned from them in a spotty way. Now she owns a camera and with that privilege comes the imperative to learn how to use it well. She doesn't know what her cousin is doing, but we learn that he's entering the Cardamom Mountains, a swath of land protected by unexploded ordnances planted there by the Khmer Rouge, and risking his life to cut down as many Sassafras trees as he and his team can, building a make-shift lab in the jungle to distill the oil to be sold to drug traders from China and the Netherlands.

This is as far as I've gotten and am trying to figure out how their 3 stories connect, with James eventually discovering yoga and Buddhism and traveling to Southeast Asia.

Attempts at Scene Development

High school. James and Caro meet. A memory from one of their first encounters:

Caro's friends are pretending not to notice him. That's fine for them, because Caro is the one he's burning his eyes into. She pretends not to feel her body filling with dread. She giggles at something her friend says to make it seem like she's feeling normal rather than terrified. He's wearing that military jacket he always wears. Caro is always nice to David Kennedy, and usually that can get him to a placid state where they can just converse about music and then he'll leave her alone. "Are we friends?" he'd ask. "Yeah, we're friends," she'd say, smiling, and then as soon as they parted ways would drop the smile and control her desire to break into a run. But now she's in a bikini and even though hers is more conservative than the bikinis of all of her friends, she knows she's toast today.

He moves up in the line and people say "Hey!" but then see he's in a long military jacket, he's not cutting them to the Jump. He's also scary. He's known at school. He keeps a syringe of blood in his locker. Once he told someone it was AIDS blood and he'll use it on anyone who crosses him. People let him by and soon he's next to Caro. She has chosen to ignore him until the last minute. She decides to be happy to see him.

"Oh, hey David Kennedy." She smiles. "Are you wearing a bathing suit under that?"

Her friends watch as he leans in to whisper something in her ear.

The line is inching closer to the Jump. Caro realizes he's been waiting until her turn was imminent. The asshole was waiting to come and threaten her at just the right moment.

"Show your tits," he had said, "Or I will push one of your friends off the rock."

The whole park was one gigantic chain of hazards. She looked at her friends and she measured the distance to the edge of the rock. Someone pushed from the ledge would probably end up in the water. But people got hurt here all the time. The park had its own ambulances; the town made them finance their own after two summers of the park's injuries claiming all the town's resources. A body might hit water, but a body might also hit rock.

Her choice was to take the dare or not. She gets closer to the front of the line. He hovers near her. Her friends have withdrawn because they are scared too. The terror grows until she reaches the front of the line. She sees him put her friend's body between his body and the ledge. She makes her choice.

SAME SCENE, BUT JAMES'S POV:

James is working the Tarzan jump. By mid-afternoon, when the water has warmed a bit, the line zigzags at the top of the jump and one by one kids take their swing. Most of them know how cold the water is, but sometimes even the ones who have swum in the mountain runoff before have their breath drawn out of them when they hit the pool. This is why James hates working the Tarzan jump—he frequently has to decide if he needs to jump into it if someone seems to be in distress, but jumping into water this ice-cold causes everyone distress. He has only very basic lifeguard training. But there have been multiple deaths at this park, including one man who had a heart attack in this very pool, and he doesn't want to be responsible for anything bad that might come of inaction. He prays for an uneventful day.

He's watching from his spot on the rock when he hears a commotion across the pool where the crowd waits. The crowd is chanting "Show us your tits!" He realizes they are yelling at a girl he knows, Carolina from school. It doesn't occur to him to take action. Kids are always yelling

show us your tits. Girls on the Jump are always flashing their tits, boys frequently tucking their thumb into waistbands and yanking them down to show their junk. It's a major part of the Jump's appeal. But there is someone hovering near her who looks like he's menacing her. Oddly, he is wearing a military jacket; everyone else is in bathing suits. James looks around to see if other workers closer to her are doing anything. He decides to call out to stop the scene. But all that he thinks to yell is "You've got to jump!" He'd wanted to get her out of the situation. But instead, it feels like he's yelled at her, and he immediately regrets it.

To his surprise, she lifts up her bikini top and pivots back and forth to the crowd so everyone can look. The crowd cheers and cheers. She raises both middle fingers high to the crowd. She returns her bathing suit to its position and grabs the rope and jumps. But she lets go too soon and hits the water weird. James quickly decides to jump in and help her.

In the water, when he nears her, James sees fury in Caro's eyes. "I don't need your help," she growls at him. He swims alongside her until they get close to the edge. Only when she lets him help her to shore does he understand she is crying.

"Why did you do that if it was going to make you cry?" he asks—and immediately regrets it. She stops crying and glares at him. He wonders if he should just let her go. But he wants to hold onto her. "Can I get you a dry towel?" he tries. She nods.

"Is there anywhere someone can go where they can't be looked at?" Caro asks.

James considers the shack up the hill where park employees sometimes went to fool around (yes it's the 80s/90s and we said "fool around"). He decides it would be too suggestive to take her there. There was the closed ride down the hill. He walks her there.

“Sorry I asked you that before,” he says.

“Fair question,” she says.

He does not ask it again, even though he still wants the answer.

I wasn't certain that these early notes set my story in the right direction. My avoidance of Cambodia as a setting remained a problem. My imagination did not yet have permission to enter the space, but my imagination needed this permission in order to conjure the core of the novel.

If I had not been constricting my imagination, I might have noticed that Caro kept wanting to come forward and that I kept pushing her back. I pretended to myself that Caro was based on someone I'd known briefly for a short time several years ago, and I denied to myself—or at least resolved to never allow these thoughts to form sentences, even in my mind—that I was assigning Caro some of my central personal and creative conflicts.

I did notice that Caro seemed furious and had the potential to explode.

I kept pushing her back into the sack of third person and tying it at the neck. She kept mysteriously releasing the knot. Her negative energy concerned me. I didn't want her too present in the novel because I thought it would be too much.

For some weeks, James and Caro roamed my mind within the confines I had set. Little scenes animated and vanished. I let my characters roam experimentally, searching for that thing to hook into, until one day I watched them wander into the Plaza Vieja, Havana, Cuba.

This was off course, an experiment; maybe I'd let Caro off the chain, just for the sake of narrative investigation. I'd put her where my body had been, in a place I *knew* I knew.

Cuba is a Place I Know

I first went to Cuba in 2001 and spent five weeks teaching creative writing in a program for American high school students. I spent the next two summers directing the program and have traveled there regularly since. By the end of my first summer in Cuba I felt disappointed in myself for not being in its expected thrall. In 2001 travel to Cuba as a US citizen still felt legitimately “forbidden” and like we’d snuck past the gates, but the poverty in Cuba was sobering, and *socialismo o muerte* locked the Cuban and the foreigner into a fixed relation, based in economics but symbolic of much more, and it seemed impossible to get to know someone on equal ground this way. First I had to come to terms with some things about this place I had chosen to visit and which its citizens were not permitted to leave. The mutual, open acknowledgement of our contrasting economic realities was principal. Among friends there was little dancing around when it came to favors or exchanges. I would write my friend Sandra and ask if I could rent the room at her casa particular in Vedado during a visit, and she would write back and say I could stay for free in her room with her, which she didn’t have to tell me was illegal and put her family at risk, and bring \$600 cash, she needed it for her visa. I found the bluntness beautiful. No obligation to perform a needless social ritual. I admired the unwillingness of Cubans to explain how things work in Cuba to foreigners. To earn a Cuban’s trust as an American, you had to demonstrate you knew the rules of the tourist apartheid and that you weren’t starry eyed about Che Guevara and that you understood a car built in the 1950s was only cool until you actually needed to get somewhere.

The relief of assurance, to land on familiar soil, in a place where I spoke the language—this might be an intermediate step from the Vale to Phnom Penh. Shifting emphasis from a singular foreign culture to the comparative, the global. Dipping into my established expertise.

A third setting suited a story with a trio of main characters, and I liked the possibilities that opened from a broadening of international context. This also felt like it might be a move to confront my current shortcomings by recalling a previous state of ignorance, aiding an effort to move a character intellectually and psychologically from a position of not-knowing to the position of knowing. James and Caro might split towards different paths—James being the one who enjoys the bliss of not-knowing, Caro being unable to not-know—and a journey to Cuba an ideal place for this distinction to reveal itself.

I couldn't take my story to Cambodia yet, but I could take it abroad with confidence.

This experiment is from the point of view of Caro as she and James arrive in Cuba for a 4-week study program. Caro, half-Spanish, speaks fluent Spanish, and this is only part of what I imagined would separate Caro from James. I planned to pretend I didn't draw most of this scene from my autobiography, which, of course, I did.

Junket to Cuba

Cojímar was dark and deserted. Somewhere ahead of me was the water; I knew the shoreline was close, but the only road in front of us was a tapering strip of dirt that headed toward a few shack-like houses, lining a huge, untended lot. We were at what felt like the edge of Cojímar, near the highway that led to Havana. The center of Cojímar, twenty minutes from where we stood, was notable for the marina and restaurant where Hemingway set *The Old Man and the Sea*. There, in the mouth of the bay where Papa had once docked his fishing boat, local kids congregated at the rocky edge of the marina and swam and fished. Every afternoon tour busses emptied their Japanese and North American and European tourists into La Terraza, where the tourists took photographs of the photographs of Ernest Hemingway that crowded the walls. Tourists didn't tend to stay in Cojímar longer than it took to eat fishy lobster cocktail and stroll along the waterline, past the bust of Hemingway, just long enough to imagine him, with his gray beard, pushing off to fish for marlin in the deeper waters.

The Cuban government had opened a four-story hotel, the Panamericano, at this outer edge of Cojímar for reasons that were then unclear to me. There was not much here to see. But the hotel was perfect for a group of 30 American teachers and students, in Cuba on a miraculous legal license. And the Cojímar landscape was beautiful in an unsterilized way: from the third floor of the Panamericano you could see over the palm trees to the water, and the sunsets were spectacular, but the squat cement structures and potholed streets that dominated the town had not been altered or hidden for the sake of the resort guests. We were not in an idealized Cuba. But we wanted to be in Havana.

A mangy, skinny dog approached, pausing just out of kicking range. From the dangling nipples I could tell it was a she. She had almost no fur, and her pink skin was visible and mottled.

“Oh, God,” Allison said. “that poor dog. Scabies.” She hissed at the dog to make her go away and the dog scuttled off, head bowed.

The wind was blowing slightly but it was stifling, sweaty and hot. One cab had passed, apparently empty, but when we stepped off the curb to hail it, it didn’t stop. The hotel guards had told us a cab was the only way to get to Havana at this hour. “There should be taxis, if you stand on the corner one will come by eventually.” Another cab passed, but again, didn’t stop for us. We started raising our arms to the sound of any approaching car.

“What is going *on*?” Allison asked aloud. A red, battered car, with a cardboard sign that read “taxi” taped to the windshield, slid down the road toward the water. Most of the cabs that passed us were definitely empty. The drivers seemed to be checking us out before deciding not to take us. In the tourist state of wide-eyed wonder, my two companions and I blinked and made a show of little shrugs, but there was nothing to say. Palm trees barely swayed and all around us was concrete, empty streets, and the pulsing sound of the Panamericano disco behind us.

If we ever got to Havana, we were going to la Bodeguita del Medio, where Hemingway had supposedly invented the *mojito*. La Bodeguita del Medio was a tourist destination, but clearly one of the things you had to get out of the way when you were an American first visiting Cuba. James hung back, expecting the women to get the cab. I wanted to grab him by the sleeve and pull him forward. But he was going to be passive tonight and tonight this angered me and a piece of me wished he were not here, not in Cuba, with his bad Spanish.

“Try showing them some leg,” Allison said to me. “You’re the sexy one.” I had just met Allison, and was not sure what reaction she wanted from that statement. I stepped off the curb and into the street, hiked up my skirt, and juttied my hip toward an oncoming checkered cab, a diesel-blowing yellow-and-black car that I think was a Russian Lada. The driver slowed—and stopped.

“Finally,” I said, but as soon as we took a step toward it, the driver looked beyond us, bowed his head slightly, and put his foot on the gas. We were left stranded in the middle of the street. Behind us we heard laughter.

We turned around to confront two policemen in blue-grey uniforms. They covered their mouths, making a gesture to indicate that they were trying to hide their amusement, though it was clearly just a gesture and they looked us in the eye as they laughed. They were probably in their early twenties. They were handsome, almost adorable. They’d been standing behind us the whole time and they were having fun.

“What’s going on with the taxis?” Allison asked them.

“Those *taxistas* cannot pick you up. *Prohibido*. Those taxis are for Cubans only.”

“How do they know we’re not Cuban?” I asked, which made the policemen laugh harder. Well? It wasn’t because of our racial features; I shared ancestors with Cuban people, and Allison’s dark complexion could easily pass for Latina. James’s hair was dark. Our clothes didn’t seem like enough to give us away.

“You have to take a tourist taxi,” one policeman said.

“Why can’t we just take one of the Cuban taxis?”

“*Prohibido*.”

“Why is it *prohibido*?”

“Because that is the law.”

“Why is it a law?”

“Because Fidel made it one.”

“How can you tell the difference between tourist taxis and Cuban taxis?”

“You just can.”

The policemen strolled passed us, crossed the street, and planted themselves at the median. From the shadows where they stood, they chatted casually, smoking cigarettes. Cabs approached us, slowed, saw the policemen, took off.

Patience was the kind of thing you could build a tolerance for, and had to build a tolerance for in Latin America, or so I'd been told. So we stayed on our street corner, even Allison in her uncomfortable, clunky shoes, and we waited, without complaining and without understanding, until the proper taxi emerged from the dark end of the street. It was dark blue, shining in the little light there was.

“This one! *Vengan*, girls, this one!” The policemen ushered us inside excitedly, closed the doors for us, and wished us a pleasant evening, waving goodbye as the cab pulled away. The air inside the car, cooled by air conditioning, smelled new. Definitely nicer than the Cuban taxis. It delivered us, in some iteration of luxury, to Old Havana.

At la Bodeguita del Medio, I lost myself in the novelty of the *mojito* and the live Cuban band for a while. By the end of the night Allison was playing the clave and James was practicing his salsa with the original clave player. The band appeared to be having an even better time than we were. James moved onto a second dance partner, a curvy, toothy woman in a tight yellow dress, who was pushing him around the dance floor and twirling periodically underneath his arm. I sat at the bar with two art educators from New Orleans who'd arrived that morning.

“I just can’t believe we’re *here*,” Christopher, an architect, kept saying. “I mean, in *Cuba*.” He glanced back and forth between me and the enlarged copy of the scrap of paper where Hemingway had scrawled, *My daquiri in El Floridita, my mojito in El Bodeguito*. The bartender lied without shame, “I knew Hemingway. He came in here all the time.” Christopher grinned at me like I was in on something with him, like we’d met outside the backstage door of our favorite band and together successfully snuck past the bouncers.

I felt Christopher’s awe and excitement. It was hard not to. There was music and there were *mojitos* and there were new friends and the air was hot and close without being stifling. Sugar came through the straw with each sip, grainy from the bottom of the glass and mixed with chewy scraps of mint. Mysteries outside.

“We love Americans!” the guitar player shouted at us all. He smiled and bounced to Allison’s clave beat. I danced, briefly and clumsily, with one of the drummers, and returned to my station at the bar.

“I don’t really get this place,” I admitted to Christopher. “Not the Bodeguita. Cuba.” I tried to mask my disappointment with curiosity.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to,” Christopher said, and shrugged, and ordered another round of *mojitos*.

This was all an obvious performance and we were the marks. I watched James across the room, watched him enjoying it all, smiling with his teeth at the woman who flattered him. These musicians were doing a job, and smiles and flattery were an expectation of that job.

I didn’t walk alone out into the street of Old Havana because I didn’t know where I was going or where I was or how to find the right kind of cab and I knew being alone in a country you’d known for less than three hours was ill advised. I also knew that soon I would know how

to navigate these streets, and I would come to understand a level of urban safety exists in Havana that comes with a freedom I'd never imagined possible, and I would walk away from whatever this bar dynamic was, and James would likely stay within the boundaries of el Bodiguito. Why wouldn't he? Wherever tourists were in Havana, money could be made, and someone's livelihood depended on this young American man's fantasies being met and making him feel he'd spent all those dollars on mojitos and tips of his own free will. He could dance and drink and blank his mind, but I wanted to know what the police officers knew that I did not yet know. I wanted to be where people were real with me, and I wasn't being played.

Wrong Turn Gains

I'd tried many times to render Cuba on paper—dozens and dozens of unsalvageable pages. How interesting that this material asserted itself now as a stop-gap solution when that very material had been my previous problem. This scene led me away from the story of *The Pleasure Seekers*, and I would find no place for it in the plot; however, this urge to revisit Cuba offered a clue that sprung from instinct and led me to investigate its message to me as the conscious artist.

In creating a scene for my characters in Cojímar, Cuba, I had stepped off the narrative trail and retreated into familiar territory: a foreign locale and an area in which I had documented knowledge and authority as a writer. There, I learned the limitations of James and Caro's relationship and understood one of the core disagreements between them. Writing this sketch reinforced a preoccupation in *The Pleasure Seekers* with superficial understanding vs. genuine clarity, and the cognitive dissonance we might accept as the price of protecting our pleasures. I'd learned something about my hero, James: he'd fit into the role of clueless tourist more easily than expected. This was not a good indication of his ultimate heroism.

Until this experiment, I made no space for Caro's voice. I almost always preferred writing in the first person, but for a novel with three distinct characters, a third person narrative felt appropriate. Even with the equalizing point of view, I'd prioritized Caro last, holding her at a muffled distance.

I'd known this scene would not likely end up in *The Pleasure Seekers* from the start, and this side-trip to Cuba had been a test of something else. I felt I'd simply indulged in the first-person narration I preferred in an effort to get something down on the page. But the ease of this voice was telling me something I was now compelled to put into sentences and to consider.

Maybe the voice I wanted to hear was Caro's. I wanted to be Caro. I *was* Caro. Maybe we were the same. Maybe it feels that way when an author enters her character, animates her.

The urge to say "I" and "me" and to be certain of my perspective—to have a direct line to the reader—was an assertion of genre, and this first-person assertion on Caro's part a step in the direction of memoir.

Intellectually I clung to the trajectory of the novel. But intuitively, I knew my narrative had diverged from its original intention. A year had gone by and all I had to show of the novel were notes and outlines. But in my resistance I had in fact generated pages of what was not a novel. I had to face the reality of my story's resistance to me—I would have to allow the story to adapt.

One morning I woke up to a cascade of thoughts about a recent event that had activated my storyteller's brain. Not thoughts: sentences. The situation had revealed something important to me, but I didn't know what. The voice, so clear, knew where it was going when I did not. It was a glorious thing, to free oneself of the muscular effort of art, to be carried away by some compulsion with intentions of its own. Sentences slid into place and a perfect paragraph now existed in my mind as a narrative made of smoke. If I could make myself get out of bed I could catch it. A new paragraph began and pale ghost thoughts unrolled into the places I knew the story would fill. When the mind begins composing in this way, the only option is to abandon your rest for the keyboard and begin transposing.

Chapter 5: Confessional Practice as the Production of Knowledge

What follows is the narrative that pulled me from bed and announced with authority this project's intention to return, in this chapter, to memoir, the arena of true stories, the place writers go to find out what they really think and to learn what they don't want to know.

Here is where the text turns transforms from novel attempt to autocriticism.

Autocriticism, as I define it for the purposes of this study, builds on Lauren Fournier's concept of autotheory, which she investigates as

a term that has emerged to describe contemporary works of literature, art, and art writing that integrate autobiography and other explicitly and embodied modes with discourses of philosophy and theory in ways that transgress genre conventions and disciplinary boundaries (Fournier, 9).

I differentiate between autocriticism and autotheory as a practice versus a genre: this thesis may be read in its final form as an autotheory that has applied autocritical methods to raise questions and draw conclusions during the act of writing and analyzing. Autocriticism invites a textual reciprocity into the act of composition; the following sections, each reflecting on and emerging from previous chapters, form the thesis. In this manner, "You Are Beautiful" should be read both as a memoir in the confessional vein and as data that will play off of existing data—the primary finding of which, at this point in the writing process, has been about resistance. Following the writing executed without resistance, I will integrate the early generations of text in order to proceed with the sections that follow.

Confessional: You Are Beautiful

*the remnant of a vast, oceanic
bruise (wound delivered early and long ago)*

*was in you purity and
sweetness self-gathered, CHOSEN*

—Frank Bidart, *Desire*

In other words, she wanted it both ways. There is much to be learned by wanting something both ways.

—Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

1.

The daughter very much wanted to go to Florida. This was several months into the virus and a vaccine had finally been approved. The moment the daughter returned home from her second vaccine shot, the one she believed would immunize her both from illness and from worry, she planned her journey. Most years this Florida trip was routine, something she did with her children in the winter to visit with the grandparents and escape New England chills. But a vaccine had not been approved for children yet, and risk was still too high. So she would go alone.

In Boston's Logan airport the daughter watched, with a sense of superiority she recognized as overly smug, a clot of adults circling two toddlers, reacting to them in jerky bursts as if the toddlers were dangerous, untested machinery of which they'd been put in charge. She was thankful her own kids were clear of toddlerhood. Right now all she was in charge of was her body and one piece of luggage, a familiar feeling from long ago.

It had been a year since she'd had a proper visit with her parents. They were closing in on 80 and had spent the year in strict lockdown. Despite the early pandemic months of uncertainty and confusion and the shock of funneling so much of one's life into the digital and disembodied platform of Zoom, the daughter had had a busy and bountiful good year. She'd published a book and done enough talks about it that her fear of public speaking, once tremendous, had dissolved. Her three kids were a tight and loving crew, and she'd regained a friendship with her ex-wife during lockdown out of necessity—an unexpected benefit of the pandemic, since the divorce was still fresh. She'd joined a cohort of artists and met with them monthly for workshops and critiques. Her job was steady: the creative writing classes she taught had gone from online to “hybrid learning,” so she was able to spend time in person and in conversation with bright young people. It hadn't been all bad. What threw the darkest shadow on her year had been the regular spikes of worry that her parents might contract Coronavirus and die, and this worry was spiked with beams of gratitude that she, now 48 years old, still had her parents; they were healthy, had lived long lives. But now she recognized how much fear she had about their deaths, their inevitable deaths that she'd tried most of her life to avoid thinking about, and knew she should start preparing for the ends. To begin with, she should practice active gratitude that she could still spend time with them in the flesh. So the first thing she did, once the vaccine became available in her state and she was able to make an appointment for it, was book a flight to Florida where her parents lived in winter. South she flew.

2.

I was the daughter. I told myself this story, the version in which all would go well. The one in which I got what I want. I told my children, who had stayed home to go to school, this was a working trip so they wouldn't be jealous that I was going to Florida without them. And I did have work to do: long Zoom meetings on Friday and Saturday for a workshop with my cohort, and a class on Thursday which I planned to teach while balancing my laptop on my knees near the pool. I did not yet know how hot and heavy the air would be, how uncomfortable to sit in the sun. Or I knew that Florida was hot like that in May, and had chosen to forget.

3.

In the story, Mother and Daughter would cook together, or the Mother would insist on cooking by herself, or they would dine at restaurants, would walk the loop together around the pond and down the road along the beach shore. I who needs panes of solitude built into the structure of every day would walk by myself near the waterline on the beach and dive underwater in the condominium complex pool. My parents had booked me "A Nicole," which is what they called an appointment with their favorite massage therapist. Luxuries to indulge in before flying back north to children and more work. My dad and I would talk pleasantly over dinner, and afterwards the three of us would agree on something apolitical and unprovocative to watch together on TV. My mom would drink wine while we watched, and I would maybe resort to it too, since I couldn't carry cannabis, my preferred intoxicant, on the plane and without a medical card I would not be able to buy marijuana in the state of Florida.

I'd entertained the thought of trying to pass a few edibles through airport security. But the new style of scanner, I'd heard, revealed more of your body's secrets than you knew.

“What would happen?” I asked Austin, the man I used to call my boyfriend, but whom I now referred to mostly by name. Austin had broken up with me at my kitchen table in the second month of the pandemic, citing panic over my desire to integrate our children’s lives. We’d gotten back together with almost no conversation eight months later. Our children had still not met each other and possibly never would. “Like, what is the worst thing that could happen if I stuck a few edibles in my bra?”

“If you get caught with marijuana by airport security, you will definitely get arrested,” Austin said. This was the response I expected. Austin believed in propriety and considered life choices with his imagination trained on a worst case scenario. “Considering your job as a college professor and your status as a parent, it would be in your best interest to not get arrested.”

Out of curiosity I slid an OB tampon into the cup of my bra to see if security would flag it. My period was a little late and likely to show up when I was en route, so this was something I could explain without lying if I needed to. At the airport I stepped inside the body scanner, raised my bent arms overhead. The bored security guard waved me through. Later that evening, out to dinner with my mom, I went to the restaurant bathroom to wash my hands before dinner and realized I’d begun to bleed, and was grateful to have the forgotten tampon conveniently stashed in my bra.

4.

It must be my period, I thought, wondering why my body felt so heavy and uncomfortable in the woven-plastic chair at the Italian restaurant in the mall. Normally I relished heat, and winter in Boston had been long and inescapable.

My mom and I chewed warm sourdough bread with butter melting into its folds. I enjoyed the food, but eating at a nice restaurant with good food lacked the pleasure I'd expected. "I feel exhausted," I told my mom.

"It's no wonder," my mother said. "You've been working really hard." She would never say *too much*. She lived with a workaholic, my father. He had been vaccinated for two months and had already made several work trips to California.

"I think I am becoming a workaholic," I said. "I don't really enjoy anything as much as I do my work these days."

My mom looked mildly concerned.

"Should we split a kale salad?" I asked.

"I don't like kale," she said. "I find it bitter."

"You have to massage it," I said. "You put it in a plastic bag with olive oil and lemon juice."

"Who massages their kale?" my mother said. "No one!"

"I massage my kale!" I said, but the truth was I hadn't bought kale in well over a year, or any other greens besides leaf lettuce in a plastic clamshell box to throw on a sandwich from time to time; it had been a year of food for comfort, I barely remembered how to eat for nutrition anymore.

"Speaking of massage," my mother said, "Are you excited for your Nicole?" She was pleased to have arranged this for me. I told her I was thrilled.

We split a salad that was not kale and ate pasta and life was good. Or, I wanted it to be good. I wanted to remember a time when people took care of me, the comfort of remembering this, while having no one to take care of myself—I wanted a few days of inhabiting this fantasy.

But my fantasies of well-being were already being thwarted. Something wasn't right. It was too hot and my body felt uncomfortable in the fake-wicker chair. The wheels were in motion and there was nothing I could do. I just didn't know that yet, that it was already happening as I pushed soft pockets of pasta into my mouth at the edge of a parking lot in Florida, where even fancy restaurants offered a view of evenly parked cars, vehicles slowing pulling in and pulling out between painted lines.

5.

Many mornings I rediscovered myself, upon waking, swaddled in cool sweat. This was the first sign of menopause, I read somewhere or someone told me. Apparently prior to the end of one's fertile life there was this whole thing called perimenopause, which can last for ten years until menopause; you learn about perimenopause only when you've passed its threshold, after Googling "night sweats" or talking to women older than you about the weird happenings in your body. For the past three years, some days I woke up dry and just as often I woke up drenched. Who knew a body could sweat this much while not moving, and when no one else was hot? I hadn't known my calves, my ankles, knew how to sweat at all.

The night sweats didn't wake me on their own, but my first morning in Florida something else forced open my eyes: high between my thighs, the tickle of blood spilling fast towards the bedsheets. My cycle had gone haywire simultaneously with the onset of the sweats. Where once the flow began slowly and followed a steady curve, now some trickster had their hand on the faucet. But it remained rare, during sleep, for blood to *spill* like it just had.

I pressed my thighs together, rolled out of bed, and hobbled to the bathroom. I sat down on the bowl and kicked my blood-soaked underwear and pajamas into a knot on the floor. When I stood moments later I saw a deep cushion of tissue reddening the bowl's bottom.

I'd always thought menopause would mean periods that grew lighter, that the blood would come thinner each month and eventually fade away like a wisp on the wind. Instead, it was the opposite: my cycle was shorter, 25 or 26 days instead of my once reliable 28 or 29, but heavier than ever. I rummaged under the sink among the disposable razors and hotels soaps until I found a cache of maxipads.

The next morning it happened again. Back to the washing machine I walked with my balled up pajamas. Blood was *dropping* out of me.

"I don't know why I'm bleeding like this!" I said to my mom, an apology for running a half-full washing machine twice in two days. She watched me spray my pajamas with Shout and search for other clothing items to justify running a load. "Did you bleed like this before menopause?"

My mom didn't think so. "I just remember driving all over Costa Rica looking for tampons during Easter week when everything was closed," she said. "Remember that? We came to visit you in La Victoria and we were on that road trip, and I thought I'd gone through menopause, it had been months since I'd had a period, and then we couldn't find tampons or pads ANYWHERE."

So this was what it meant to be a middle-aged woman: delivered back to the uncertainty around what to expect from one's own body. All those stories we have archived, the stories that starred us, or that served as cautionary tales starring classmates: the sudden oval of red-brown on the white jeans, the rush to the middle school bathroom stall, the bold, bright, alarming

conspicuousness of those hidden organs and their machineries at the beginning of their working life. At the end we return to that, our bodies telling us how it's going to be, telling us we would never know them enough to get ahead of them, even after living inside them all the way to the end.

Because that was what this was, and I knew it: the beginning of the end of my body. I had a lot of years left but they would be spent dying, little parts by little parts.

6.

I birthed my first baby at age 38, just after marrying. We both wanted babies—three of them, to be exact. We agreed that I, six years older, would go first. Because two women getting pregnant required Assisted Reproductive Technology instead of just fucking for free like straight couples do, the process quickly became consuming, as constant and as demanding as a job, except we were losing money instead of making it, and the stress was immense. As soon as I became pregnant and passed the twelve week accomplishment, I became a writer again instead of a fertility tracker. And so it happened that my first books and my first babies tumbled out at the same time, all within four years. These were, hands down, and despite some disappointment in my marriage, the happiest years of my life.

7.

Part of my plan to enjoy my visit involved going to the beach club to which my parents belonged and eating a perfect cheeseburger. Aside from some of the people, I loved this beach

club. The beach was impeccably manicured, tended by men with rakes, with jetties jutting out to break the waves so the water was calm. Overlooking the ocean, a long string of swimming pools. On one end was a lap pool where adults sat and read newspapers and magazines and their screens, and way at the other end was an adults-only zone with another narrow pool with the surface gleam of water no one swam in. In between were two enormous pools filled with splashing children in tasseled swimsuits tossing dive toys purchased at the pool shop. Everything in view was without flaw. Anything you put in your mouth would taste good.

At the restaurant overlooking the main pool I sat with my mother and ordered the cheeseburger, but when it came I couldn't eat it. As I swallowed my third bite my body closed up. When I put the cheeseburger again to my mouth my body said *no* and then *Don't do that again*.

I could fight you, I thought to my body.

My body returned: *You will lose*.

"What is wrong with me that I can't even eat a cheeseburger?" I said to my mom.

"Maybe it's the heat," my mother said.

"This has been going on for a while," I said. For much of the pandemic I ate in atavistic panic, as if needing to prepare myself to run from danger at any moment. Craving nothing, as if my body wanted me hungry and alert, then suddenly demanding that I eat carbohydrates that would digest fast and convert to instant fuel. I looked at my burger, carefully cut in half, missing those three small bites. This was the worst it had gotten.

I was empty. I hadn't eaten in the morning. But my body wanted nothing. It might accept something like crackers. But even the French fries seemed turned.

“I kind of feel like I did when I was pregnant,” I said. “Like all I want is refined, white carbs.” I forced down a few French fries and regarded my plate pitifully.

“Well, I don’t think stomach issues are a sign of Covid,” my mom said, since that was still all we were thinking of.

My mom read a book at the pool while I taught my last class of the semester in a hallway of the hotel via Zoom. After class I changed into my bathing suit in the locker room. The mirror showed me a version of myself that seemed slightly off. I looked tired, very tired. My skin the palest pink. All the soft parts exaggerated, fat hooking over my straps. Like all concentrated spaces where women of a certain age have had plastic surgery and worked out daily with trainers, this beach club was not a great place to feel ugly. My superiority to the women around me who’d starved and gone under the knife to gain approval from high-end patriarchy was based on a premise that did not, at this moment, hold: *If I wanted to, I could be one of you*. The solution was to stop looking into the mirror. So I turned and walked out and dove into the pool where my body disappeared into the water.

8.

My body’s signals had always been strong. Something told me, that pull in my core, that first day of my first blood, to go upstairs, to the bathroom beyond my parents’ bedroom, to pad across the wall-to-wall sky-blue carpet and close the mirrored door to the most private place in the house.

But still, when I saw the rusty blood patch, I was confused. Was this *it*? There was something unusual and brownish in my underwear. But blood was red.

“Mom!” I called until she climbed the stairs. I was twelve. I was a precocious child, lusting for every rite of passage. I’d wanted to be the first girl in my grade to get her period and did not understand why the girls who beat me had the self-control to not burst through the middle school doors with their fists raised in triumph. When a classmate showed up with braces it felt like a personal injustice. I wished for glasses, scoliosis, broken limbs, illnesses, things it made no sense to covet—but I wanted to know, with my own body, what *everything* felt like.

I showed my mother the crotch of my cotton underwear, white with thin stripes of pink and blue threaded through. “Is this my period?”

Yes, she’d said, and then she laughed and laughed and laughed. I’d wanted my period to come so bad and when it did, there I sat, bewildered and annoyed.

It was the summer before seventh grade, and I was twelve, the median age for menses, center of the graph. My sister and I had just returned from a week visiting my dad’s cousin Sally in Illinois. “I knew it was coming,” my mom said. “Somehow I just knew. I told Sally you might get your first period while you were there.”

The word *cramps* did not accurately describe the dark, turbulent status of my body’s core. *Pain* did not describe it either. The only thing I could think to do was lie down and nurse the feeling as I waited for it to pass. I wanted to enjoy my triumph, but I *was* annoyed, an annoyance dictated by my body that pushed everything else out of the space.

The body is an expert in trial runs. This pushing, pulling, invisible sensation was preparing me for something. I was learning something important and the discomfort was my teacher. I just didn’t know what yet.

9.

On my second night in Florida my dad entered the house through the garage as my mom and I sipped wine in front of the TV. We hugged our first hello hug in a year. He traveled so much there was rarely any discussion about where he had been or how the journey was, even now, when travel was new again. “What are you watching?” he asked. It was the Ken Burns PBS documentary on Ernest Hemingway, a writer my mom and I both liked.

“Well, he’s a class A narcissist,” my mom told my dad when he asked how it was.

“Doesn’t he deserve to be a narcissist?” my dad said. “Hemingway? Didn’t he accomplish quite a lot?”

I thought of something Rachel Kushner had written about Marguerite Duras’s habit of referring to herself in the third person, as “Duras”: “maybe it was just an element of what some labelled her narcissism, which seems like a superficial way to reject a genius” (Kushner, 2018). A narcissist gets a pass if she’s “genius” enough, and these genius-narcissists have endless enablers, which is how you get miserable, lonely people like Hemingway. The documentary showed me he was lonelier and more miserable than I had known. I also recognized something familiar about his moods: the larger-than-life Up—often followed by adoration around a book’s success—and the want-to-be-dead Down, often the result of not feeling loved, after his solipsism drove his woman away.

The documentary was riveting. It took Burns’s usual crystalline and comprehensive narrative voiceover and integrated close readings of Hemingway’s writing in the context of life events, and also commentary by living writers about the influence of his work. Tobias Wolff

spoke about Hemingway's short stories, those little masterpieces. "Tobias Wolff wrote one of my favorite short stories," I told my mom. It was a story I'd discovered late, well after graduate studies and teaching for years. It had been a real pleasure to discover a story so many people loved and to love it so truly. Even with all the overconfident analysis maps of this story available on the internet and on the tips of so many writer's tongues, I was still able to lose myself completely in the magic of the story as I read it.

"What's it called?" my mom asked.

"Bullet in the Brain," I told her.

"I don't know that story," she said.

I thought about how she would love this story, how the great payoff for the reader, the arrival of the plot's pleasure point, is channeled through a boy's Southern diction, the same drawl my mother has slowly lost but through which she is probably most herself. "I'll print you out a copy," I told her. "It's so good." I was only slightly tipsy from the red wine. I mentally scanned my toiletries to remember if I'd packed Zantac for the acid reflux the wine would instigate the minute I became prone. I'd find the Zantac bottle where it faithfully could be found since pregnancy transformed me into a heartburn monster.

10.

I was setting up at the dining room table while my mom watered plants out back. I had a Zoom meeting with my cohort of artists, and today it was Eve and Carrie's turn to present. Carrie's work dealt with heirlooms and inherited objects. Eve mostly worked in painting, a multimedia artist with an interest in the aging female body. Our agenda included a one-hour

movement session, followed by a session led by Eve and Carrie. I wore yoga pants and a loose shirt that I was already pulling at.

My parents lived in a small condo with a back space big enough for a seating area and enough living green matter for my mother to tend. In the hot months they returned to Long Island, where my mother managed a small oasis of a garden, roses, massive hydrangeas, great bouquets of lavender and a patch of herbs and carrots. She grew up on a tobacco farm in North Carolina and slides into her southern accent when talking about gardening and planting. She is very good at growing things and making growing things beautiful.

“You need....a *yard man*,” she drawls to me every spring, visiting my patch of urban garden in Boston and shaking her head at the mess of my front yard. The woman who’d lived in this home before I moved in with my kids had cultivated a complex perineal garden that I had no idea what to do with, aside from pulling out the most obvious weeds and planting annuals in blank dirt patches. The multiple patches of roses flummoxed me in particular, catching on my clothes whenever I approached and then chasing me away with the inescapability of their spikes.

I’d tried to subjugate the garden, I really had. I pulled on gardening gloves and snipped offending growth with garden clippers, then stared at the green tangled mess, thinking of the year I lived on a farm in Costa Rica and wishing for a machete. Then I just permanently gave up. Or maybe I would figure out what kind of action to take someday, but I couldn’t figure out what it would be.

11.

That was the day a man looked at me and said: “You used to be beautiful.”

Later, home at my parents' house, I went into the downstairs bathroom, shut the door, faced the mirror. A sallow and puffy face stared back at me with resentment. It was true. Once I'd been pretty. And then I was sometimes beautiful to some people. And then I was sometimes beautiful if you were able to see older women in that way, which I was, and that had been enough. Now it was not enough. I was still bleeding hard, which explained the pallor. Maybe this insane period was telling me my time was up: Menopause was nigh. My body had always sent me strong signals. This was not the one I expected at the end, but what did I know about signposts at the end of a road I would only travel once?

I just hadn't expected the passage to slam like a door.

Tears spilled out of my eyes again.

"Stop crying," I told my mirror-self, newly-named Crone, unkindly.

12.

I was never a Beauty. I have always been conditionally pretty. It depended on the backdrop, where I was in my endless emotional cycle. I sprinted beauty in bouts of hypomania and then burned it out, landing in an ugly depression. I was beautiful in the summer, August was a beautiful month, and by November I was plain again, pale and unsatisfactory. I was beautiful when I was in love. I lost my appetite for food when in love—I shunted that hunger to sexual desire, doubling it up. I was beautiful when I tried really hard, such as right before my sister's wedding, or when I was determined to keep a girlfriend who was younger than I was and poised to leave me at any second. Then, when the summer was over or the girlfriend was gone, I would

comfort myself with fattening food and gain weight and puff out and be ugly until the next motivation came along. And then a pandemic would send everyone indoors, into private spaces where they couldn't be seen. In that unseen space, I would learn not to care what I looked like.

I had not stood in front of a full-length mirror for a year.

What a freedom it had been, to not care.

Against my will I thought, what would it take to stop eating carbs? This was how I lost weight when I wanted to: old-school Atkins, nothing packaged, meat and seafood and salads, no sugar, no bread, no rice, no pasta. Two weeks of Atkins and I'd drop ten pounds. But I felt in my body that those days were over. I couldn't eat like that now. My body told me *carbs*.

And at the moment, it told me *nothing*.

Metabolism slows at menopause. My body told me to slow down. I'd also heard at menopause you become invisible.

Invisibility would be the next phase of being Crone, I supposed, but I did not feel invisible now.

13.

When my day of meetings was over my mother drove me to a strip mall for my massage with Nicole. Nicole was exactly the kind of body worker I liked: she left my back bruised from cupping, rubbed muscles with river stones so hot they burned, had studied her anatomy and could discuss how the piriformis connected to the sacroiliac joint and what tight hamstrings did

to a low back, coaxed my body towards recovery even if it hurt. I wanted it to hurt. Her office was decorated in a style my mom called “Margaritaville”: faux-weathered wooden wall hangings featuring flip flops and seagulls, beach scenes captioned with puns about partying and enjoying life, “We don’t skinny dip, we chunky dunk!” “It’s five o’clock somewhere,” seashells glued on everything.

“What is going on with your body today?” Nicole asked.

I reminded her about my degenerated disk (L5S1), the ankle that dislocated and was never right again. Now there was also a bunion, foot pain, and the disk injury shot pain into my hips, down the side of my left thigh. I was never an athlete and experienced no great sorrow about my body losing its strength, though it did bother me that I could hardly run a few steps without it being followed by debilitating back pain. The thing that upset me most was my failing eyesight. I was on 1.5 magnifiers, and would probably need bifocals soon. All appropriate for a crone.

“Face down,” she said, and I was grateful to hide my face from her for a while, except still sniffly from crying all morning, and the face rest made it worse.

“I hear you sniffing,” Nicole said. “Do you have allergies?”

“No,” I said, and explained to her that I used to be beautiful.

“Just don’t listen to anyone who tells you that!” she said. She made some sounds of pity and uncertainty. Then she said, “Do you ever take anything, you know, to help you relax in situations that are stressful?”

My eyes opened to the frame of the face cradle. Was Nicole trying to hook me up with pot? A quick back and forth confirmed that she was.

“Let me see what I can do,” she said.

“Oh my God you’re amazing,” I said. “That would be amazing. I can give you money.”

“No, you’re not giving me money. I’ll see what I can find.”

Yes, a few edibles for the evening would definitely be welcome. I scanned my body for areas that needed to relax. I felt a tug in my stomach, a twinge of nausea, and was grabbed by a hand that pulled me right back to the mirror in which I became Crone.

Relax, I told my stomach.

I was a lapsed, but long-time yoga practitioner, practiced in body awareness. My teacher would say, “Are you holding in your psoas? See if you can ask it to release,” and I could. I’d gotten better at nonreactivity and calmly talking myself out of small panics. “Rest,” I told my stomach. But it would not rest. I felt nausea build and my mouth fill with saliva. I began slow, steady breathing.

The tugging was interfering with my massage. I tried to talk myself down. *I feel a growing sense of nausea. I acknowledge it. If I wait, and breathe, and tell my body not to tighten in panic, it will go away.* I shifted around on the table. It wasn’t going away.

Was I so upset about my lost youth that I was going to *throw up*?

“Just FYI,” I told Nicole, “I think I’m ok but I’m suddenly feeling very nauseous.”

Nicole asked if we should stop and I said no. I swallowed back saliva for the last twenty minutes of my session. My massage had been pre-paid over the phone and I rushed to the parking lot, where my mom was waiting in the car. I shut the door and announced, “I am pretty sure I am going to throw up. Maybe before we get home.”

On the ten-minute drive home I stuck my head out the window like a Labrador and deeply breathed the hot salt air, negotiating desperately with the upward-pulling ache that was now in my throat and wrapping around the roots of my teeth. My mother parked the car and

handed me the housekey on its beaded rooster key chain. I opened the door, tossed the key on the table, strode to the bathroom, fell to my knees, and violently threw up as my mom entered the house. As she closed the front door, I gasped for air, and then after she'd quietly padded up to the other side of the bathroom door I violently threw up again. I flushed the toilet. I wiped down the toilet seat and back with a wad of toilet paper, then flushed again. I remained on my knees, my breath quick and deep, afraid to stand. I scanned my body for aches—any sign of flu—but I was alert, alive, my eyes wide with alarm.

Still on my knees, I opened the bathroom door a crack. My mom waited there, her eyes also alarmed.

“I must have caught a bug on the plane,” I said. Then all the fear of my parents catching Covid returned. Had I come to Florida only to get them sick? “You’d better stay away from me,” I said.

We had an imminent dinner reservation. “Do you think you’ll be able to come to dinner?” she asked.

“No, I definitely can’t come to dinner,” I said. “But you guys should go. I’m just going to lie down and maybe it will pass.”

“What could it be? Do you think it’s Covid?”

I didn’t feel feverish, and my lungs felt clear. “I don’t think throwing up is a sign of Covid,” I said. “Could it have been the soup I had for lunch?”

I’d reheated vegetable soup my mom had made and frozen in small batches. “No, I eat that soup. I made it and froze it right away.”

I curled fetal on my narrow bed in the guest room while my mother changed for dinner. Across the room on the dresser, my phone dinged, but it seemed so far away. It rang after that; I

let voicemail pick up. It must be a bug from the plane, no other explanation. The airlines claimed air was purified in their cabins, and passengers and crew wore masks, but Covid taught us nothing was definitive about transmission through the air. Covering faces helped, but virus molecules snuck around seams, they found other ways into your nose, onto your lips and into your mouth. We had guidelines but no rules. I chanted silently, *please do not throw up again*. My eyes still felt wild from it. My breath was fast and shallow.

My mom knocked on my door. “I think Nicole is trying to get in touch with you,” she said. “She has something for you I think? I gave her your number.” More dings followed my mother’s departure. I lay on top of the quilted bedcover with my shallow breath and my chant. Do not throw up again. The phone rang again. My body told me I should make the trip to the dresser as quickly as possible. I lurched towards the machine and saw stacked messages from Nicole.

I have something for you ☺ ☺ ☺

Give me a call when you can, I’m passing through your area

I hope it’s ok, it’s just what I could get from my friend. Are you there?

Alden, are you there? What’s your address? I think it’s _____ street?

Your mom gave me your address, I am heading over!

By the time I read the last text Nicole was knocking on the door. My stomach was back in my throat. *Go fast*, it said. Marijuana helped nausea. But first I’d have to get to the door, down the stairs and twenty feet to the front of the house.

More lurching—no one could see me. I was alone and safe. I just had a bug. I could sense I might vomit again. I opened the door a crack.

“I am so sorry Nicole, I just threw up and I hope you didn’t catch anything from me!”

Nicole passed me a small, rumpled-soft paper bag.

“This is what I could get!” she said. She didn’t care about the vomit. She was pleased with herself, beaming. There had been a mission, albeit a confusing one to me; could her intuition truly be that powerful? If I wrote it as fiction you would not believe it.

14.

Not long before the pandemic, I’d taken part in a tribute reading in Brooklyn for my college mentor, Edmund White. Downstairs at the venue, as people made their way up the stairs at the Williamsburg McNally Jackson, I inserted a fresh super tampon that I assumed would cover me for the evening. Upstairs someone had printed RESERVED signs on plain white paper and placed them atop ten of the front row seats for the readers; I sat on top of one. I would be the seventh reader. I wore a black Allsaints dress with an asymmetrical cinch and a slit up the side that went a few inches above my knee, and black riding boots. By the third reader I was in trouble. I sat completely still while blood seeped into my underwear, and probably also my dress. I knew running to the bathroom would only provoke a bigger catastrophe than sitting still and slowly bleeding onto my clothes—thank God I’d gone all black. I would have to get up and read in front of the audience and pretend it wasn’t happening. The tampon had never stood a chance. This is how it was, perimenopause.

The audience was mainly comprised of gay men. When my turn came I stood at the microphone with my ankles crossed and my thighs clamped together, knowing that blood rivulets might descend towards my boots. It might already have been happening. I read an essay I’d written about Ed White’s gift to us all, the transparency with which he describes aging, becoming

an old body, but still wanting sex, the compromises involved, the insecurities, and how he always tells the truth. The black dress covered me, but when I returned to my seat I saw the blood smear, an arc like a rainbow, on the white paper over my seat.

Later that night, Valerie and I could not find a cab to get home. We stood on the sidewalk, scanning the street. It was warm, the later part of spring, about to get hot in the city.

Williamsburg was like lower Manhattan used to be, streaming with professionals in their 20s.

When a cab approached, a millennial dude jumped in front of it, either for himself or a female companion. We were too old to dive in front of cabs. It was going to be a long wait. The stream of bar crawlers was incessant, like a summer holiday town on a weekend night.

Nearby, on the corner, a man on a break from his kitchen job stood outside of a restaurant muttering to the man next to him as he watched the crowd move. His anger seemed dangerous. He singled women out as they walked by in clothes he found too small, too slutty, and got louder. “Look at these women. All these women with no class. You have no class,” he barked at the crowd, which seemed not to hear them, but you knew some of the women did.

Angry men didn’t scare me the way they used to. The great majority of men who hated women were no longer interested in my body, and this safety was something I’d entered into recently. I looked down on misogynists so I felt superior to this man. All this combined with the freshness of the MeToo movement made me feel bulletproof. Valerie and I tried to figure out how she would get home to Red Hook and I would return to my friend V’s apartment in lower Manhattan.

Valerie’s phone had died so she’d left it at home, bewilderingly. I opened Lyft to see a twenty-five minute wait for a car. I entered her address into the app and the car began inching in our direction.

“I see you! You’re a disgrace,” the man on the corner yelled into the street.

I glared at him.

“I see through you,” he shouted as he pivoted in our direction. “You have NO class.” And then he pointed directly at me, jabbing his finger. “YOU. You have NO CLASS.”

I was a middle-aged college professor and mother of three in a tea-length dress and jacket. I’d just walked out of a literary event.

“Are you talking to *me*?” I said.

“Yes, I see right through you and you have no class.”

“I’m sorry. You’re saying I have *no* class? You are speaking to *me*?” I tapped myself on the chest and shook my head, laughing. “I’m sorry, are you saying I *do* have class?”

Valerie moaned a signal of distress and pivoted her body away from me. She’d watched me confront men since 1991 but this was not her style. I was no longer a New Yorker and she was, so I wondered for a second if she sensed a more present danger than I did. But the parade of drunk millennials on the street around us offered insurance of safety. They were there, providing the friction he needed to unleash his anger. He needed them too, his passive audience. Our witnesses.

“That’s right,” he said with hatred. His eyes bore into mine in a very personal way that surprised me. “You are a slut with no class.”

I kept smiling. “I do not understand your comment,” I said, staring back, like we were friends in a moment of not understanding each other. He gave up and returned his abuse to the passers-by. Though I was shaking from adrenaline, I thought, *I win*.

So this is what it is like to be a middle aged woman, I thought. You bleed all over yourself in public from perimenopause, push through the event and the drinks after anyway, and

at the end of the night you are called a slut for being female on a sidewalk. Valerie hugged me and jumped in her car. The Lyft app would not allow me to order myself a car until the first car had reached its destination, so I sat on a bench to wait and the man on the corner went back to his kitchen to despise women in a less public setting. I worried he would hurt someone tonight, but I couldn't do anything to prevent that or to know. I scanned the street for yellow cabs and began mentally outlining a lecture for my Feminisms class based on what had just happened. It would be a good place to bring in Kate Manne's theory that sexism is a set of beliefs, and misogyny an enforcement strategy. The man on the corner was a soldier and his mission, as he saw it, was to scare women into place, to hate them if he had to, until it made him feel righteous to hate. When I told my students this story, they reacted with horror; I, however, remembered a calmness, the freedom of knowing I had faced unleashed misogyny with fearlessness, and believing in that moment that just by seeing things as they were, I was invincible.

This invincibility had graced me only when I entered my late thirties. Men on the street no longer wanted to fuck me; my body had become too old. Having crossed the border of fuckability I was protected. Where once my heart would have flooded with fear at the sight of those eyes burning into mine with hatred, now I can look at this man in the eyes, smile at his face as his hatred flies off my shield.

15.

It was a decision I'd made in my 20s. I recognized misogyny as an enforcement strategy, and intimidation as a method of this strategy, before I imagined there were words for this behavior. I understood that sometimes this sense of superiority and a sense that I should bend for

a man was something many men didn't even know they were exercising. Mostly these presumptions were small. Walking on streets in Manhattan, how many times I'd see a man coming towards me with the expectation that I, young woman, more like a girl, would reroute and get out of his way. Well I wasn't going to get out of a man's way on a sidewalk. My path was as important as anyone else's path and sidewalks were for everyone. I maintained my trajectory and in the end a man could either collide with me and endure the embarrassment of having been mistaken about his claim on the sidewalk while I had the calm of preparing myself for a collision, or move out of *my* way. His choice.

The worst sidewalk offenders, though, were the beautiful, thin, fashionable young women in Manhattan. They charged through cafe doors as if expecting you to not just move, but *rush* out of their way. Beauty is coming! I didn't budge for them either. The difference was they were alert, used to having to adjust their stride. I once challenged a girl at the entrance to the Coffee Shop at Union Square. When I put my body in the doorframe before hers, she shrunk to the side with the adeptness of someone who'd shrunk herself before.

I've charged like that through few doors myself, if we are telling the truth.

Maybe no longer being beautiful makes it easier to not budge.

16.

The name of the friend in LA who had arranged the reading at the travel bookstore was Kelly. Kelly was a true Beauty. Every conventional benchmark—she hit it. Her blond hair was styled like Jennifer Aniston's because it was the 90s, and Kelly nailed this and every aspect of her look. Of course, she was skinny. And somehow she was curvy at the same time. We liked

each other immediately, or seemed to, though at first I kept my distance in case she was sucking up to me, her new boyfriend's friend, in order to score points with him. No, it turned out, Kelly didn't have a competitive bone in her body. She liked being pretty and she wanted pretty friends. I was honored to be worthy of her consideration. Now, years later, she was working as an entertainment lawyer in LA. and I was stopping there on my way from New York to Australia. I'd be leading a frantically-paced hiking, biking, and skiing trip to Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji. A leisurely layover in LA seemed like a good way to prepare myself, so I planned my flights accordingly, and when the friend I'd planned to stay with got an acting gig that meant he wouldn't be in town after all, I had the idea to call Kelly, and I found myself in Kelly's apartment in Beverly Hills, sharing her bed for three nights.

Our social contexts differed. I was an aspiring artist/professional hybrid commonly spotted in downtown Manhattan. I wore indigo nail polish from a bottle labeled URBAN DECAY and for my six-week trip to Australia and New Zealand I had packed exactly one dress, a sky blue tailored tank dress, fitted but not tight. On my second night in LA, Kelly had plans and I called up another college friend who took me to 80s night at a gay club where the bartender filled each of my four vodka-sodas to the rim with pure vodka. The next day I was hungover, decimated; Kelly had planned a special night out, some rooftop party impossible to get into, super VIP. She was dating a talent manager whose clients included Rod Stewart; he had connections, had arranged it for us. I lounged all day in her Beverly Hills apartment listening to Luscious Jackson's *Fever In, Fever Out*, drinking water and praying to recover from the vodka. When she returned from work, Kelly had shopping bags weighing down both arms and a look of horror on her face.

“Oh my God I only have forty-five minutes to do my hair and makeup!” she said. She’d tried to get a make-up artist at a department store to do her makeup, she shopped there all the time, but the woman had refused unless she bought something. Arrrgggh!

She rushed into the bathroom with her bags. Now I felt a little horrified. I was already in my sky blue dress, which had taken ten seconds to step into and zip in the back. Suddenly I realized what made an Urban Outfitters dress look cheap, the little threads poking out from the seams, the washed-out shade of blue. But worse, aside from lipstick and my painted nails, I did not even have any makeup with me. I did not use makeup, nor understand how to use it. Unless you were on TV, at your wedding, or preparing for a photo shoot of some kind, I considered a full face of makeup overkill, trying too hard, even sad. Lipstick was all I had ever needed to feel maximum pretty. But I was in a different land now.

I smeared my lips with Fetish by Mac, slid on my black platform sandals, and was ready to go. My face looked plain and bare. What I relied on, and what was usually enough, were my legs, a pretty face, and the long blond hair. In downtown New York I was pretty enough, and just barely thin enough, to cross most thresholds. But in LA I was frumpy, ordinary, and the city was criss-crossed with velvet ropes to keep out people who couldn’t even bother to try.

Six of us sat at a fancy restaurant—Kelly, her celebrity manager boyfriend, two of his friends, and a duplicate of Kelly named Gina. Gina and Kelly hugged like they knew and liked each other well. In order to show my appreciation for this expensive red wine, the exclusive rooftop party, I prepared to smile through my hangover, and to make interesting conversation. I asked the talent manager who worked with Rod Stewart, “Do you ever feel, working with famous people, ‘Oh, I could do this,’ do you ever wish you were the star?” The talent manager slowly shook his head no with a smug smile and replied, “Absolutely not. No, no, no. Never in a

million years. I cannot tell you how insecure Hollywood stars are. They spend their days worrying what people think of them. Even Rod Stewart. Totally insecure. I'd rather take their money and enjoy my life."

Under normal circumstances I would have guzzled wine until I was having fun, but the hangover trapped my head in a vise and from the beginning it was a night I was going to have to get through. Dinner was manageable, but it was going to be a long one. We were going into our third hour at the table when the maître-de approached Kelly's boyfriend, murmured something about needing the table for the next party. The boyfriend vaulted to his feet.

"We are enjoying our wine at the end of dinner, and you rudely rush us out?" he boomed. There were more words between them, and then a complimentary bottle of red wine delivered to our new spot standing at the bar.

I stood with Matt, the man they'd brought to even out the numbers and to potentially pair off with me, the bisexual girl with the baggy blue dress and the boyfriend in New York. The truth is I wanted to fit in in this version of LA. I disliked these men and Gina was kind, pleasant to spend an evening with, but her gaze was trained on the men. I saw she'd chosen a life of reliance. But something in me wanted them to like me, to find me worthy of this expensive dinner and rooftop party for special people. I also did not want to embarrass Kelly, who had been so kind to include me, and to reflect well on her. I didn't usually have to work so hard, but the forward elements of my personality were my subversiveness and my booksmarts, and with this crowd I had to search around in the smaller pockets.

The bar was busy and jostling. Matt suddenly looked at me accusingly.

"You just spilled wine on me," he said.

I looked at my steady glass in my steady hand. I had not spilled wine on him. Certainly I hadn't touched him, and my wine glass still contained wine. I had been sipping my wine slowly, each sip a needle to the brain, and he was sloshed. But I knew, whether or not I had spilled or caused him to spill, that I was supposed to shoulder the blame, to beg him for forgiveness, maybe grab a napkin and pretend to wipe off the patch of pink soaking into his dress shirt.

But I hadn't spilled the wine. And so I said so.

He regarded me with disbelief.

"Yes you did," he challenged. "You spilled wine on me."

I knew what he was doing. It was a classic power move, a cue for me to perform subservience. I had the usual choice. The moment would pass quickly if I gave him the response he had solicited. Was I going to be the kind of woman who demonstrated how well trained she was on cue? Or was I going to be the kind of woman who made everyone uncomfortable, who risked relationships, to stand at eye level with the men? I really did want to get along. But I understood what an apology cost.

"I didn't spill wine on you dude," I stated with finality. I planted my feet and prepared for blowback. He looked astounded. I glanced over at Kelly and wondered how she would hear about this. What she would be asked to carry after I had refused. *Your friend's a bitch who spilled wine on me, or thanks for bringing the lesbian weirdo* and Kelly left with the burden of response. Luckily, my wine-compromised companion managed to move on without an apology from me. Another kind of man wouldn't stick around to talk to a woman who'd denied him what he'd asked for.

My last day in LA, after Kelly had gone off to work and we said our goodbyes, I opened her closet and pulled out a dress a similar blue as my dress, but this dress had structure, the fabric

was silky and thick, and no tiny threads poked out of its seams. It was a size S, too small for me with my wide hips and bustiness, but I could still try it on. The material stretched to fit my body, with one zip my torso took the shape of a subtle hourglass. This dress was shockingly flattering, even if in New York it would have been considered trashy for being so small and so tight. It was so short that if I bent over you could see my entire ass.

In this dress I walked to Rodeo Drive and pretended I belonged there. In this dress, in my youth, with that slash of Fetish, I did belong there. Shopkeepers treated me a certain way. I could be this if I wanted to. I saw the perks that came with it. It was nice to feel them for a day. But to be in the world like this at all times would require making apologies to a lot of men for a lot of wine I hadn't spilled. In the afternoon I shed the dress, hung it carefully on its hanger, realigned it on the rack, dressed in my travel clothes, some floppy black pants and a fitted t-shirt, and hailed a cab to LAX. Away I flew.

17.

When I was young and stopped for breaking driving laws I never dodged a ticket. I experimented with crying, begging, acting annoyed; police wrote me slip after slip. They ticketed me in a suburban speed trap one month after I'd gotten my license, pulled me over for "looking suspicious" while driving three minutes from my home; piled points onto my license over the many times I was pulled over on Route 2 between Boston and Western Mass.

Then something changed. I exchanged my series of sedans for a minivan when my third child was born. I drove my new minivan over that invisible border, entered middle age; a record flipped.

I was pulled over on Rt 6 from Provincetown to Boston on the section that I knew was heavily policed. The speed limit was 40 and I was going 60. This was a trip I made dozens of times and I knew where the speed traps were. I had been stupid to speed, and I slowed to the curb, awaiting the fate of an astronomical fine.

The officer was a young white man, handsome. I smiled calmly at the officer and pretended to be happy to see him.

“Is this your first time on this road?” he asked.

“No,” I replied, not taking the way out he’d offered me.

He walked my license and registration back to his cruiser and I glanced at the expired inspection sticker on the dash, wondering how easily he could spot it from standing outside my window. Then I returned to my breath. For some reason in these moments I had never had to struggle for stillness.

When he returned he announced that my registration had expired. Also, there was a hold on my registration because I had unpaid parking tickets in Brookline.

“I had no idea,” I said truthfully. I involuntarily glanced at my expired inspection sticker, expecting him to mention it next.

“According to the law, I am supposed to confiscate your vehicle,” he said.

“Oh my God,” I said.

“But I’m going to let you off with a warning.” He handed me a slip with all the warnings and no citations at all. He smiled and smiled as I thanked him profusely. Then I drove away in shock. No one I knew *ever* escaped the Rt 6 speed trap without a ticket, but this was beyond.

My friend Ricco had once been pulled over on this road after leaving my house in Provincetown to drive back to Boston. He was driving a truck he had similarly forgotten to re-

register. He was brown-skinned. He called me to come pick him up on the side of Route 6 after they'd confiscated his vehicle. He never did get that truck back; it would have cost him more to deal with the fines and storage fees than it was worth. I thought about this as I drove my unregistered, uninspected minivan back to Boston, safely under the speed limit. For now.

In that minivan I was pulled over 4 times in a little over a year for legitimate violations: once for speeding on Centre Street as it curves towards the VFW Parkway; once for taking a right turn on red that was clearly marked NO TURN ON RED; and once for an illegal U-turn.

Warning. Warning. Warning.

"Do you live near here?" asked the officer, an older Black man, after pulling me over for turning right on red.

"Yes," I said. "About two blocks away."

"Are you new to the neighborhood?" he asked, offering me a way out, but again I didn't take it.

"I've been here about two years," I said. I'd stopped at this light a hundred times. I'd turned right on red because no cars were coming and I didn't feel like waiting.

He faltered, and then said "Well, that's not very long. I'm giving you a warning, but next time you'll get a ticket."

"What is happening," I said aloud, driving away with my written warning now on top of a stack of written warnings in the glove box.

"White privilege," everyone said, and this was true. But I'd always had white privilege, and I'd always gotten tickets.

What was new was the minivan.

But there was something also new: it was the way I could smile now at an approaching officer, how I now understood how to be calm. I could be calm now because I no longer lived with the low-grade, constant expectation that I must be ready to defend myself while alone in public situations. A police officer sees a middle aged white woman, a gray minivan with multiple car seats, and they see a woman successfully fulfilling a role society works to uphold and reward.

You see why I have to speak back to a man on a corner. Privilege is a shield and is it also a weapon. I didn't always have the weapon, most women don't, and so now I'm obliged to wield it.

I don't mind being the holder of this weapon. I don't mind at all.

18.

When my wife and I prepared to divorce we were obliged to hate each other for a while. It was the only way to separate, and we both knew we had to eliminate the ingredients that combusted when combined if we wanted to be happy. The truth is we liked certain things about the other very much. But there were hurdles in our arrangement that we could not clear.

"Why don't you *ever* water the plants?" she asked, her exasperation as much of a surprise to me as the question itself. I'd never given the care of her plants a single thought.

She had a leggy cactus-like plant that I loved. It spilled out onto the windowsill, its forked legs spikey and curving. She'd collected a few little plants that thrived, their size unchanging, in small containers, and some larger, delicate-looking plants that had survived her move from the west coast to the east coast. They'd been hers before she knew me, just like my

dog Roxy had been mine before I knew her, and it had never occurred to me to water them, just as it never occurred to me that she would walk the dog unless I asked her to.

“Aren’t they your plants?” I was confused.

She huffed. What she wanted was for me to start watering the plants. But because of that edge in her voice—the edge that carried all of her frustrations with me to the same pool where festered all the things about me she found insufficient—I vowed to never once water a single plant for the duration of our marriage. Unless she asked. Nicely. Which she never did. So I never watered a plant.

After we split I bought a smaller house in the neighborhood just south of where we’d lived together. I was determined to make it nice, to do that by myself, in part because she so thoroughly believed I could not. At Home Depot, I wheeled my shopping cart towards the checkout lane past an island of houseplants. Yes, I thought. I would buy plants. So many plants. And I would water them and keep them alive in my home with its pleasing color scheme and stylist yet tasteful decor. That would show her, and more importantly, myself.

As a kid I’d been obsessed with spider plants for the way they kept throwing little miniatures of themselves off to the side. My mom kept one on the radiator in the living room. We’d started with that one fat striped spider plant, added a solid green spider plant, and soon they were dangling babies from thick, stem-like stalks. My mom explained how to clip spiderettes and plant them directly into soil, how they sprouted will full root systems, ready to be planted. I obsessively searched the basement for empty pots, scooped them full of soil from a bag my mom kept in the garage, cut and planted the babies as fast as they curled outward into shape, three spiderettes to a pot.

I'd forgotten how much I'd enjoyed doing this, nurturing these brand new plants, giving them an environment in which they could root and then watching them flourish. In Home Depot, I chose two spider plants for old time's sake, and then experimented with the rest. I picked up what looked nice to me—aloe, a money tree, and Alocasia, my favorite with its black-green leaves that looked like the flattened faces of prehistoric birds. By the end of the year, after more trips to Lowe's and Home Depot, I had acquired over thirty plants.

Outside, the yard behind my new house was a wild slope, ungovernable. The woman who'd lived there before me, a jeweler who had painted everything inside the house purple, had done her very best. She'd rigged hoses that reached all around the property and planted roses supported by crisscross structures of white plastic that were ugly and dirt-splashed but gave the roses somewhere to climb. She'd had a low wall of granite blocks constructed to delineate the flat space at the bottom of the yard and lined the stacked stone blocks with hydrangeas. But mostly the space behind the house was an incline, unnavigable, that she'd planted within an inch of its life because there was no way to use the precarious land other than to grow things on it.

The week I moved in I stood in the backyard, recently transformed into jungle by summer, holding a pair of garden clippers and blinking at the mess of green. I thought about the year I'd lived in a small town in Costa Rica, where everyone owned a machete and where I'd come to understand the practicality of that tool, the feeling in your hand of a problem that can be solved, and the relative uselessness of its bourgeois cousin, the garden clippers. I didn't have a machete, and so I gave up and let the weeds strangle all that was deliberate.

But inside I attended to my plants. A string of pearls died one summer after being overwatered by a plant sitter, and I mourned. Otherwise they lived—every one of them. When my ex-wife saw the Alocasia, she oohed and aahed over it, so I bought one for her and told her

what it liked: sunlight, but not direct; water, but let soil dry out before watering. Mine thrived in the corner of the living room, shooting off hollow green straws that unfurled into elephant ears, while hers browned and then expired. How had she kept so many other plants alive, through moves and drives and changes of state, but this one died?

19.

One day in March, about a week after a snowfall, I pulled open the front door and was hit by deep, hot spring. Every spring begins like this and yet it seems a unique miracle every year. This was exactly when the hot flashes began.

Not a flash but a wave, as if someone had turned up the thermostat beyond comfort in an emotional reaction to feeling too cold and the heat had just kicked in. Like I was badly blushing with a wholeness of body, a burn that comes with deep humiliation. Or the dye they push into your veins before a CAT scan, the way it turns a body into liquid heat. I could not say that this feeling was unpleasant. It was here to tell me something, to stop me in my tracks long enough to whisper something only I would know.

“Are you here?” I asked out loud.

I stepped into the yoga studio wondering they’d turned up the heat for class, and then observing my fellow yoga practitioners were somehow not suffocating in their sweatshirts and long sleeved shirts. Once settled on my mat, the heat passed. Later, lying in corpse, the final and most important pose, heat returned. A dry, invisible gush.

These waves. Storm’s on the way, I thought: I am prepared.

But when my period did not come that month, or the month after, what I found was a vast expanse of still, unbothered water before me. An unbroken surface of calm.

Then it returned, and 28 days later it returned again, and 28 days, again.

20.

The year I lived in Costa Rica was half my life ago: I was 23 and then 24, and in the middle of being alive, thinking nothing of my physical demise; if anything it was the opposite, my physical being as commanding of attention as it would ever be at any point before or after this year. Gringos were stuffed into various pockets of Costa Rica and you spotted them in shiny rental cars on their way to Tamarindo or the cloud forests of Monteverde, but in the sugar cane mountains where I lived a blonde-haired gringa was an anomaly. I lived with a family in the last house down the long road, the one road in La Victoria, and when I walked from the house to the center of town, from every house erupted the greeting, “Teacher!” Because I taught English to every child in the first, second or third grade, over a hundred of them altogether, I knew every child in the town, and thus almost every family.

I had American friends scattered around the country, each one alone in their own small town, teaching in their community elementary school. Every week or two we traveled on buses from our different corners of the country to meet up in the city of San José or the beach town of Cahuita. When I left La Victoria and the men around me no longer saw me as a teacher of their children the greetings I received were different. In La Victoria I was an excitement, a celebrity; in the city of San José, the feeling was one of being tracked. Even up in a ponytail my gringa hair was a beacon for attention. A steady hiss on every avenue: *Macha, machita, tss tss*. If I walked

alone in the city I could expect the sudden arrival of a man's breath on my neck. If someone touched me I was prepared to shove them, then deliver a glare that dared him to do it again. Combined with the power status of being American, my confidence protected me, but walking from the bus station to the soda to meet my friends with my hackles up turned me cagey.

I never learned a single thing about how women in rural Costa Rica managed their periods. I had been advised to pack all the tampons I would need for my entire year of teaching. When my parents came to visit me halfway through the year, we booked a trip to Arenal volcano and other nearby stops, riding around in a van with a few other tourists.

"I'm not sure what to do," my mom had said. My mom was a problem-solver who rarely asked for help.

How many times could we ask to stop the van without explaining a woman was bleeding and we needed something for the blood? Inevitably a woman will bleed and need help, even a woman who didn't like asking for help or admitting she bled. Finally, I murmured an explanation to the van driver and he drove us toward a solution.

Being reminded of this episode called other episodes to mind. During the middle of my year in La Victoria, I was struck by a stomach bug that left me feeling clammy and crampy. I lived in a house at the very end of La Victoria's one road on a slope of land where my host father, Rafael, farmed coffee. He'd built the house himself. The family of four lived in one room and I lived in the other, with a bathroom in between us; none of the interior walls reached the ceiling, so we were essentially living together in one big room partitioned by curtains cut from threadbare flowered sheets. It might have been an embarrassing place to have stomach issues, but Rafael himself lost his stomach loudly most mornings, and the girls had frequent, noisy bathroom visits, so a precedent had been set. Still, I needed something to make me feel better, so

when I felt well enough I took a 2-hour bus to San José to fetch my mail at the WorldTeach office. In this era before email I lived for my letters, but when I arrived at the volunteer office, Kate, the director, delivered the bad news.

“Shari picked up your mail,” she said cheerfully, and then her face fell as I expressed my horror. I had no plans to meet up with Shari. Shari lived about an hour north of Turrialba, up in the green mountains of Santa Cruz, where dairy cows grazed. I lived thirty minutes west of Turrialba. I would have to take the bus back to Turrialba and beg Shari to come bring me the awaited stack of letters.

By the time the bus delivered me to Turrialba the stomach cramps forced my throat and jaw shut. I stumbled to the Hotel Wagelia, where I regularly sat on the porch for hours with a pot of coffee, and asked for a room. I wanted to be sick in a room with walls. After an attempted nap in the fetal position I called Shari from the hotel phone and asked her to read all the return addresses off the letters and consider bringing them to me in Turrialba. “Why don’t you come to Santa Cruz?” she said. “You need a change of scene. It will do your spirit good. Get on the bus tomorrow and sleep over!”

What Shari had left out was that she and her host family were going to a school dance that night, and now I was expected to join them. Shari’s host Elsitita was the director of the school and so the dance was important to her. My stomach was folded flat by then. I felt brittle from the emptying of my body. I absolutely did not want to go to a dance in a town where I knew no one feeling like I did, but after some pressure we started off up the mountain road in the pitch dark. A vehicle approached and Shari’s hosts flagged it down. Soon we were crouched in the back of a chicken truck, squatting over the corrugated metal floor and trying not to hit our heads on the

low roof. The truck turned up a pitch-black path and stopped in front of a floodlit school sporting zone where people of all ages drank and danced to the tinny songs pumped out of the discomóvil.

One by one we leapt from the back of the truck. I jumped, and as my feet hit the earth, a great gush of blood announced itself. I was usually prepared—my body sent me precise signals, particularly the rolling of cramps, as warning—but the stomach bug had thrown me off and I carried nothing.

I asked for the bathroom and Elsitá walked me to the row of stalls for schoolchildren. I opened the door and prayed to see toilet paper, but, not surprisingly, the dispenser was empty. At my school, too, you had to carry your own toilet paper into the bathroom.

“Wait,” I begged Elsitá. I barely knew this woman, she had already extended hospitality to me, but I had to ask her for help.

Elsitá, without a word, disappeared, and then returned, stuck her hand through the crack in the door to pass me a jumbo maxipad and a wad of rolled up toilet paper, small miracles.

So in the end it was all fine, not even a story to tell—my mother found pads that day, even during Easter week, and my problem was solved by the nice school director who understood. But somehow, over twenty years later, what I remember most vividly is the strain on my mother’s face after returning to the bus from the second pulpería empty-handed, the feeling of dread and panic as my feet hit the ground. How alone in it we are when we know something dramatic is happening to our body but no one else can see it, and how hard we work to make sure no one ever sees with their eyes what is happening to us.



Ways to Tell the Truth

When I returned to my senses I found myself far over the border into memoir, with fiction far behind me in another land. How had I arrived here, on the ground of nonfiction, with several thousand words of something I had not intended to write, guided not by research and effort but intuition?

“You Are Beautiful” erupted from a subconscious insistence on the body as the story site. In it I’d established the body as a trusted source of knowledge and truth, and through this trust conjured what Donna Haraway calls “situated knowledge”: “a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges...[an] ideology of direct, devouring, generative, and unrestricted vision” (Haraway, 1988). Memoirists know the paradox at the heart of all good memoir: the more particular you are about your individual story, the more universal its appeal. I’d returned to the knowledge of the Self and its certainty, the knowledge of body.

I’d searched out the permission to write with objectivity, and subjectivity stepped forward. From this position, themes emerged on the page, some common to *The Pleasure Seekers*: Beauty as an ongoing negotiation. That self-allegiance comes at a social cost. The feminist act of refusal. An acknowledgement of my own position as it slipped in and out of power roles. The scripts we play out.

Confessional writing is a method of collecting data on what you think, and why you think it (Elgrably, 1985). This untamed autobiography prompted a more thorough investigation of story forms, considering the different allowances of memoir, fiction, and blurring subcategories such as autofiction.

You Have to Get Some Data on Who You Are

John Truby, Hollywood story-building icon and an expert in narrative design, suggests that the ultimate purpose of any story you write should be to “change your life.” There is only one method to accomplish this, he says:

Simple: do some self-exploration, something most writers, incredibly enough, never do. Most writers are content to think of a premise that’s a loose copy of someone else’s movie, book, or play. It seems to have commercial appeal, but it’s not personal to the writer in any way. This story will never rise above the generic, and so it is bound to fail.

To explore yourself, to have a chance to write something that may change your life, you have to get some data on who you are. And you have to get it outside of you, in front of you, so you can study it from a distance. (Truby, 2008)

The process Truby describes is a form of othering, which is a characteristic of both writing the self in memoir and writing characters in fiction, even those based on particular human beings. The writing of memoir requires both “getting some data on who you are” and objective analysis, via creative practice, of said data. Confessional writing not intended for an audience, such as diary writing, does not anticipate outside study, and is not necessarily interested in, and does not require, an interrogation of findings; this might be the most useful data of all for what it reveals of the writer’s more guarded thoughts.

To create a persona—a version of the writer’s self that will serve as a guide through a memoir—is to take the “data on who you are” and through self-othering create a version of the self to exist on the page. This other self must be imagined from the reader’s perspective. *What will the reader think of “me”?* is a question that helps the memoirist understand not only if she is communicating clearly, but also if she is right thinking. Unlike journaling, memoir writing for an (anticipated) audience has the effect of forcing the writer to express logically what she thinks and

why she thinks it; the writer cannot presume a reader's shared historical knowledge or systems of logic and so must provide them in a way the reader can trust.

Many memoirists consider this revelation of beliefs the point of writing nonfiction or writing in general. In her essay "Why I Write," Joan Didion expressed a motivation similar to Baldwin's compulsion to write nonfiction in order to "find out what I don't want to know": "Had I been blessed with even limited access to my own mind there would have been no reason to write...I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear" (Didion, 1976).

This exercise in transforming the self into external character is helpful in practical ways. In one way, it equalizes the author's experience of herself as a character with the characters she creates in fiction. In another way, it alerts the writer to shortcuts with self-representation or facts of her life in order to construct a cleaner or more digestible narrative. Awareness of accuracy in the process of creating oneself as a character—and memoirists often lack this awareness—yields important information for a writer willing to wrestle with her urges to invent, simplify, and warp the truth to create a cleaner, more readable, and more intimate narrative.

In fiction, the presumed distance between the author and her fictional characters creates a more permissive arena in which to address such material. When the *I* finally forced itself past the membrane of my determination to erase myself from the work, creative practice revealed that in order to articulate some of the knowledge I have of beauty privilege and the beauty penalty, my narrative required that direct line of first-person narrative voice, an unmitigated transmission of experience. As Karolin Meunier put it, "One has to observe oneself, detach from oneself, objectify oneself, while still insisting within this movement of abstraction, on having a significant voice" (Meunier, 2012, p. 10). In this way I was able to inhabit my story at the same

time I gained trust in my authorial voice, instigating the autocritical method that deploys the reflexivity available through hindsight.

Writing “You are Beautiful” forced a reckoning with my authorial anxieties around self-exposure. Had I been hiding behind a fictional project, exploring experiences too personal, or too risky, to express in nonfiction, in order to skirt judgment? Why did I consider this work memoir instead of fiction—what differentiated it from an autobiographical novel or autofiction? A joke I’d heard struck a chord: “Memoir is what you write when someone has wronged you; autofiction is what you write when you have wronged someone else.” There is a case to be made that autofiction is a reckless memoir draped in a shroud.

While the particular attributes of autofiction as a genre are disputed, a central attribute is a blurring of the line between deeply personal nonfiction and fiction. It was a term first coined in 1977 by Serge Doubrovsky, in reference to his own work, to describe an autobiographical narrative that should be approached as a reader would approach fiction: “Fiction, d’événements et de faits strictement réels ; si l’on veut, autofiction” (Fiction, of strictly real events and facts; autofiction, if you will) (Doubrovsky, 1977, back cover). Autofiction rose in the 2010s with the maybe-true novels of authors Karl Ove Knausgaard, Rachel Cusk, Ben Lerner, Chris Kraus, Annie Ernaux, and others (van Lear, 2018). It is notable that this rise directly followed the memoir boom. There exists an argument that autofiction is a workaround for writers who wish to explore their less admirable qualities, their weaknesses, without the humility expected of memoir writers. Autofiction has a long queer history—iconic queer and feminist writers from Edmund White to Cookie Mueller and Eileen Myles had been writing in this style, simply calling it fiction, for decades before the term came into use (Kraus, 2014)—and autobiographical novels are historically common among first-time novelists (Bloom, 2019). When did autofiction as a

genre begin to suggest an alternative to memoir, as a genre in which one admits one's flaws, but not really? And what are the resulting formal constraints?

Unadorned autobiography when writing about complex beliefs, including those that might not reflect well on the author, is, in contrast to the obfuscating veil of autofiction, an act of literary (and cultural) resistance (Bradford, 2010). It also calls to attention the importance of confession when approaching content that may expose an author's empathetic lapses.

In "You Are Beautiful," I confess the truth of my reproductive life and the dance it's done with my fluctuating appearance, particularly as I reach middle age. I reveal a need to be true about menstruation, menopause, and miscarriage. These expressions feel urgent, but in the act of writing, I wasn't sure why.

Eventually I will come to understand that my abandoning fiction and returning to memoir lifted a dam, and because what I'd been hoarding behind it seemed unrelated to a novel about deforestation in Cambodia and American ravers or wars or genocides, it was obviously not going to be useful to my project, at least not in an architectural sense. It appeared, I thought, as a little side project, a cleansing, something I had to get out of my system, nothing that anyone ever has to read. Just for myself, because I had to.

But of course the obliteration of my audience was key. I wrote freely because I assumed no one ever needed to know about this autobiographical indulgence.

This change of course was not, in fact, an indulgence, but the story seeking an alternate vessel to the novel shape that refused to hold it. Memoir was calling me back. If the story was required to be about my body, the story was my body. The moral of the confessional is that sometimes it takes the brain a while to catch up, and sometimes it never does.

The Pull of Memoir

My origins are as a fiction writer. I studied fiction exclusively as an undergraduate and then as an MFA student. I often set my stories abroad, in countries where I'd briefly lived. In the 90s, I was drawn to the newly emerging genre of literary travel writing and began toggling between nonfiction and fiction. Just as I grew comfortable with my authority as a travel writer the memoir boom arrived. My original draw to memoir was largely practical: while fiction was almost impossible to place in magazines, much less get paid for, creative nonfiction was in high demand, journalism still paid respectably, and it held genuine appeal to me as a professional traveler. Though I always expected to return to fiction, along the line nonfiction became my genre of comfort and expertise.

I was one of many writers riding an emergent wave. During the early part of the memoir boom of the 1990s, a spate of confessional memoirs identified an audience hungry for true personal stories. The market reflected a shift in reader interest over the next two decades: *Forbes* reported that 2013 was the last year fiction titles from commercial presses outsold nonfiction titles, and subsequently fiction sales steadily declined, while the sales of personal nonfiction titles grew (Rowe, 2018). (This trend saw a reversal beginning in 2022 [Curcic, 2024]). There were clear material rewards for writing autobiographically. The personal risks were also clear. "Don't blow up your life for a byline," warns writer Estelle Erasmus in a "public service announcement" on the *Brevity* blog in 2020. She writes, in response to what she argued was a trend in advancing one's writing career by mining one's marketable personal histories:

If you broke the law, faced down a cop, stole money, betrayed your marital vows, or played a prank on someone that ended with tragedy, why would you want to advertise that? It can't possibly benefit you or your family. People will get mad, and may want revenge. Whether they send your essay to the cop you proudly thwarted, testify against you in a

child support hearing, or take action to have you pay what you took back to society, think twice about writing about it.

Instead: If you've done something that shouldn't be publicized and you are compelled to share it with the world, write it into a novel. You will get points for imagination, even if it is the truth. (Erasmus, 2020)

In contrast to Erasmus, I believe that any topic, no matter how revealing, can be borne by craft. It's tempting to dismiss Erasmus's argument as cowardly—isn't the whole point to tell the truth?—but it is an unavoidable fact that writers cause harm by writing carelessly about others, or about sharing family secrets, without considering how craft and story choices will impact real lives.

A case of a reckless memoir is Julie Powell's 2009 *Cleaving*. Powell rose as an early blogger, amassing a huge following by setting a goal to prepare every dish from Julia Child's *The Art of French Cooking*. Powell's blog became the basis of the charming film *Julie & Julia* starring Meryl Streep and Amy Adams, which won Powell an enormous fan base. In the film Julie's husband is played as supportive, encouraging, loving and sweet, an all-around nice guy. This is not necessarily an accurate portrayal, and I expect Julie had little say in the Hollywood translation of her husband's character; regardless, it set the stage for the public's reaction to *Cleaving*.

Powell's second memoir is a chronicle of her marital infidelities while simultaneously taking lessons in the art of butchery (Powell, 2011). Her tone revealed little regret, and maybe some glee, over cheating on this nice guy for whom Powell's readers had an established affection. Even if a reader could put all that aside, infidelity is a hard enough sell without being accompanied by descriptions of animal dismemberment; *New York Times Book Review* reviewer Christine Muhlke advised "The squeamish—morally and otherwise—should read elsewhere" (Muhlke, 2009). Readers and reviewers were savage, an NPR critic calling it "one of the most

unpleasant reading experiences I've ever had" (Holmes, 2009), and public support was withdrawn; Powell died in 2022 without having published another book.

Despite Powell's questionable choices as an artist, the gendered element of the criticism in the context of coming clean is hard to ignore. The demand to be likeable is higher for female writers of memoir than it is for male writers of memoir, as Lacy Johnson writes in "On Likeability" (Johnson, 2018). Powell's persona in *Julie & Julia* took the form of a scrappy young woman with a respectable goal, and the reader cheered for the success of a determined woman on her epic culinary odyssey. The details of her sexual escapades and descriptions of a hatchet blade hitting flesh were part of Powell's life story, but they were not truths readers wanted to know. Even through a forgiving feminist lens, Powell's choices were failures of empathy and craft. She'd repelled the reader both from the story and from her as a character—which of course meant the author herself. I suspect *Cleaving* may have been a case of blowing up your life.

What can we learn from listening to the rare woman who has somehow achieved public recognition while living shamelessly, recklessly filterless? Female writers have long received harsh criticism for their confessionals, and yet confessional writing continues to be a genre associated with feminism and women writers (Fournier, 2021), its formal unruliness valued for its norm-upending potential to hold authentic female voices (Felski, 1989). "You Are Beautiful" was an attempt to write in opposition to this imperative to be likeable, but not entirely: How can I discuss, for instance, the details of menstruation, miscarriage, and at times feeling beautiful, without alienating a reader who is disgusted by bodily functions or offended by vanity? Audience only comes willingly. What you write must contain an offering (Gornick, 2001, p. 15). An offering can be made through craft. Sometimes a story really is too much, and you really should be selective. Sometimes you can only tell a story by leaving most of it out.

Nick Flynn managed a more sympathetic account of infidelity in *This is the Night our House will Catch Fire* through craft, choosing sparseness of detail about his marital affair and his marriage, a narrative timeline that breaks with chronology and keeps the reader alert, and the graceful appearances of self-analysis (Flynn, 2020). Powell failed, in *Cleaving*, to sufficiently withhold; she asked too much of the reader (too much sympathy; too much complicity; to behold too much deeply personal information) without considering the reader's sensibility, falling into the category of memoirs critic Michiko Kakutani disparaged in the *New York Times*:

lesser efforts [of memoir are] propelled by the belief that confession is therapeutic and therapy is redemptive and redemption somehow equals art...[but] candor and self-revelation only become literature when they are delivered with hard-earned craft...the exposed life is not the same as the examined one (Kakutani, 1997).

Sometimes personal truth *must* come in the form of memoir, as in the case of Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*, which serves as a life successfully exposed and examined.

The Kiss (1997), Harrison's fourth book, is a short memoir detailing the author's 4-year sexual and romantic affair with her biological father, whom she met as an adult. She had already told this story as fiction in her first novel, *Thicker Than Water* (1991). She continued to produce fiction with themes of abusive father-daughter/patriarchal relationships in her second and third novels, *Exposure* (1993) and *Poison* (1995). Harrison received tremendous backlash for publicizing the truth of her active participation in an incestuous relationship. The misogyny operating at the heart of the personal criticism persists in current discourse about memoir.

The Kiss is an artistic success, an engrossing narrative containing almost no details of her physical relationship with her father, a masterful demonstration of withholding. Harrison lingers on one physically intimate act only: the first time her father kissed her and crossed the line from paternal to sexual. This kiss, as objective correlative, stands in for the sexual content too

transgressive for the page, and for the continued confusion, disgust, powerlessness, and longing that defined her experience as a daughter. It's tormenting to not have access to the details, but tormenting the reader is sometimes the wisest of moves.

Despite her conservative approach, because of the shocking nature of her acts and her presumed complicity, and because it was an early volume in the new memoir canon, Harrison was repeatedly interrogated about her choice to write this story as memoir, especially since she was an established writer of fiction. Attacks, many of them personal, came from all sides. In the *New York Times*, critic Christopher Lehmann-Haupt suggested the problem with *The Kiss* was its artistry:

In ["The Kiss"] Ms. Harrison has reworked the material she treated as fiction in her first two novels, "Thicker Than Water" and "Exposure." At the end of a praising review of "Thicker Than Water" published in 1991, the novelist Scott Spencer asked astutely if that novel's autobiographical elements hadn't overwhelmed its art. "Are we witnessing the beginning of a brilliant career or a bleeding soul's attempt to bind itself in a tourniquet of words?" he asked. "Can a novel ring too true for its own good?" In "The Kiss," Ms. Harrison effectively reverses the terms of this question, and makes you wonder if a memoir can ring too artistic for the truth.

(Lehmann-Haupt, 1997)

Harrison had no way to win. The book critic at *The Washington Post* declared *The Kiss* "slimy, repellent, meretricious, cynical" (Yardley, 1997). The reviewer at *The Wall Street Journal's* suggested, using her grandmother's admonishment to her grandchildren when they spoke of things they shouldn't, that the author should "hush up" (Crossen, 1997). Incest was permissible subject matter for fiction, but as a true story critics questioned her motives repeatedly: "Just because she wrote it doesn't mean she had to publish it" (Wolcott, 1997, p. 33). Lucy Sante, writing for *Slate*, was in the minority as a sympathetic reader/critic who likened the attacks on Harrison and *The Kiss* as a witch hunt (Sante, 1997).

Harrison's work and her statements about it reveal an interesting issue of creative practice: she could only progress as a fiction writer if she came clean about her own history, writing in the form of admission, confession, and personal report of what actually took place. As she told *Entertainment Weekly*, "the material itself had become more of a stumbling block than an inspiration. It was getting in my way as a novelist. I wanted to deal with it and then move on" (Schwarzbaum, 1997). Writing *The Kiss*, Harrison explained, was both therapeutic and necessary for her as a novelist: she likened the process of writing the memoir to the feeling of the Novocain wearing off. These declarations did not provoke a critical retreat. Instead critics doubled down: "The care she is lavishing on this latest 'stumbling block' raises questions of whether the author really does want to move on" (Schwarzbaum, 1997). Harrison was prepared to take the beating because the story demanded an exit. If a story wants to be written it will force its author to manage the consequences of the resulting text.

Other writers who established themselves as fiction writers, wrote autobiographical novels, and then retold their stories as memoir include Alice Sebold, who wrote the autobiography of her sexual assault, *Lucky* (1999), followed closely by a sexual assault narrative, the novel *The Lovely Bones* (2002); Tobias Wolff, who mined his own troubled childhood in fiction until finally revealing the lived experiences that inspired the novels in his memoir *This Boy's Life* (1989); and Marguerite Duras, who wrote the story of a particular love affair repeatedly in multiple genres. In the work of Duras, plot was frequently drawn from the relationship she, at fifteen years old, had with a twenty-eight-year-old wealthy Chinese banker while living in poverty in Vietnam (then Indochina). Duras "would tell the story again and again" (Haven, 2014) in fiction and screenplay form in *The Sea Wall*, *Eden Cinema* and *The North China Lover*, and *The Lover*. After *The Lover* was published in 1985 when Duras was seventy years old, "Duras stated

publicly that it was completely autobiographical—an assertion that made her a media star” (Garis, 1991).

Duras’s account of her affair changed as she grew older, and it’s notable that the most celebrated of all her works is one she wrote at the end of her life: It seems she could write most forcefully about how crucial her beauty was in the unfolding of her life once she was physically “ravaged,” as she describes her physical appearance in *The Lover* (Duras, 1985, p.3). Later, when you inhabit a different body, you can be frank about the things you held close for social reasons that no longer apply.

In contrast to the process of approaching *The Pleasure Seekers* with careful preparation and intellect, “You Are Beautiful” was produced without intention. I had not been aware that I had a story to tell, urgently it seemed, about the experience of my body. Upon first analysis it seemed my intention was to make these experiences felt in the bodies of those who have never, will never, or who have not yet experienced perimenopause, miscarriage, menstruation, IVF, and the functions of a body that are considered private, even unspeakable. How, though, did this connect to my initial project goals?

A compulsive memoir became a puzzle to assemble: what answer was I offering to a question I didn’t know I asked? I had questions about beauty and aging and my position as a writer. I’d arrived at the feet of that paradox of memoir: the more specific you are about your own circumstances and inner life, the greater the possibility of many readers finding themselves in the story you’ve told. Memoir afforded me character embodiment. As writing about the self enables writing about the other, in making my body a subject on the page, the body of Samnang and other resistant characters became possible.

Samnang and James and Caro roamed in my imaginary landscape. But this confessional outpouring and analysis was an indication that the conflict at the heart of my story had forced its own course, and what I thought was a novel had become something else I now needed to identify and follow. The *I* had taken charge, and the pull of memoir proved too strong. Instead of a novel, I had begun a record that explored my inability to write a novel and the psychological and artistic practice of grappling with a hostility between form, content, and author.

So we arrive here, somewhere in the middle of a story about a novel that resisted its writer until it transformed into the record of a story asserting its form. At this point in the plot, the writer faces what she's made, and the decision of whether she will continue to resist this alternate story with all its fresh demands. This is the part where I stop resisting.

Cambodia still called. I received word that the Whiting Foundation approved my proposal to travel to Vietnam and Cambodia, and I was going back to find out how to map the story I had lost control of. When I traveled I took notes—I never attempted story; the details were still settling, I didn't want to interfere with the unfiltered experience of my body in this unfamiliar world. I might not know what was true, but I knew that whatever truth was, I'd find it later in my body, where I hoarded my memories.

Chapter 6: Return to Cambodia

Literature and Photography

Like most colleges, ours reopened after Covid lockdown with an all-encompassing sense of desperation, with strict masking and Covid testing protocols. We were still worried about death from Covid and socially shell-shocked. Classes were held in hybrid mode, and when in person held in big rooms with sprawling seating arrangements keeping us six feet apart. I never saw the bottom halves of my students' faces except in a tiny rectangle on a screen.

Carly was a front row regular in my Art of Nonfiction class. She had emerged from Covid with curiosity and optimism, her social skills intact, when most of her peers had withdrawn into themselves. Class discussions required unusual effort to keep alive. Carly had the instinct to jump in when she sensed I felt stranded. We quickly discovered the significant overlap of our interests, especially photography, and took our conversations from class to coffee shops. Carly had gossip on everyone, even admin. I told her to read Sarah Sentilles's *Draw Your Weapons* and she insisted I listen to the *Red Scare* podcast. Carly became my Literature of Photography TA for the following semester, and when I began planning my trip to Vietnam and Cambodia we worked it out so she could accompany me as my assistant.

The theme of the project was photography. In terms of *The Pleasure Seekers*, photography united various aspects of the creative process and the content: I'd visited Cambodia in 2006 while obsessed with my first SLR camera, creating a lasting link in my mind between the land and the practice of photography, and this link formed a key element of Samnang's character and internal drive. For the proposed project of curriculum development, I'd research the setting of one photograph taken in Vietnam, and then investigate the Phnom Penh photography scene, while Carly and I both documented the research through photography. Carly had a way of

challenging my ideas with unusual grace, and our casual conversations formed part of the research.

I would travel to Cambodia to complete this fellowship, and I would also be gathering data and knowledge—the situated kind. My body in Cambodia. My feet back on the ground there. My ears attuned to a language I couldn't speak. My novice nose. I had sought a story, a novel to construct, but now I traveled more expansively, with my senses open, as I continued my quest to find a form for my story.

(A small note: Following the writing of this proposal and my trip to Vietnam, evidence emerged that Nick Ut may not have taken the photograph “The Terror of War” [Frater, 2025]. I have noted that the photo is attributed to Nick Ut, though this is now contested.)

Research Proposal

January 4, 2021

Photography in Vietnam and Cambodia
on the 50th Anniversary of “The Terror of War”

A proposal to the Marion and Jasper Whiting Foundation Fellowship
for Higher Education of Present and Prospective Teachers

Dear Whiting Foundation,

I seek a Whiting Foundation Fellowship to travel to Trảng Bàng and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and Phnom Penh, Cambodia in order to visit the site of one of the most impactful photographs ever taken on its 50th anniversary, and to meet with photographers, gallery owners, and arts educators to study contemporary photography and art production within Vietnam and Cambodia. These studies will contribute directly to a course I developed for Emerson College, The Literature of Photography, a staple first-year interdisciplinary seminar at the college. My learnings will also contribute more expansively to an international perspective in courses I teach in visual culture, creative writing, and gender studies.

On June 8, 1972, Vietnamese photographer Nick Ut took the first “viral” photo, “The Terror of War,” which was responsible for a great shift in the American perception of the war in Vietnam. I first wish to visit the site of this photo in Trảng Bàng, Vietnam, on June 8, 2022 to investigate the impact of a single photo on the community and physical space of Trảng Bàng. I will be based in Ho Chi Minh City, and there will connect with artists and organizers affiliated with the Mekong Cultural Center to learn about their initiatives with photography and the impact of photography from the war era. From Ho Chi Minh City I will travel by bus to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to meet with photographers and members of the arts community and to visit cultural centers and art collectives. My studies involve two elements of photography in the region: The photographic art produced within the region, by local artists; and the ongoing legacy of tourist and war photography in a region of great historical interest to the international community.

“The Terror of War,” also referred to as “Napalm Girl,” is a touchstone photo that we explore from various angles in The Literature of Photography. From an educator’s perspective entering 2021, I have been struck by the impact this photo has on even those first-year students who have little knowledge of the war in Vietnam, and by students’ growing interest in the region and the war as the result of studying this image. In addition to demonstrating the impact of a single image on the American view of the war in Vietnam, “The Terror of War” invites students to consider the role and responsibilities of a photographer in relation to their subjects, the emotional toll of documenting war and violence, and basic elements of photographic style, composition, and use of light to draw a viewer’s eye. Every photograph is a story—the Literature of Photography emphasizes the narrative nature of the still image—and by investigating reactions to the iconic photo along with developments in photography in and around Trảng Bàng, I hope to enrich this course with a fuller understanding of the narrative this photo contains.

With a broader view, I wish to study the uses of photography in Vietnam and Cambodia as an antidote to cultural trauma and increase my knowledge about the photographic art that has been produced in the region in the past 50 years. The Khmer Rouge slayed an estimated 90% of the artists living in Cambodia at the time of their civil war. In recent years arts organizations have emerged to encourage arts development in Cambodia, including Cambodian Living Arts, which has an affiliation with ArtsEmerson, the Cambodian branch of the Mekong Cultural Hub, and SA SA BASSAC, a gallery and resource center dedicated to curating, mediating, and archiving Cambodian contemporary visual culture. I will visit these institutions in order to study local contemporary visual arts and to meet with working photographers, both local and expatriate, in order to study their work and learn about their resources, artistic goals, and the specific practices of photography in the region.

I have been affiliated faculty at Emerson College since 2000, and in this time have won the Alan Stanzler Award for Excellence in Teaching and developed curriculum for new courses in two departments. I designed *The Literature of Photograph* for implementation in 2008, just after I circumnavigated the globe as a Visiting Professor on Semester at Sea (then sponsored by the University of Virginia). I now teach three sections of the course a year; it has become a core first-year seminar of particular interest to students in the departments of Visual and Media Arts and Writing, Literature and Publishing. The original curriculum was influenced by my very brief visits as a professor on Semester at Sea to, among other countries, Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia, where I felt acutely conflicted as a traveler with a camera. As Susan Sontag declared in *On Photography*, “The photographer is supertourist, an extension of the anthropologist... always trying to colonize new experiences or find new ways to look at familiar subjects.” As a teacher, scholar, and photographer in these countries for only a handful of days, I was galvanized by the beauty of the physical spaces, the visible traces of historical violence, and the friendliness of the people I met, while also vexed by the potential link between photography and colonization, the Othering that Sontag suggests we engage in as practitioners of photography.

A large portion of the course material of *The Literature of Photography* involves the ethical decisions artists, journalists, and specifically photographers must sometimes make. By traveling with my camera with a directed learning mission, I aim to study the dynamic between photographer and subject in an active role, in keeping with Emerson College’s emphasis on professors in the arts as scholars who actively practice the arts they teach. By renewing and enhancing my first-hand knowledge of this region of the world, I hope to offer my students an informed look at a geography that has been touched by war, and to model for them a curiosity about the effects of cultural trauma, and how photography serves as documentation as well as art that allows for discovery.

The course will address my findings regarding photography, photographers, and photographic subjects in Vietnam and Cambodia through a series of lectures, photographic presentations, discussions, and student projects on war photography and tourist photography. As I model my own learnings as both a scholar and a photographer moving through the area, I hope to raise questions that all art-makers, both professional and casual, should consider—questions each *Literature of Photography* student will need to answer based on their own belief system and their learnings in the course. These questions will culminate in a photographic essay in which each

student explores, using image and language, a topic of ethical interest to them personally. Ultimately, a Whiting Foundation Fellowship will enable me to pass on to my Literature of Photography students an increased understanding of the ethical considerations of a photographer as well as vivid and specific knowledge of contemporary art and photography in Southeast Asia.

My proposed travel budget, CV, Candidate Information Form, and two letters of recommendation are included with this letter. I thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Alden Jones





Above: me photographing and interacting with a Khmer family at Wat Phnom, Cambodia, 2006 (photos taken with permission)

This is Not a Travel Essay

Carly and I arrived in Saigon in the last days of 2022. After completing the project in Trảng Bàng, we flew to Siem Reap to meet Narin, our guide for the northern Cambodia leg of our trip.

We didn't *have* to go to Siem Reap—the remainder of the fellowship project would take place in Phnom Penh—but I couldn't let Carly visit Cambodia without taking her to the major temple complexes, and of course I wanted to revisit them, to touch the sandstone and smell incense inside Angkor Wat. I requested the coordinator throw in some activities we might not want to miss. I was not familiar with Kulen Mountain before I saw it added to our itinerary.

Narin, our guide, led us first to a cliff high up on the mountain.



What I thought might be the highlight of the excursion was its beginning. Later, when I calculated the impact this visit had on me, I was grateful to be introduced to the mountain free of suspense or anticipation. Narin was leading us towards the Valley of a Thousand Lingas.



Stung Kbal Spean, or The River of a Thousand Lingas, Narin explained, had only been open to the public since 1989, and the area around it remained unassuming—a dirt path suddenly opened to a riverbed and there it was. An explorer had come upon this significant Hindu site in 1969; archeologists determined the site's construction occurred between the 11th and 12th

centuries under Khmer kings Suryavarman 1 and Udayadityavarman 11. Hermits carved lingas, blatantly phallic representations of lord Shiva, into the sandstone in the riverbed. These squat cylinders were set into yoni, deep circular impressions surrounded by two squares, representative of Shiva's female counterpart, Shakti.

The yoni was considered the passage through which all things came to life. Conjured from the limestone riverbed, these linga-yoni carvings sanctified the water as it flowed over them; the sanctified water tumbled down a waterfall, continued into the Siem Reap River and ultimately the Tonlé Sap, purifying Cambodia's major water source.

An endless grid of yoni-lingas spread up the riverbed and down. A little painted sign forbade touching the carvings in Khmer and English. Nothing would have stopped anyone from touching them if they wanted to. No ropes, just trust.

Narin had a particular way of saying the word "linga"—a rise and a linger on the "a," so that it sounded almost as if he were singing. As he explained more about Stung Kbal Spean River he spoke the word again and again: "lingaaaaa, shiva lingaaaaa."

Carly and I stepped forward to get a closer look at the carvings. The water was clear and slow-flowing and as I solemnly considered how long water had been passing ceaselessly over these carvings, Carly said, "So. The river of a thousand dicks," and I laughed and laughed. It was true that Narin spoke mostly of the linga, and clear linga held the prominent spiritual significance. Yet the yoni turned the linga into something else. A balanced, stable structure. I interrupted my thoughts by noticing, with disappointment, I was engaging in gender binary thinking again. Must reroute and search alternate meaning, figure out a way I could undermine the binary, minimize or critique the phallic structure of the linga and separate it from maleness.

My mind wandered into the world of the novel. Narin beckoned us up the path past a collection of silk umbrellas fixed into the dirt and covering a statue of Ganesha, the elephant god.

A spring gurgled up clear water in a small, sandy pit roped off not far from where we stood. A few tourists were there with us, dipping their hands in the holy water, always respecting the skinny ropes of demarcation. It felt like the site of the beginning of everything, my mind tracing the flow to the temple complexes and the Tonlé Sap and finally the sea.



The creative machineries engaged. I considered how I might integrate the river and the carvings and the mountain and the spring into *The Pleasure Seekers*. It would be difficult to reconcile the gender essentialism of the linga-yoni binary. I continued turning over ways to undercut this binary or frame it as erroneous. But the linga-yoni structure was in essence binary: it symbolized “the merging of microcosmos and macrocosmos, the divine eternal process of creation and regeneration, and the union of the feminine and the masculine that recreates all of

existence” (Doniger, 2009, p. 494). Maybe I couldn’t write about it at all. After a few moments on this track I stopped as if slapped.

I had not even noticed the naked ethnocentrism in this instinct to impose a value so recently espoused, and so specific to my own culture, upon a foreign site I intended to treat respectfully, all while considering how to reframe an ancient act of devotion in terms of how it would appeal to a specific group of readers in my own country. *What was I doing?*

I opened myself up to a sacred place and heard its unexpected echo, an otherworldly reply, and then immediately set out to wrestle it into alignment with a current trend in Western ideology? I’d spent years of my life reading and writing about ethnocentrism in order to avoid unwittingly participating in it, but when ethnocentrism emerged from my political side, my instinct was to conform with it. Whereas my original intent in resisting ethnocentrism was motivated by respect and curiosity for the authentic possibilities of fictional representation, now I fully recognized that had been replaced by a much more base motivation: fear of reprimand.

This was all very backwards, and backwards was not the direction I wanted to take. What alarmed me most was that it had taken me this long to see something I considered within my area of expertise. I had not trusted myself; I had been wrong to not trust myself.

We stopped to buy sugar dumplings from a vendor Narin knew, and throughout the rest of the day I felt the tiles of my mind’s exterior slowly peel away and fall to the ground with a periodic clink. We passed through an archway leading up to a monastery and a large reclining Buddha.

“You go,” Narin said, waving indifferently towards the hundreds of stairs leading up to the Buddha.

“You don’t want to see the Buddha?” we asked, and Narin said, “I’ve seen the reclining Buddha, and it’s a lot of stairs,” and smiled.

Tourists stood in front of the reclining Buddha for photos. “Please don’t write on the Buddha,” pleaded a sign in English and Khmer, but visitors scrawled their names anyway on the Buddha’s lower robes. Carly and I took pictures. Back outside, monks chanted their monotone incantations. Most of the people around us were Khmer with some Chinese nationals and one or two Europeans clustering around specific sites of value to tourists. Locals made their way here to make offerings to monks in exchange for directed prayers and blessings.

“This is a place families come to pray, to rest and enjoy,” Narin said. He pointed out a network of house-like structures with wooden floors on short stilts. “Families come here and stay all day, and nap there when they are tired.” I was still grappling with the lingas and the yonis and the narrative my mind had dammed off and prevented from flowing over them. We moved down the mountain towards the waterfall.

At the top of the path down to the river’s cliff I stopped to take a picture of a tree whose roots spread out and split and penetrated the earth in every direction, a vast map of riverways atop the packed dirt. Now I was thinking of trees again—back to the beginning of the novel. When you can see the root systems, exposed as they were, you understand their mirroring of rivers. I took my last shot.

Later, Carly and I sat by the pool on the hotel roof. I scanned the rooftop. A young Cambodian mother swimming with her young son periodically begged a heavily tattooed European man on a lounge chair to come and play with the child while he ignored them both and talked on the phone. Beyond the pool, bordered in potted plants, brick-red roof after roof after

roof, and below us the noisy street. My wrestling with ideological orthodoxy as a teacher, the pressure I felt to conform, now presented itself as a meaningless exercise—I'd ignored this, my observations of the world in front of me, what I could see quite clearly before my eyes and knew was true.

This is not a travel essay. But if it were, it would contain a personal arc, and the person in the essay—me, the I—would, by the end of the essay, be changed by their experience in this place. A travel essay might be accompanied by photographs of me or taken by me, the kind that proved I was there; I might include a shot by Carly of me, emerging from the lip of Stung Kbal Spean, the River of a Thousand Lingas, appearing troubled; this visual might serve as evidence of my transformation as it was taking place.

In a travel essay, I would trace a goal, a need to understand something. I might make a mistake, or experience ambivalence; I would be honest with myself, discover what I didn't want to know as I constructed the essay.

A travel essay would contain all of this within a tight, well-paced narrative that illustrated something about the point I was making as I made it. It would resolve neatly and the reader would feel pleasure and the heft of new knowledge.

But memoir endings are smoke and mirrors. The story goes on, because the *I* is alive in the world, still cycling through all the confusion that made writing a travel essay, much less a novel, impossible to confront.

Chapter 7: Psychedelic Therapy and the Dissolution of Ego

Content warning: drug use

Ketamine Therapy as a Truth Finding Mission

During the time I'd been trapped in a desperate state of feeling beholden to a hostile audience, I considered how MDMA might lift me from the box of fog, whip through some chemical habits formed in my brain, and perhaps even help me understand what I believed. I was eager to take MDMA again after many years, and a fresh experience was likely to contribute to the content of *The Pleasure Seekers*.

While MAPS founder and director Rick Doblin has spoken of MDMA as “the most gentle” of psychedelics used for psychological treatment (Doblin, 2019), more legal barriers have existed for MDMA in therapeutic applications than other psychedelics (NeuroLaunch, 2024). I was unable to find a psychiatrist willing to offer MDMA therapy to a patient without a PTSD diagnosis, but I was able to find a psychiatrist willing to treat me with ketamine therapy, a legal practice in the United States. I needed some kind of mind-altering therapy by this point in the story. People said it worked. It was self-research on top of being therapeutic. It was expensive, but I could afford to try it a few times.

I had never been interested in ketamine recreationally (unlike MDMA). Ketamine had been around in the gay clubs I frequented in my 20s, but it seemed an anti-social drug and I didn't see the appeal. “You go into a K-hole,” I was told. Who wanted to be in a hole by themselves at a party? This seemed terrifying and lonely.

Personal engagement with psychedelic therapy shifted my attention to the therapy element and away from the pleasures and recreation associated with MDMA. If I were not in search of any kind of particular high, and with the guidance of a therapist in a session, ketamine therapy offered a possibility to work out some of the blocks I was experiencing in the writing practice. For each session I set an intention or a question I encountered as a creative block. What follows is a recounting of and reflection on the first and second sessions.

1. What is truth? How do I know what truth is? How do I know when not to trust something that seems true but isn't?

You lie down on the mat in the office. It's your third meeting with Dr. Green but your first in-person meeting. You'd imagined him much taller. Black foam goggles over your eyes and headphones over your ears. Some playlist they probably cue up for every ketamine initiate. A blood pressure cuff goes around your arm and squeezes. Doctor Green asks if you have set an intention. You didn't realize this is how ketamine therapy started, but blurt the question you most wanted the answer to: *How do I know what is true?* You might as well set an ambitious intention the one time you're free of expectation. Dr. Green plunges the drug. Anything is possible.

The first moments are terrifying. You exist but you don't, and it's not clear how you will return to your previous form. The universe is a plane. You're a point that belongs in it. And there it is in front of you, this giant, gleaming mass—the truth. The truth is instantly recognizable and just out of reach, and just as instantly you understand that the truth, that entity you'd chased, is forever inexpressible. Words and stories have never been anything other than attempts, vain

efforts. “Wittgenstein,” you say to the ghost of Dr. Green, who, somewhere far away, writes it down.

I don’t remember the rest. Just that sense of belonging but also being so small within the place I belonged. Instead of making me feel insignificant, it scraped away the silly concerns that come with feeling important. My body had vanished, but my Self remained the same. Eventually I sat up and declared, “I need to break up with my boyfriend and quit my job.”

I broke up with Austin two days later. Now the job. I was in the second year of a non-renewable position at the college where I’d taught for 23 years. At the end of this year I could either go back to teaching there as an adjunct (which I did not consider an option) or I could find a full time position elsewhere, a tenuous proposition. Then a third option had opened—the one I’d been hoping for, the tenure track position that fit my expertise—but it was instantly clear the Chair had a plan for the job that did not include me. I could spend my last year at the college I loved in limbo, resentful, with the desperation of wanting what I probably couldn’t attain, and strained relationships with the colleagues who determined my employment fate; or I could accept this was not the job for me, move my attention elsewhere, and enjoy my final year at the place that had been my home. I called a colleague to tell him I was withdrawing my application for the tenure track position and leaving the school after this year.

“Why? Don’t do that,” he said.

“I thought you were going to tell me I should!” I said. “I shouldn’t?”

“No, you shouldn’t,” he said, and so I didn’t. A few months later I would win the academic lottery and be offered that tenure track job.

2. *Why does Cambodia keep drawing me back?*

After I voiced my intention to better understand why I was so drawn to Cambodia, Dr. Green changed the music selection and handed me the headphones I wore during my session. “What’s the soundtrack?” I asked him. In previous sessions it had been a mix of classical and “yoga music” with sounds of sitar and deep, thrumming beats. “You’ll see,” he said, and soon I was water-level moving down a river in Cambodia at a steady speed with monastic chanting in my ears. It is not the sensation of swimming or traveling on a boat. It is the sensation of being physically tiny but also present without a body. Water level I sped down the river, or up, remembering how the Tonle Sap River flows both ways.

Brian Scannell, a friend from my 2006 Semester at Sea voyage, the first trip I took to Cambodia, appeared on the bank of the river. I became fixated on this. Brian Scannell! I kept saying. I hadn’t talked to him, or thought of talking to him, in many years, though we’d had a strong, and often fraught, relationship during those 100 days on the ship.

Brian Scannell! What was he doing with me on this river in Cambodia? He wouldn’t fade away. He was on this journey with me. I’d gone looking for a reason I couldn’t get Cambodia off my mind, worrying something was problematic about it, and Brian had appeared, perhaps as a clue.

A few days later I found I still had Brian’s number in my phone. We’d last spoken in over a decade. I texted him and told him he’d appeared in my ketamine therapy session, we were on a river in Cambodia together. He called me right back.

Actually, Brian told me, he had gone to Cambodia after our Semester at Sea voyage. He’d gone because of the way I spoke about my trip to Cambodia. Once, on the ship in 2006, Brian

had come to me with a red face and shallow breath, in a panic. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he said. He described his symptoms. I told him he seemed to be having an anxiety attack. He said he’d never had one before. I offered him half an Ativan and talked him out of hyperventilating. I’d forgotten all about this exchange from almost twenty years ago, but Brian spoke of it as momentous.

In Phnom Penh he visited the genocide museum S21 by himself. If you have been to S21, you know it is not a good place to be alone; and if you believe at all in ghosts, you will be swarmed by tormented spirits. S21 is a former school turned into a torture compound by the Khmer Rouge. Now a museum, it displays torture devices and chains and walls and walls of photographs of beaten bodies and faces of the accused. Brian told me that he’d gone there alone, and then returned to his shitty hotel room and had the panic attack of his life. He recalled that I’d helped him the first time he’d had a panic attack, on the ship. He called on me to help him again. He imagined me in the room with him. It had helped him.

Brian had met and befriended a painter in Phnom Penh who had survived the genocide. He commissioned a painting from him, which was the last painting he made before he died.

Brian had been a photographer and videographer when I met him. Now he was an English teacher at a Waldorf high school. He’d been developing what he called “curriculum for healing.” He taught about the Cambodian autogenocide. We used to get blind drunk together and often behaved badly. Now we discussed the ways we tried to access the spiritual world. We talked about what it meant to be a teacher.

I’d gone into the session asking what my relationship was to Cambodia. I had not been thinking about Brian at all, deciding long ago that our friendship existed only in the past, as a

story or a time capsule. I'd forgotten about that panic attack on the ship, and how I happened to have a few Ativan on hand, and how outsized his gratitude had seemed at the time.

Most remarkably, reconnecting with Brian's is trust in me, in my retelling of my experience of Cambodia, his interest in a place as the product of my stories, returned me to the audience I first imagined when I envisioned this novel, and my hope that the novel might lead others to discover Cambodia's history. I had lost my ability to connect with the original context from which the novel first emerged, an audience I imagined hungry for a story that needed to be told. Speaking to Brian, I remembered this audience, the curious, the trusting.

Typically, after a psychedelic experience, one progresses through the next few days with a fading trust of one's mid-trip revelations. But it's interesting to discover which ones stick. And this stuck: the truth is right there in front of us, but no one can reach it. You can only trust it is there, and try to get as close as you can.

Perhaps ketamine therapy offered what I asked of it: the “[amplification] of the recipient's subjective consciousness...a time-out from usual states of mind to facilitate a reshaping of self-experience” (Kolp et al., 2024) which enabled me to clarify what I already thought was true. Rather than access to an empirical truth, the influence of ketamine in a therapeutic setting opened space for a tighter synthesis of my personal, subjective truth, cleansed of obfuscating doubt. Conclusions arrived at during ketamine therapy swept away cobwebs and mitigated my ego even after my standard senses were restored. These visions were liminal experiences, but my memories of what I'd seen under ketamine were like memories of material events. I trusted these memories. I trusted my perceptions.

After ketamine therapy, I restored trust in my original intentions as a writer. I finished with a clearer idea of what I thought and what I believed. This chapter is the record of this process, a key piece of my creative practice—the self-knowledge that comes from deep self-interrogation.

Through ketamine therapy, as through the burst of unpremeditated confession, the suspension of my ego removed a barrier so formidable that its sudden absence prompted a psychological deluge. In both sessions, I'd experienced a sense of creative abundance, an endless reproductive flow. A generative energy that had been missing from the novelist's efforts had galvanized the creative process and popped up as a scaffolding for the work itself. In some ways this was a continuation of what I'd begun in *The Wanting Was a Wilderness*, in which the container for the story of how to write a memoir was formed through process rather than by following a map or plan. One might draw themselves a map—a novel plot, an outline—but that map would lead one nowhere if the land upon which one stood did not correspond to what was on the paper. Sometimes you could only write the map by walking the land.

Transformative psychological therapy is not unlike the act of confession, and confession is a common initiative feature of psychoanalysis (Jung, 1954, pp. 55-60): defenses are stripped, masks are off, the truth will out. This practice of self-attention also echoes the contemplative practices of Buddhist doctrine that encourage detachment and revision:

If the antidepressant effect of ketamine is indeed closely related to an attenuated self-focus during negative experiences, its administration might open a plasticity window for psychotherapeutic learning, in which the attributions of memories and perceptions are disentangled from the self and reviewed under a new light. (Lehman et al., 2016, p. 1233).

These experiences of ego dissolution were delivered to me in altered states—the fugue state of confessional free association, the chemical interference of ketamine on the normal patterns of the brain. Now I needed to learn how to kill my ego with my brain standing by, aware, prepared to resist.

I rattled now in the loosened shell of my ego.

Death of the Ego

March 2024. I disembarked in Atlanta on my way home from Cuba, where I'd spent spring break leading a travel program for American writers. The trip had been one of our best, the only dark spot the continuous power outages in our *casas particulares* in Playa Larga, where property owners with renting licenses had constructed as many cinderblock guest rooms as would fit on their property and overstretched the power grid. Even those hours in the pitch black, with the air conditioning stalled, the internet disabled, so black navigation was difficult even to get to the bathroom, listening to the one audiobook I'd downloaded on my iPhone for as long as the battery lasted, it felt good to be back in this place I loved, and it was not all bad to lay in the steamy blackness listening intently to a book being read aloud, to enjoy a book when absolutely nothing else competed for attention. I didn't hate that internet access was such a chore that I'd lost my motivation to sign on. I felt relaxed and happy as I maneuvered through the throngs of travelers moving between gates in the Atlanta airport. I pulled out my phone to see what I'd missed.

I strolled through the terminal while cycling through social media apps, skimming gossip and news. A thread about something happening at *Guernica* magazine, some kind of upheaval, stopped my thumb on the screen.

I had recently interviewed with *Guernica's* editor-in-chief, Jina Moore, for an editorial position; they hired someone else, but in the process I'd hit it off with Jina. While prepping for our interview I'd read some of her international reportage, including interviews with women in Cambodia—the majority of whom had kept their stories to themselves for decades—about the sexual violence they'd suffered by the Khmer Rouge during the Pol Pot years (Moore, 2015). This had been my first encounter with first-hand accounts from sexual victims of the Khmer

Rouge. I wrote her about it, we exchanged some messages, and I vaguely aspired to collaborate with her someday.

Now, in the Atlanta airport, I was reading about Jina’s ousting from *Guernica* over publishing an essay by Israeli writer and peace activist Joanna Chen (Tracy, 2024).

I stopped in my tracks in the terminal. Travelers streamed around me. I stood in that spot and I read.

This was the third coordinated attack by anti-Israel activists on a literary organization in my orbit for having the wrong position on Palestine. My opinions on Israel and Palestine were irrelevant. No cause should be fueled by anonymous coercion that carried a strong undercurrent of threat. Institutional leaders had already been personally smeared on social media for refusing to comply instantly with demands to align with the activist agenda. I’d received instructions earlier that month to read a particular statement about Palestine, in an unsigned email, before I introduced a panel I was moderating. No matter what I felt about Palestine, I could not accept the unmistakable wielding of coercion—blatant bullying—nor the uncritical compliance with it I saw from many of my peers. Within a day of the essay’s publication, nine *Guernica* editors had resigned and were all over social media denouncing Jina for “supporting genocide” (Silmi, 2024) by platforming a peace activist on the basis of her Israeli citizenship.

Confronting this news less than an hour after returning from Cuba made the shock unabsorbable. We didn’t do speech control in the United States. We didn’t boycott artists based on their nationality. We didn’t silence or demonize writers for their government’s actions (which in this case the writer explicitly decried). Freedom of expression was a sacred American belief and a core tenet of being a writer (Packer, 2024).

Travelers in the Atlanta airport continued to flow around me as I scrolled, coming to terms with the fact that my peers, in large numbers, appeared willing to trade it all in. Grown adults with professional reputations were on social media stating outright that only those with the right opinions should be permitted to speak, and declared themselves the arbiters of what was good and right. This felt familiar—like a ratcheted up version of the classroom experience in 2020. There was something uncanny about it.

All this time I'd squandered my imagination, catastrophizing the consequences of my art on my person, and in doing so, rendered the imaginative world of a gestating novel a shadowy, abandoned basement where no life could grow. Meanwhile, I'd been in the wrong house.

The binary options, to repeat each shibboleth or be cast out of the community, formed a pattern, identified by prickles of resistance forming an electric chain through memories of classroom callouts, nasty comments, fear of Twitter mobs, my inner sensor rising up on Kulen Mountain—all forming an ongoing, unspoken command to short circuit one's own reason, to abandon one's personal ethics, in order to achieve a political goal defined by a force which must not be questioned.

Receiving this latest news one hour after returning from Cuba, where I'd made so many friends who would have done anything to exist in a context where political positions were not demanded and speech was not compelled, shredded any doubt: I no longer belonged where I thought I did. I placed my hand over the cord of my parachute and peered out over the edge, wondering if there was a place to land, because I had no choice now but to jump.

In an interview with Jina after the *Guernica* event, a Semafor interviewer noted “how left institutions in the US are just burning themselves to the ground,” asking Jina what she made of that after her ejection from *Guernica*. Jina replied:

There does seem to be a kind of hardening, a flattening of nuance or complexity, or even of history. I suppose one of the things institutions are having to think our way through now is, how do we function in a space that is increasingly governed by competing orthodoxies? (Smith, 2024)

An artist functions in an unacceptable environment by disrupting it.

Hidden beneath my ego was the lifelong instinct to resist what was demanded of me. This refusal was the story, the narrative art's disruption.

Of all my attempts to guide my novel-writing practice by Buddhist tenets, I'd neglected to destroy my ego. I'd attended to my self-image at the expense of the novel's existence. I'd forced a form upon it when its logic called for something else. When a writing effort broke through with enough momentum to demand its pursuit, it emerged as nonfiction—the area of my expertise, but also the realm of truth, that stability of belief, where truth defied avoidance. I couldn't release my creative resistance until I rejected a sense of self as defined by the opinions of others. No: until I destroyed the idea of Self.

Once I pulled the parachute cord I floated downward, wondering where I would land, if I would find people somewhere I hadn't yet discovered, how lonely I would be now that I'd jumped. As I sank gently through space, testing out my comfort with solitude, I felt my ego slip out of me and descend towards the planet surface. Now I was alone. I was put a point on the plane, invisible to judgment. The trap door engaged its machineries, opened a gap as it rose, and the words tumbled out, waiting to be gathered. I removed a pair of scissors from my jumpsuit, opened their maw, and began cutting each cable. As I closed the blade on the final tendon, I lowered my lids, inhaled, then calmly clipped the cord and plummeted to my death.

Conclusion

Autocriticism offers the creative writer a particular angle for the production of knowledge: rather than separating analysis and practice or toggling between genres of creative and critical writing, it unites analysis with the knowledge generated from the practice as it takes place, creating pathways for knowledge that feed and reflect off each other. The mutual exchange between the author and her text—the novel she intended to write, which transformed into a quest to understand why it could not be written—produced an intertextual body of work, each section determined by and in conversation with the sections that preceded it, each step of the process creating the conditions and generating questions for the next. *How Not to Write a Novel* lays bare the manner in which a text was formed through attentiveness, revelation, and respect for the text and what it required, generating pedagogical tools and a model for writers as they grapple with their own process. The application of the Noble Eightfold Path as a systematic, replicable framework for writers to interrogate their ethical alignment to their subject matter offers a unique tool for writers working with subject matter that raises questions of cultural representation. Building on previous Buddhist-inflected craft analysis that instruct writers on the necessity of ego dissolution for the practice of writing, *How Not to Write a Novel* illustrates what happens when a writer resists that dissolution, and offers a map of how one writer, through practice, discovered a path to her own ego death. In my failure to write a novel, I produced a thesis with echoes Halberstam's notion of the queer art of failure: in the failure to produce the intended novel, a new approach to the project became possible via a new way of being, the resulting text a success according to rules dictated by the text itself.

Ideological conformity and artistic practice are fundamentally at odds. If morality is an obligation of art, its mechanisms cannot originate in a fixed set of preconceived ideas meant to confirm a current set of accepted values, but from deep, process-based self-inquiry; a story with a moral that seeks alignment with values originating outside of the artist at best offers a simulacrum of such alignment. This is what John Truby meant when he said a story that aimed not to “change one’s life” through “self-exploration” but to imitate another work of art “will never rise above the generic” (Truby, 2008). This thesis illustrates, through the transformation of my intended work of fiction, how artistic practice that involves personal truth-seeking under conditions of uncertainty generates new knowledge not only of the creator-self and the material in question, but of innovative creative writing architectures.

In this thesis I have explored questions of novel as form, creative writing practice, and the responsibilities of authorship. I have posed and answered related enquiries via confessionalism, analysis of the confessional memoir form, travels to Cambodia, consideration of the Noble Eight-Fold Path as an ethical tool for writers, and contemplation on resistance, arriving at the conclusion that a novel will be written when the conditions allow; by attempting to coerce a project into existence, I traced how, at each step, the coerced project ultimately rebels. In the case of my attempts to write *The Pleasure Seekers*, paired with a refusal to abandon the original idea, an unplanned eruption of confessionalism indicated a demand to return to the nonfiction genre. This led me back to my expertise but also demonstrated the urgency of the *I* as the cite of artistic authority. Art emerges not from the performative illustration of correct positions, but from a writer’s willingness to follow her deepest intellectual and creative instincts—which, as any artist knows, will likely lead one into crevices and corners that are dark and unknown and even personally dangerous places one is not supposed to go.

By the time I reached the end of this study, writers began speaking more publicly of the compromising of artistic values during the era in which I conducted this work. In an essay on Philip Roth for the *Yale Review* in June 2023, novelist Garth Greenwell wrote that

Art has a value that seems to me moral, and, like my students, like much of what we've taken to calling The Discourse, with its purity tests and cancelations, its groupthink and dismissal, I want to think of art making as an activity with moral implications. More, I want to place it at the heart of one way of striving toward a moral life, by which I mean at the heart of our attempt to live flourishingly with others, or at least bearably and with minimal harm. The problem is that, in much of our discussion of art, I think we've made a mistake about what moral engagement *is*, and so what art's role in it might be (Greenwell, 2023).

Continuing this conversation with an interviewer for the *Yale Review*'s Back Matter Substack in 2025, Greenwell addressed the limitations of such mistaken moral engagement:

I'm interested in the kind of moral relations, the kind of thinking, the mode of existence, that can happen when we try to cultivate interest instead of judgment. I'm intrigued by what happens when we resist certainty, especially the certainty of apparently self-authorizing responses like outrage or disgust" (Greenwell, 2025).

Through sustained attention, this thesis demonstrates what becomes possible when an author and her text resist the epistemic foreclosure inherent in a morally stringent context which shuts down curiosity before questions have even been formed. Morality cannot be outsourced; it must be integrated within the Self. Greenwell's warning against outrage and disgust applies to the reader as well: these are modes of rejection, a refusal to engage, when art requires willing engagement. The capacity for pattern recognition, logical analysis, and systematic integration of information are tools essential to novelist, reader, and truth-seeker guided by morality; as I learned by writing *How Not to Write a Novel*, and as this study illustrates, these tools cannot be compartmentalized or selectively applied without injury to the artist, the creative process, the reader, and the art. Alignment with one's beliefs is a function of personal study, reality testing, questioning, and

faith in a trusted framework. It does not arise from placing limitations on one's beliefs or imagining a hostile audience the artist must please.

Social and professional belonging mattered to me. When I made efforts to conjure an alternate context to the one I'd built, the space was, for a while, blank. Finding, at the time I began this project, no other option but to work within the restrictions I felt as a novelist, I pushed against the constraint of the novel until it split and its contents spilled, demanding a form that could hold them with care, in ways they could root. As a writer unable to abandon her mission, fear of aloneness gave way to my core identity as a truth-seeker and form followed.

A truth-seeking artist is a clearer of cobwebs, a cleaner of window glass, a burner to the bones, a mask snatcher—hopelessly devoted to clarity and truth. That I could not abandon my artistic mission relates to my stubborn attachment to trust in logic, reason, and truth; these elements of personality likely contributed to my early development as a writer. When cultural orthodoxies compel an artist to create under the conditions of predetermined conclusions, the artist is forced to trade in nuance, narrative sophistication, and any possibility of the effortless creative flow that animates good art. Under the conditions in which I engaged *The Pleasure Seekers* as a novel, I became a novelist whose medium bluntly refused her from the start, and by shifting to nonfiction, the genre of personal certainty and authority, a *novel form* was born from resistance.

The metamorphosis of *The Pleasure Seekers* into *How Not to Write a Novel* creates new knowledge about how narrative form itself becomes its own manifestation of ideological defiance at the same time it becomes the site of creation. What began as a work of straightforward cross-cultural fiction became a four-year autocritical excavation of the story behind the creative blocks I could not at first identify or understand. Fiction gave way to a

nonfictive progression through multiple methodological approaches through often unexpected forms: analysis of my own creative flailing, analysis of *American Dirt* as a cautionary tale, ethical applications derived from the Noble Eightfold Path, revelatory notes from ketamine therapy sessions, and the photographic anti-travel-essay. The pivot from novel to multi-genre work became a declaration of the artist's trust in herself and the location of my authority over my material without caveats. Conventional craft solutions had collapsed; as I released the fears associated with external factors and the impact on my person, new craft solutions presented themselves.

At the end I find myself at the beginning, back to Flaubert's insistence that the (wo)man is nothing and the work, all; but in contrast to Flaubert's retreat from biography, my creative process required a more radical self-erasure: only by destroying the *reader* could I freely imagine in the manner that art requires. The resulting work exists as the record of my creative process and a case study of an artist meeting the requirements of her art: *How Not to Write a Novel* is the story of a psychological evolution, forced by the text itself, as a map to move its author from creative paralysis to creative expression in an era of competing orthodoxies.

The prickles of external coercion and self-doubt will continue to afflict aspiring novelists; and also, art finds its way. The truth will out. Close your eyes. No one can hear you or see you or smell you or behold you in any material form at all. You are bodiless, a point of consciousness on an infinite plane and truth is right there, just out of reach and inexpressible, but perfectly, utterly clear. Now what do you know to be true?

With the question of truth approached—with appreciation for the fact that truth is inherently unreachable—the novelist may begin.

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