

# wordswork

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## *Editorially Speaking*

-Sundy Watanabe

An unseen master electrician slowly brought the house lights to half. As the lights lowered, the babble of an almost-full Austad Auditorium gradually hushed. Reverently, expectantly, the audience waited for E. L. Doctorow to take the stage.

Glancing around me I could identify the silhouettes of English professors and students, Writing Center faculty and assistants. "Right," I smiled. "This is my crowd." And then Doctorow was at the podium. The man himself.

Maybe others are more sophisticated, more blasé, about being in the company of writers. 'Yeah, sure. I met Him/Her last year at ...' they drawl, and swagger/slouch away with their hands in their pockets. But me? I am still very excited to be in the company of master word crafters, those who make words work.

When I came to the Doctorow Convocation, I already had this issue of *wordswork* in mind. I knew that I wanted to explore autobiographical voice: fact and fiction in personal essay and poetry. I anticipated that Doctorow would give me a wonderful line to quote. He didn't disappoint me.

He began by describing of his own childhood: neighborhood, family, friends, the sensual experiences of growing up in Brooklyn, New York. Then, working from his own history, he created a story "not verifiable from the real world, but true" through the voice of *Billy Bathgate*. And voice, Doctorow says, is the "line that precedes invention."

As the words rolled out, the images piled one on top of the other until the character of Bathgate was real.

From all different levels of experience, writers continually work to find that personal voice which grabs an audience. We use journal work, invention, poetry, life experience--real and imagined. Someday, maybe we'll find our own voiced character, our own *Billy Bathgate*.

## Hemingway Hatches an Egg

-Carina Woodruff

Dr. Seuss, a famous author of children's literature, wrote a book entitled *Horton Hatches an Egg*. The story is about a selfish bird who did not want to have to sit on her egg during the long, but necessary, incubation period. That foul piece of poultry tried to convince everybody she came across that they should sit on her egg so that she could be (so to speak) as free as a bird. Finally, she was able to trick a very kind white elephant, by the name of Horton, into undertaking the task. She asked Horton to watch the egg for a little while. She said that she would return in a few days, but she didn't come back.

There were many times that Horton wanted to get down from his perch, but he didn't. He stayed with the egg, not worrying about what happened to him. Horton was laughed at, ridiculed, and exploited, but as he put it, "I meant what I said ... And I said what I meant. An elephant's faithful one hundred percent."

Horton became very attached to the egg, and as the day that the egg was supposed to hatch drew nearer, Horton's anticipation grew. Finally, the egg hatched. The real surprise was that the offspring was not a bird at all.

Well, it was a bird, but not one that looked like any of the birds in those big almanacs. This bird had a trunk, and a face that closely resembled that of Horton's.

My introduction to the works of Ernest Hemingway was very much like the introduction of impending motherhood to that poor bird—I didn't want to have anything to do with it.

I was finally forced to read one of Hemingway's pieces when I was enrolled in English 308, Critical Approaches to Literature, and I was terrified. I don't know why I was so scared. Maybe it was because Hemingway, Thoreau, and Emerson are held in such high regard and I have never felt that I am extremely intellectual, or maybe I was just afraid that I would be forced to think.

Whatever the case, I remember sitting in class making a list of things that I would have rather been doing instead of reading Hemingway's works. This list included: Having my teeth pulled without any pain killers, spending my weekend with Tom Jones in numerous Las Vegas night clubs, or, finally, being slid down a long banister filled with tiny razor blades, after which I would be dipped in flour, and then thrown in a balling tub of alcohol, left to fry like chicken.

After a while I finally realized that I had avoided it long enough; I had to complete the assignment. The piece that we were assigned to read was "Hills Like White Elephants." After I had finished reading it, I was astounded. Why had I been so scared? The piece was pretty clear. It was pretty stupid, and boring, but clear. The story was about this couple who had stopped for a beer before boarding a train—big deal! You can imagine my surprise when the instructor of the course stood in front of the class and exclaimed, "It ('Hills Like White Elephants') was about abortion! Did you get it?" I was dumbfounded. I wondered if we had read the same piece.

After that horrible experience, I was even more wary about reading anything by Hemingway. Then it happened again. I was assigned to read the same piece for another class.

I kept putting it off because, not only did I have to read it, but I had to write about it also.

Waiting until the last possible moment, I finally started. This time I decided that I would read the short biography that was included with the piece (anything to stall). As I was reading the biography I came across an interesting quote from Hemingway himself, "The dignity of the movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water."

This quote really struck me as being interesting because I have always had an admiration for writers who were effective in their use of double and underlying meanings. With this in mind, I once again began reading "Hills Like White Elephants." It was amazing.

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I really enjoyed the story, and I was surprised that I had not seen all the depth and hidden meaning in it when I read it the first time. I was so excited about being able to understand and appreciate Hemingway's story that I wrote page after page of text in response to the piece, but then when it came down to shortening it to a one-page critique—I couldn't do it.

That is when I realized that I need to incorporate some of Hemingway's techniques in my writing. It is not up to me to describe the whole story. I should present the facts as sparingly as I can and let the reader come to his or her own conclusions.

The other day as I was reading *Horton Hatches an Egg* to my three-year-old nephew, I realized that Hemingway was my own personal Horton. I had not done any personal writing for quite some time. I work in the Writing Center, and being around people that are so original, and so creative, can really be

discouraging. I was constantly comparing my work to theirs, and quite frankly, mine just didn't stack up. Every time I wrote something new it wasn't any better, just bigger. It got to the point where I was writing seven and eight page essays that had no meaning.

I was frantically trying to put together a piece that I could submit to *Metaphor* when I realized that no matter how hard I tried, nothing I wrote would be good enough. So I quit. I realize now that, like the selfish bird, I was not willing to wait. I didn't realize that my writing needed to go through its own incubation period.

Instead of 'spending my spare time writing, I started spending my afternoons reading. I read a lot of novels and I read a lot of Hemingway. I read and reread almost all of his short stories. In addition to his short stories, I also read the *Old Man in the Sea* and *Men Without Women*. I began to recognize his "iceberg theory." It is prevalent in most, if not all, of his works. Although his topics are diverse, his style remains the same: not unlike Horton, Hemingway is consistent.

Because of Hemingway, I have finally started to write again. At the moment that just means that I am keeping a journal, but it's a start. The reading that I have done over the last few months has really helped me learn to focus my writing. I am more concise. I almost feel as if I am "stealing" Hemingway's style. Like Horton and the offspring, I see some of Hemingway in my own work. Over the past quarter I have really come to admire Hemingway, and I have some great advice for students who are having a hard time with his works. Just remember: He meant what he said ...And he said what he meant. An artist is faithful one hundred percent.

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**"True ease in writing comes from art,  
not chance."**

**-Alexander Pope**

## **OUTSIDE THE OAKLAND COLISEUM**

*-Lyall Crawford*

**A** Rolling Stones concert. You are standing with hundreds of others outside the Oakland Coliseum waiting for the first show to finish. A young man is entertaining the crowd. He is sitting at the top of a knoll singing and playing the bongos. Between songs he jokes with us. He eases our impatience. Soon, all of us seem to be celebrating while we wait.

Suddenly, a set of double doors to the coliseum bursts open and a small group of Hell's Angels emerge from inside. Instead of following the walkway and exiting with the others at the conclusion of the first show, these four men and two women start toward us from the top of the knoll; they cut across the bank toward where we are standing. One of the Hell's Angels kicks the young man in the back of his head. He tumbles down the landscaped bank. He and his drums come to a stop at your feet.

The young man gets up and runs away.

The six Hell's Angels have reached the crowd. They are standing directly in front of you. You look into the eyes of the one who kicked the young man, and they seem as expressionless as the eyes of a shark.

You want to say something. You want to protest. You want to defend the young man. You want to say that it isn't okay to kick people in the head. But your anger at the injustice of their behavior is quelled by your fear of personal injury or death. You are convinced that the Hell's Angel with shark eyes would think nothing of killing you.

Everything is still. The entire crowd seems to realize what is happening. Just when you overcome your fear and begin to object to their viciousness, one of the women reaches her hand across the shoulder of the Hell's Angel you are facing and puts long, painted nails right next to your eyes.

You turn your face away. You are certain no one will help you. These six Hell's Angels have intimidated the entire crowd. You step out of their way. The people behind you make a path. Hundreds of people move out of the way for six Hell's Angels. For three days you are ashamed of your behavior. For three days you are unable to look up.

# Samurai Flies

*-Gordon Platt*

It was the time of year when flies come indoors to die, those last cold days of autumn, full of madness and despair, when the samurai flies buzz and whine past our ears like frenzied Japanese zeros on miniature bombing runs. Then landing and sitting still, they wait for us to perform for them their "seppuku." And we oblige-by smearing them into black, lumpy paste, and into the next life. But I believe they are content, for beasts know when to die.

And so it seemed with Sam this fall as the season gave grudging way to winter. He lay curled on the porch and listened mournfully as the last of the leaves rattled like bones in the trees. Listened and watched and would not be comforted.

What circadian rhythms can animals hear that we cannot? What change in the world could his eyes see to which mine were blind? Sam wasn't sick and he wasn't old, and he was loved. And yet, as I watched him, it became clear that he had decided to die.

Sam had always been a self-contained, calm, moth-eaten mop of a dog. He had long, unruly black hair and one ear which stuck up straight and one which forever fluttered at half-mast. While most dogs seem to me distinctly American, loud, good-natured, no great thinkers, but at ease with their place in the world, Sam seemed to me very different. Sam was an artist and a zealot, and I think he longed to soar above the mundane. Sam had a Japanese soul.

While most dogs like Frisbees and rolling in road kill, Sam liked birds and baths and yellow flowers. He couldn't tell a dandelion from a daffodil, but he knew yellow and he was crazy about it. And he liked his baths, once a week and hot.

But most of all Sam liked birds: not to eat, not to chase, but to watch. He could watch for hours as the gulls wheeled overhead.

This fall, however, Sam had given up all his pastimes, and it appeared that he spent his days brooding about the Doberman that lived next door. It was a huge, evil thing, named Bruiser, and it had terrorized the neighborhood for years. Sam's interest in Bruiser was new and sudden, and for a time I was encouraged, because Sam's new project seemed to have roused him from his funk. But as I watched, I understood that Sam's only interest lay in trying to goad the dog into a life-ending fight.

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Bruiser had the disposition of a professional wrestler and easily outweighed Sam by half. If there was bullying or brawling to be done, the Doberman was always at hand. But now, Bruiser wanted nothing to do with a fight. The smell of death was on Sam, and it terrified his enemy. When Sam realized that the Doberman was not his door to the next life, he retreated to the porch and seemed lower than ever.

The next week Sam tried a different strategy and took to lying in the middle of the road. There were several near misses as drivers swerved to avoid him. The screeching of tires and the curses of passers-by became a constant refrain. But Sam didn't hear them, he was listening to the sweet songs of the Valkyrie which had come for him. I was determined, however, that She wouldn't have him yet. so I locked him in the house.

This worked well enough for a few days, until Sam managed to nose his way out of an attic window. I came home just in time to see him launch himself toward the ground thirty feet below. He might have seriously damaged himself this time, but his fall was broken by a passing troop of Girl Scouts. He



burst upon them, a bowling ball among pins, and scattered them into the gutter. Sam looked in wonder at the heap of dazed Brownies and at his own undamaged body and let out a long heart-rending howl.

That was enough. If he was truly prepared to do away with himself, the least I could do for my friend was to help him manage it with some dignity. So, early the next morning, I gassed up the car and got my .30.30 and a half dozen cartridges and called Sam, and we went south.

There is a spot in Southern Utah called the Goosenecks. There, the San Juan River has worn away the plateau, and one can look two-thousand feet straight down to the river below. That's where we were going.

We drove for hours, and gradually it became light. I reached over occasionally to pet Sam, and he was shivering with anticipation. We finally arrived, and I opened the car door and reached onto the backseat for the gun. Sam jumped out and together we walked with stiff legs to the lip of the canyon.

We looked down at the muddy, green river far below and listened to the wind in the cedars and the far-off sound of crows. Sam keened a low lament, and I watched him anxiously to see what he would do. He paused for just a moment; then, without a look back, he walked off the edge of the cliff.

It seemed to me that he stretched his legs and craned his neck to catch the air, to catch all of it, to prolong his final flight for the last few moments. He looked for all the world like a hood ornament, stretching out to meet the rushing air. I looked away; that's how I would remember Sam.

It took me the rest of that day to hike down to the river and to find and bury Sam's body. I found a slab of red sandstone for the marker and scratched on it, not the name Sam, but the name Samurai, because I thought he had earned it.

What quiet call from Nature had compelled Sam to jump? I don't know. Why do lemmings stream into the sea? Why do whales crowd onto the breach? Perhaps they all hear the same silent summons. Whatever their reasons, whatever Sam's reason--his end does not diminish his memory. In my memory, Samurai flies.

## Linoleum:

### Clean for Valentine's

—Diane Kulkarni

for be-bopping, mashed potatoes  
to "It's My Party and I'll Cry if I Want To."  
Dim lights, pink crepe paper streamers,  
me dancing slow with crazy Johnny  
but watching Liz  
walk in with home-on-leave Mike—  
(he was supposed to be mine)—  
she wearing his ring, he her red lipstick.  
Me alone with his letters,  
in the middle of *smoke gets in your eyes*.

### Used

—Josh Felix

Cold and slabby,  
squishy and square,  
Wet when you wipe me,  
Dented when you stike me,  
Feel the weight of the morning,  
Barefoot on my body.

### Postpone Disaster

—Lisa-Kim Webster

Gurneys roll faster and faster on my slick  
skin. They slow and skid around  
my corners, earasing the glow  
of my exterior, leaving me instead  
with stubborn back scuffs and puddles of  
red red blood. The sickening pool that  
smells of salt is swish-swashed away with  
citra-cell so that I smell like orange  
tributary shining new. Companion to  
walls that are mental institution blue.

## Kentucky Summers

-Donna R. Cheney

As a child.  
I thought my cousins in Kentucky  
Had an ideal life.

They had a wonderful house  
Built with its back against  
A green, tree-filled mountainside,  
And the front magically  
Perched on stilts  
To keep the floor level.

Under the house lived  
A family of pink and brown pigs.  
When she peeled potatoes and carrots  
My Aunt Ruby opened a trap door  
Right in the kitchen floor  
And fed the pigs,  
Who snorted happily.

We had to climb steps  
To go on the porch  
Where marvelous old rockers  
Waited for us  
To drink cool lemonade  
And dream lazily.

When we got too warm,  
We kids went swimming  
In the clear stream in the hollow,  
Where the water was not so deep that  
Uncle Clyde had to worry  
About us drowning  
(Though once, secretly,  
We dammed a spot to dive in).

My cousins got to run barefoot the whole summer,  
Squishing creekbed mud and mountain sand  
Between their toes,  
But when my Momma came on weekends,  
I had to wear shoes. at least near the house.

Ah slow, soft, sweet, Kentucky summers.

I did not know of stark Kentucky winters,  
Of cold coming up through the cracks  
in the floor,  
Of slaughtering pigs,  
Or of walking to school, over the mountain,  
barefoot.

## Jupiter Devouring His Sons

-Thong Ly

Warnick's face always reminds me  
of a painting by Goya, called "Jupiter  
Devouring His Sons." The painting illustrates  
a monstrous being tearing off human limbs  
and stuffing them down his throat. I only  
have one limb-my savings account-and he  
ate that too.

Warnick is a divorce or accident lawyer  
who cannot make a living. So he takes a  
course in Legal Residence 101 at a  
university. Next he sets up an office and  
lures new immigrants, who cannot speak  
good English, like my family. Then he  
promises that they will get their Green  
Cards in less than a year, legally, of course.

So here we are in a claustrophobic,  
box-like room that Warnick calls his office.  
There are not enough chairs, so my sister and  
I have to sit on the floor or lean on the peeling  
wallpaper. My brother is sitting on a stool.  
The only light source comes from Warnick's  
desk lamp and a hole in the ceiling. When the  
pillar of light strikes my brother's head and  
face, it is reminiscent of a drug dealer being  
questioned by an FBI agent. But it is Warnick  
who should be on trial, not my brother.

"You need an honest lawyer to me your  
application, but I can't me the petition without  
being paid first," Warnick begins, flicking  
ashes as he speaks. His square jaw is dotted  
with short hair. "Five hundred per person."

Since we do not respond, he adds.  
"Hey. When you think about it, it's really  
worth it."

"But we already paid one thousand  
four hundred for the---" My brother says.

"No, no, no." Warrick interrupts.  
"That"-puff--of smoke-"was the"-inhale-  
"introductory payment." More smoke. "The  
government works pretty fast. So you can  
expect an answer in less than a year. Ten to

twelvemonths," grunts Warnick, as he pushes clumps of dark hair back, disturbing the dandruff.

The following month, I receive a phone call from my brother. He tells me he has cancelled Warnick's services.

"But why?" I ask.

"I've been doing some research. It looks like this pimp is over-charging us, as much as twenty times over. So, I called him up and told him we don't want him to represent us anymore. Warnick swore at me and told me to get our documents out before he recycles them."

"What about our money?" I whisper, and hold my breath.

"He's refused to refund any of our money, even though a month has passed and the applications have not been filed." My brother then advises me to make an appointment to pick up our documents at Warnick's den. And so I call him up.

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"So, today at 2:00p.m.?" I ask.

"Look! Do you want to come or not?" commands Warnick between coughs. I can just see his red face.

"Uh, sure." I squeak. And Warnick hangs up.

When I put down the phone, I dash out of the house to my car. I have to speed back into the house to grab my car keys. When I finally start the engine, it is 1:50. But luckily, I manage to get to Warnick's hide-out before 2:00 p.m.

When I enter the cloudy room, Warnick is on the phone, striding back and forth, with a cigarette glued to his mouth. I don't want to interrupt, so I wait outside. But since he is shouting, I manage to discern some phrases like: "Shut your trap!" and "you got the money? No. I don't wanna check from you." When the argument is over, he orders me to

get in the room. Looking at Warnick, I notice wrinkles under his eyes. The droplets of sweat from his forehead must have magnified the creases of his skin. Anyhow, he slam-dunks some papers on me and say. "Your birth certificate, social securities, etc. are in here." But as he speaks, I have to tilt my head back slightly to avoid the combined smell of smoke and booze on his breath. "And you'll receive a reply in about one and a half to two years, depending on how fast the government operates," snarls Warnick.

"But you said it would only take a year," I moan.

Warnick squints his eyes. "You need to take more English classes." He bends his head backward, pokes out his purple lips, and releases a puff of smoke.

A bit confused, I go on to ask him, "How much will you charge us for your presence at the courthouse?"

"Oh! It's included in your first payment. Yeah." He nods.

Actually, he does little, if anything, at the trial. The judge asks us questions and we answer him, while Warnick stares into infinity. Yet about a month later, we receive a letter, opened but resealed with duct tape, from Warnick. Inside is a crumpled piece of paper that reads. "Fees for attending courthouse." A bill for six hundred dollars.

As my English skills improve, I learn to go directly to the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service.) We get our paper work done there, and we don't even have to tolerate smoke in our eyes or discuss our legal matters in some dark alley.

Some time goes by before I think about Warnick. It comes to me in a dream. When all the clouds have cleared, I sight a motley crew, probably illegal immigrants. They come to America to give Warnick what he deserves: jabs, damnations, boots in the stomach. punches. I am so caught up in the dream that in physical reality, my whole body is squiggling and wiggling and making strange sounds. My mom thinks I am having a nightmare.

# Cadence

-Anne Robbins

I must be out of my mind. I mean, I've heard of keeping pace with distant drummers and all, but the moment is anything but poetic. This doesn't even qualify as rational thought.

It is 8:00 in the morning, a whole twelve degrees outside, the day after Thanksgiving. And I'm celebrating the holiday by going to the library. The lock on my car door is frozen and refuses to cooperate with the key. I've just scraped the ice from the front window with a broken scraper. My fingers are pink and white and numb. I mutter under my breath and jerk the key out of the lock. Fumbling with the house keys, I get a cup of water from the kitchen and relock the house, all the while juggling a stack of books that are overdue. They were stamped for Thanksgiving day. It figures.

Returning to the frozen blue mound of my crystallized car. I lean one hip, and the stack of books, against its icy side while I pour water on the lock. There--not bad. I have snow and water on the front of my coat but at least the car's unlocked. I refuse defeat. Score: car one, Anne one. I laugh to myself. It's important to stay ahead in a game with inanimate objects. I note that my mind won't quit even when it's cold. Exhausting.

The car door creaks slowly open. It sounds like I feel--cold and tired. The whole neighborhood is shrouded in the complete pall that descends following a holiday. Not a sound anywhere. Everyone is too full of food, friends, and exhaustion to move.

Someone up the street is starting their car with a great deal of energy, slamming doors and racing the engine. It soon passes my driveway with a shush of loose snow from frozen streets, the driver oblivious to everything but her own frozen world.

Good. At least there's one other person alive besides me. Nice to know.

Silence again. I throw my books on the back seat, start the car, then return to the window-scraping job--side windows next. My hands now look old, tired and dry. When did they start looking like my mother's? I have no idea where my gloves are. Maybe they're still being used for doll sleeping bags. Who knows. As I scrape, I look across the street to my friend's house. It's dark and still. Seven kids, the day after Thanksgiving--she deserves to sleep in. I shiver. The cold has crawled across the back of my neck and above my boots. I can imagine her curled warm against her husband. Nice. Definitely beats scraping windows.

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The side windows are done. There are drifts of scraped flakes mounded at the bottom of the glass. I decide to be funny and even scrape the side mirrors. What the heck. Maybe I'll meet someone I need to impress. They'll say, "I couldn't help but notice you scraped the side mirrors." "Be at my office at 2:00," they'll say. "I'll have to check my schedule," I'll say. I smirk and start on the back window. My mind is relentless.

A door slams at my friend's house, followed by a brief burst of child talk, then silence. Signs of life. Since he likes to cook, he'll get up first. I know her well. She'll get up once she smells breakfast. She is a good person. We used to walk and dream together. My schedule means that those days are over for awhile. She has tried to understand my return to school. I've tried to explain the pressure, the vibrancy, the exhaustion, the exhilaration.

She listens. I explain. It doesn't work. She is patient anyway. Maybe it's better that way. Maybe if I could explain it, the dream wouldn't be worth as much. For sale: one



dream. Cheap. Today, she'll probably visit friends or go shopping. A nice day. I miss days that were easy like that. Would I trade my day for hers, if I could?

The back window is finally clear, scraped in erratic patterns. Looks like a dozen miniature frenzied skiers took flight down the glassy slope. I notice that one knuckle is now cracked and bleeding. Bloodied, yet unbowed. My mind comes through again. An 'A' for effort. I wipe the blood away with my thumb.

I pry the weary door open once again and drop the scraper behind the seat, then wedge my wool-layered body behind the wheel. Car temperature: barely tepid. Clutching a frigid wheel, I back out of the driveway. The rear view mirror catches the reflected image of my friend's house. I smile to myself as I turn the car onto the icy street. Distant drummers don't like to be kept waiting.

**"Still, I must ask myself what I am doing, and for whom. Trying to battle dizzying Insecurity, I close my mind and retreat Inward ... We operate in a state above the physical, absorbed by a dream. What you do on your own scale for your own soul is all that matters."**

**--Jeff Salz from "Freaker's Ball"**

## A Season of Song

*-Gloria Wurst*

When I bought this house,  
I had no thoughts of meeting you.  
I came up here to clean the attic,  
to purge it of other memories.  
making room for mine.

I really don't know why  
you whispered from the shadows.  
beckoning me to the brittle, yellowed paper.  
clothed in worn leather,  
covered with dust.

Your quiet presence  
demanded recognition,  
commanded me to hear your voice.  
But there are many here  
and I don't know which one to choose.

On January 16th, your birthday,  
I hear a lilting soprano,  
bright with bows,  
sweet as frosting,  
weightlessly free.

Three months later, when your mother died,  
I'd choose a mature contralto,  
steady and solid,  
deepened by events that no one likes to face,  
but all of us must.

June 23rd, the baby was born  
and it was a coloratura day.  
Smoothly, swiftly, skillfully,  
you moved into motherhood,  
basking in "Bravissimo!"

October's a staccato sotto voce.  
The lines are short, the words, efficient,  
as you wrap up the leftovers of your life.  
No matter how I strain to hear.  
there is no more.

I've known you for less than one of your years  
compressed into less than one of my hours,  
and yet we moved in harmony.  
I'll grieve for what we might have shared  
in the songs you left unsung.

# Going Forward Blindly

-Charlie Cuthbertson

If I were trying to write a personal writing history that was worthy of the name I would come up with something dramatic and pretentious right from the start. For example, I could say that my mother gave birth to me in a public library during the worst blizzard of the twentieth-century, and as a result, I was sheltered and comforted by books early in life. Or perhaps I could convince someone that I had been raised by a pack of wild journalists.

The truth of it all, unfortunately, is that I turned to books and writing as a distraction from loneliness and the unpleasantness of my home life.

My parents were voracious readers, and I can remember my mother reading stories to me from an early age. There was always something to read and I have been told that I was able to read newspaper stories before I entered school.

But somewhere along the way, I became book-dependent. It has become difficult for me to imagine my life without a book in my hand or open in front of me. At some unknowable point in my childhood, I latched onto reading and writing as a way of living, and I have never let go.

My father's job took us all across the country, and we would move into a new home only to leave it within a year or so. He also travelled alone quite frequently, and when my mother started working as well, I was often left to my own devices after school. My mother felt frustrated at being left alone, and when my parents were together, they were usually arguing. All of these factors made life seem rather random and unstable. I found only a few things that I could constantly rely upon for enjoyment and escape, and books were my primary source.

At one point, our family lived on a small radar base at the top of a mountain. Every day, all the school-age kids would cram into a bus that wound down a road of twists and hills. I started to read to distract myself from the steep cliffs (I had a fear of heights), and to block out the continual noise that resulted from a bus full of students.

As the relationship between my parents began to crumble, I read to escape from them. I have a powerful memory of Frank Baum's OZ books. And at times, his characters were so real to me that I could tell stories about what they were doing at any given moment.

I also had an Aunt Shirley, who encouraged me and supplied me with wonderful books from her own library. Shirley was my mother's only sister, and I think she sympathized with me. From her I learned about Tolkien's hobbits, Bradbury's martians, and Asimov's robots. She gave me books for Christmas and my birthday every year, and entered a subscription to National Geographic in my name when I was nine years old.

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**Sometimes I would  
rather go forward blindly  
than to remember how I got  
where I am. But the memories  
come and they are hard  
to turn back.**

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I not only read constantly, but kept a running stream of adventures in my head. I made up life stories for my stuffed animals and my pets, and I led my friends on countless quests and explorations of backyards and playgrounds. I am surprised now that I can distinguish between what actually happened and what didn't. Such was the extent of my fantasies and reading.

My father was not a great talker, but he usually sent me letters or postcards from wherever he happened to be. I think this showed me in a very direct way that writing was a useful and necessary means of communicating. I don't think I would ever have learned this in school as effectively.

I suspect many other people take most of their past for granted. It happened. But as I have written, the memories and feelings have come more readily and quickly. They come and they are hard to turn back.

Sometimes I would rather go forward blindly than to remember how I got where I am. But the memories come and they are hard to turn back.

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## Is It Live

-Charlie Cuthbertson

You can hear them.  
They are captured forever  
    in boxes labeled with dates and times:  
Tapes magnetized and trapped between plastic  
reels, bent and crinkled  
Waiting to whisper secrets  
    from their dusty strips  
If only I care to listen.

You can hear them:  
The parakeet chirping and the dog barking  
mother and father saying things like  
    "Groovy"  
Comfortable and relaxed in each other's  
    company.  
brother learning to speak  
me reading Dr. Doolittle  
kissing the microphone  
    for every relative Father can think of  
mother talking with an accent  
father talking hardly at all  
me hogging all the attention,  
    singing Christmas songs  
    in the left speaker.  
father reading to me  
mother pointing to pictures of Grandpa  
telling me, "Say hello, son,  
    Say Hello."  
father's records playing in the background  
me reading comic books  
    in changing voices  
    (B'rer Rabbit and B'rer Fox)  
dad drawing me pictures  
    of helicopters and choo-choo trains  
asking me, "What rhymes with moon, son  
    What rhymes with horse  
    What rhymes with gate?"  
mom says, "Put it away now, son,  
    Turn it off  
say goodbye to grandpa and grandma  
It's time to go eat dinner."

The funny part was  
I never said goodbye and  
I never got to hear them like that again  
Because the tape was over  
And the lawyers were waiting outside  
With the whores on the porch  
Waiting to switch off the mike  
    and erase the tapes  
So I would forget and  
Be happy when the end came.

## This is the last poem about my father

-William Cuthbertson

We will be plain.

There was abortion,  
Before that, abuse.

We untangle the banners. together:  
The ones saying Welcome Home,  
The ones taunting We Know, We Know.  
We will hand them up, together.

Sitting by each other  
We'll hear what you heard,  
Read what you wrote,  
When you too were an orphan.

He confused, swore, spit, confined  
And was shy after he asked my brother  
"What rhymes with gate?  
With horse? With moon?"

We will open the beached trunk  
Of a forgotten boy  
And split the covering calm,  
Make a use for the fat of solitude.

There will be no comfort  
And you must hear what we have to say.

For someday I will kiss your quiet face,  
Your combed hair,  
Your empty fist,  
And the fury,  
The mystery,  
The spur,  
Will disappear.

I'll carry out an army coat,  
with its stretched and empty pockets.  
There will be no more mercury nightmares.

I will notice my brother finally crying.  
And a shallow ache above my groin.

(I will say  
The hardest part.  
Not knowing your father,  
Which parts are shadows?  
And which are the legs of dancers  
Connected in stitches of silk?)

# The Biographical Jigsaw: Using Fact to Create Fiction

-Charlie Cuthbertson

One of the challenges English students create for themselves is trying to understand what an author was/is like from the works he/she has produced. What, for example, can we learn about Hemingway from *A Farewell to Arms*? What elements of his own life did Shakespeare incorporate into *Hamlet*?

We know that many, if not most, authors use elements from their own lives in their stories, poems, and essays. But how far can this autobiographical prostitution be taken? Is the use of personal experience a valid means of producing fiction?

Obviously, one cannot, without great research, write of things one does not know. It would be futile for me to write about, say, quantum mechanics, or to write about the relationship between a South African man and a British woman. There would be no harm in trying, perhaps, but it would be difficult for me to create authentic characteristics about such people.

As a result, I do the next best thing and write about the things in my life that are confusing or unresolved or powerful. My family comes up frequently, sometimes I think too frequently. I have sometimes been criticized (mostly by members of my family) for writing about them so often. Elements of my "family life" have appeared in my poems ("Is It Live" is perhaps the most notable example) and in my short stories.

**I often ask myself if this is a cop-out. Am I really utilizing my creative faculties by whining about what a lousy childhood I had?**

Through the Undergraduate Literature Conference, bookstore appearances, and other means, I have been able to hear authors talk about their work. I am happy to say that most of them claim that writing for them is a form of therapy. Antonya Nelson has noted that she uses writing to deal with her fears, which not only saves a bundle on therapy sessions, but also, as she notes, is a way of putting the fear away. Of

leaving it behind.

Most of the stuff I have written comes not from fear, but from anger. Anger about human ignorance, anger about betrayal, anger about stupidity and weakness. In terms of my family life, the anger exists as a sort of numb echo, like background radiation from the Big Bang. There is nothing I can do to change the past, but writing about the pain and the anger helps me to understand it and yet, leave it behind. To stretch the metaphor, I use writing about my family history as if I were an astronomer trying to make sense of a spectroanalysis of gas or light. Somewhere in that murky entanglement lies reality and understanding.

When I write about my past, I don't deliberately intend to make it seem like a pitiable experience, thereby eliciting sympathy from any reading. I write about the past for my own benefit, and I believe I am reading if not a total understanding, at least a more complete picture of what we as a family went through. Before I started writing autobiographical stories and poetry, I used to think that I had no connection or bond with my parents. Now I feel as if we were just random passengers in a boat adrift in the ocean, and through harsh survival tactics we came to know each other and made it to the shore alive.

Recently, my brother wrote a poem entitled "This is the Last Poem About My Father." I am hoping to reach that point myself soon. As I put together the fragments of my past, like piecing together the archeological remnants of a lost civilization, I am beginning to see a form and structure in what used to be broken, razor-edged shards. When the puzzle is complete, when the fragments are joined anew, then I will feel ready to move.

Writing is a tool. If in reconnecting my own memories and feelings, I can entertain or say something to other people, I will feel somewhat vindicated in putting my family through the turmoil of writing about them. I believe every writer incorporates autobiographical details, some more than others. I don't hide my sources very well, and my writing strips away my protective layers of skin as often as it heals my open wounds. Somewhere in between is understanding and growth. Writing gets me closer to the stability of that middle ground.