

WRITING AS DISCOVERING : EXPLORING CREATIVE NONFICTION

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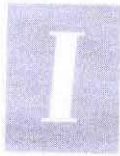
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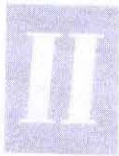
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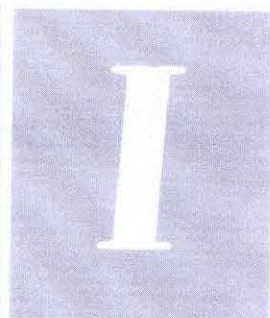
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Abstract

Creative nonfiction is often called the "fourth genre" after prose, poetry and drama. It is a new genre that often causes confusion because the name sounds like an oxymoron. Indeed, it deals with facts and real events, but uses the tools of the fiction writer and poet. My thesis discusses how this genre evolved, how people have tried to define it, as well as the technical and ethical issues involved. The second section of my thesis is a series of creative nonfiction pieces.



Defining Creative Nonfiction

The term "creative nonfiction" often causes confusion. In fact, the confusion is understandable. According to the dictionary, 'nonfiction' is defined as "books, articles or texts about real facts, people and events." As Lee Gutkind points out, people generally regard nonfiction "as academic (as informal essays about literature, politics, law, etc.) or journalistic (as in news and feature stories and op-ed briefs)" (253). In other words, people think of nonfiction as academic or journalistic prose, dealing with real facts, real people and real events. What, then, does it mean to say "creative nonfiction"? If anything, the term sounds like an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. In her article "Creative Nonfiction Writing," Rita Berman expresses the confusion over terminology in this way: "Is it a new genre of writing? An oxymoron? Fictionalized facts?" (5)

Apart from the obviously confusing name, another source of consternation comes from the multiplicity of names it is called by, or the subcategories that fall under the umbrella of creative nonfiction. It has been variously called literary nonfiction, literary journalism, personal essay, memoir, lyric essay, travel writing, and so on. Besides this difficulty with nomenclature, there is also the confusion regarding form. As Brett Lott explains, "Creative nonfiction can take any form from the letter to the list, from the biography to the memoir, from the journal to the obituary" (310). Moreover, creative nonfiction often borrows techniques from other genres, chiefly fiction and poetry. Creative nonfiction departs from mere journalism in that it eschews plain reportage of facts, and instead makes use of literary devices normally found in fiction (characterization, setting, dialogue, point of view, etc.) and poetry (figurative language, imagery, metaphor, etc.). In fact, this new genre has often been called the "fourth genre" after poetry, fiction, and drama.

In simplest terms, creative nonfiction is a genre that deals with facts and true occurrences, but tells them using the tools of the fiction writer and the poet. Lee Gutkind defines creative nonfiction (variously called "new nonfiction" and "new journalism") as "writing about your experiences and lifestyles in a literary way.... using scene, dialogue, description, first-person points of view—all the tools available to fiction writers, while consistently attempting to be truthful and factual" (14). Similarly, Rita Berman talks of creative nonfiction using "mood, setting, descriptions of place, action, people, senses, thoughts, and feelings [and] dialogue and flashbacks" (8), all of which are techniques borrowed from fiction. Similarly, creative nonfiction may also use compression of detail, figurative language, and juxtapositions that are commonly found in poetry.

The multiplicity of names comes from the fact that it is a very broad and malleable genre which can be stretched into many different directions, from the memoir and personal essay to biography and travelogue. Its amorphous nature means that it can adapt to what the situation or subject matter requires or what the writer demands, which is why it can take any form, as Lott puts it, "from the letter to the list, from the biography to the memoir, from the journal to the obituary" (310). Of course, what is common to all these genres is that they deal with the truth; everything else is up to the writer's own creativity, how and in what fashion he wants to shape the truth he wants to tell. So it is not really that surprising that the creative nonfiction umbrella holds so many other sub-genres within it.

Although the genre seems new, the roots of creative nonfiction can be traced back to Michel de Montaigne. Montaigne, a contemporary of Shakespeare, is also known as the father of the essay. The word essay was acquired from the French word *essayer* which means 'to attempt' and according to Phillip Lopate, Montaigne began by writing with the attempt to unveil the plot which was "the track of a person's thoughts struggling to achieve some

understanding of a problem" (302). The plot became the method of discovering oneself through one's writing; the discovering, linking of thoughts related to one another as the writer discovered and wrote about himself or everything around him. During that era, writing about one's train of thought might have been odd, but it definitely made the act of reading amusing and entertaining. Lopate explains that writing one's train of thought requires an 'interesting consciousness' and he claims that Montaigne was well-equipped with this.

Just after Montaigne, the essay flourished and took another turn. Bacon wrote the formal essay which was "dogmatic, impersonal, systematic, and expository, written in a stately language" while the informal essay changed with the "vanities, fashions, oddballs, seasonal rituals, love and disappointments, the urban form, the pleasures of solitude, reading, going to plays, walking in the street" (Lopate 303). They were the writings of that time and we find these vanities, oddballs, etc. seep into our creative nonfiction of today.

In the 18th century, however, writers such as Swift, Dr. Johnson, Addison, Steele, and Charles Lamb further developed and diversified the essay so that various plots, points of view, and stories would be read and the genre broadened. Swift wrote the satire, Addison contributed to the political pamphlets and Lamb moved from the sonnet to open letters in 1802.

The immediate precursor of creative nonfiction was the New Journalism movement, which began in the 1960s and flourished in the 1970s. It was seen in the work of Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, George Orwell, James Agee, and even Mark Twain. Each of these people wrote about factual events using elements of fiction which belonged to the novel. However, A.J. Liebling and Joseph Mitchell, who wrote for *The New Yorker*, were recognized for applying fictional elements in magazine articles as far back as the 1930s.

The New Journalism movement began during 1960s because of the need for a new type of journalism. People were tired of the "detached writing of the big-city dailies and the machine-like prose" (Sherman 59). They wanted a new form of writing that could represent the political upheavals that America was going through. Unaware of the need to establish this form, Tom Wolfe, a writer for the *New York Herald-Tribune*, refused to get entangled in the political writing of the time, opting for the supplement issue of the newspaper. In 1962, he offered to write about the "hot rod culture," the new linear engine car, as a supplement. He sent a letter to his editor asking for feedback on how he wanted to write about "the hot rod culture." His editor deleted the salutation of the letter and published it in the newspaper as an article. This created great chaos in the world of Journalism. Journalists were unable to accept the fact that journalistic writing can consist of train of thought. But when Tom Wolfe, along with Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and Robert Christgau, published a journal with this method of writing in 1973, the term was officially accepted.

Creative nonfiction as it is practiced today is a literary, as opposed to journalistic, genre. But it presents its own unique set of challenges since it uses fictional techniques, but deals with factual events. It is often difficult to establish the factual details of an event, especially when one has to recall details of experiences that took place years before, or events of which all the details are not available. For instance, it might not be possible to reconstruct exact conversations that took place in the past, or what a person's expression had been, or what time of day of season of the year it was, etc. These are relevant reasons for fudging details, something that all creative nonfiction writers do to some extent. Still, the writer needs to guard against going too far with the imagination. In her essay, "Memory and Imagination," Patricia Hampl gives the example of writing about how she had started

playing the piano. When she was done with her first draft, she suddenly realized that she had actually invented various details about the piano teacher, and concluded that she "had told a number of lies" (261). What had happened was that being a young child taking piano lessons, she actually didn't remember very much about her teacher, except what her imagination had made of her over the years. So in a sense, the imagined version she wrote about was emotionally true even though it may not have been literally true. Still, it is necessary to deal with these incongruities conscientiously and write as close to the truth as possible. Of course, the filling in of details is often necessary in order to present a scene as realistically as possible, either as it happened or as it was experienced. Jocelyn Bartkevicius, in "The Landscape of Creative Nonfiction," comments that the mind is full of the gaps and our job as creative nonfiction writers is really to sift our way through. In her creative nonfiction, Bartkevicius talks about how writing about her childhood became difficult, because her memory filled in details that were not necessarily there, but sounded very good.

Research, a very important tool of writing, is an important element for filling these gaps that Bartkevicius speaks about. By definition, it is the "systematic investigation of materials, sources, etc. to establish facts" (Oxford dictionary). But for creative nonfiction, it is also the process of rethinking, reimagining and revisiting events for a more reliable record. Michael Pearson, in his article, "Researching Your Own Life" addresses the need for this "diligent and systematic inquiry" (45). He explains that research is needed not only for new information but also to recollect memories. Pearson discusses that every piece of writing requires research, whether it is the memoir or the keen observation of an object or place. Pearson reminds us, "you may not be able to repeat the past, as Gatsby wished, but you may be able, through research, to reenter it, relive it in your imagination, and re-create it for the future" (49).

This re-created version is what Peter M. Ives speaks about in his article "The Whole Truth." In the article, Ives quotes Tomas Eloy Martinez, who says, "Every story is by definition unfaithful. Reality ... can't be told or repeated. The only thing that can be done with reality is to invent it all over again" (273). In other words, writing our stories actually means *re-writing* them. There is no way of re-experiencing the moments but what we do is try to reinvent and recreate what we perceive was as close to the truth as possible. Fern Kupfer speaks of the ethics involved in creative nonfiction in his article "Everything But the Truth?" He explains that memoir writers should be given permission to lie as long as they are not deceiving the reader or blatantly lying to make the work decorative. Finding the right balance is once again something that needs to be dealt with at the personal level, where the writer must cross-examine himself to recreate the story in a way that is as close to the truth as possible.

Another tricky issue is the distinction between literal or historical truth of what happened, versus the emotional truth, i.e. the way it was experienced. The writer who is recreating his experience of an event will naturally color it the way *he* experienced it, so that what is being recorded is the emotional truth, and perhaps not the literal or historical truth. In actuality, the writer does not have an option than writing about the emotional truth because, as psychologist Elizabeth Loftus has proven in her research about the reliability of eyewitness testimony, memory simply cannot be trusted. Loftus' research on the human memory shows that the memory is incapable of taking a snapshot of a situation as many people claim to do. That is really a figure of speech, and an impossible act.

Also, even the emotional truth of an incident might change over time. One may have experienced an event in one way at the time, and only much later realized that it was a turning point, a moment of personal epiphany. How then is that truth to be recorded? What

comes out of the emotions entangled with that information? This is an aspect that Mary Clearman Blew discusses in her essay "The Art of Memoir":

I know that once I write about the past, I will have changed the past, in a sense set it in concrete, and I will never remember it in quite the same way. The experience itself is lost; like the old Sunday storytellers who told and retold their stories until what they remembered was the tale itself, what I will remember is what I have written.
(234)

In other words, by writing about it, not only do we reinvent and recreate the past, but we also change the way we remember the past. The past shapes the writing, but the writing also shapes the past. As Patricia Hampl puts it, "It still comes as a shock to realize that I don't write about what I know: I write in order to find out what I know" (262).

If writing about the past is in part also creating the past, this brings up the ethical issue of the trust between writer and reader, since the reader expects to be told the truth. In his article, "When Does Creative Nonfiction Get Too Creative?" Mark Fitzgerald writes about the great liberties taken by creative nonfiction writers of today. According to Fitzgerald, "Nonfiction authors now routinely re-create scenes they did not witness, present pages of back-and-forth dialogue that they did not record, and tell their stories through any number of points of view, including private thoughts of the story subjects themselves" (15). This has resulted in many nonfiction bestsellers, but it also brings up the ethical issue of how far you can or should stretch the truth. While Fitzgerald does not object to creative nonfiction writers using "such novelistic techniques as setting scenes, depicting multidimensional characters and finding a compelling voice to tell the central narrative" (16), he mentions a disturbing trend that has seeped in from the postmodern age: that of using the unreliable narrator. This unfortunately gives memoirists too much latitude to

invent the truth rather than recreate it. This violates the trust of the reader who expects creative nonfiction and is in actuality reading fiction. Lee Gutkind, also known as the father of creative nonfiction is willing to grant a certain degree of stretching and exaggeration in writing creative nonfiction, but he also cautions against crossing “the line between fiction and nonfiction” (qtd. in Fitzgerald 17). Similarly, Mark Kramer, author of a collection of essays titled *Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists*, says that there are certain rules that should not be broken: “No invented quotes. No thoughts attributed to someone unless that person has said they had those thoughts. No rearranging of the sequence of events” (qtd. in Fitzgerald 17).

The definition given by Robert L. Root, Jr. in “Naming Nonfiction (a Polyptych)” helps us understand what nonfiction is and isn’t. He humors us into understanding the term nonfiction as “*not* fiction” (243). He writes:

All literary genres essentially create representations of reality and require craft and design and discovery and process, but nonfiction is unique in that it alone is required by virtually unstated definition to apply those strategies and techniques to something that already exists. (246)

This is exactly the ethical issue that every creative nonfiction writer has to struggle with: how to recreate reality with “craft and design” and yet not stray from the truth. We have to realize that we do not have total freedom but “have to play by the rules; there’s a line you can’t cross” (Schwartz 338) because it is not fiction but creative nonfiction. Mimi Schwartz, in her article “Memoir? Fiction? Where’s the line?” talks about the fine line between fiction and creative nonfiction. She tells her students that they must “gather the facts by all means” by looking up old newspapers, photos, etc. and only then “[use] the imagination to fill in the remembered experience” (339). Creative nonfiction requires the writer to truthfully re-

present a past experience. The biggest challenge for the writer is to depend on memory, journals and perhaps interviews with the people that were involved or present at the scene. But the problem remains as to how much is the real truth of the situation. People usually speak about an incident referring to the memory as vivid. For the creative nonfiction writer, we need to often debate how vivid that memory was. The writer remembers his version of how an event unfolded, but another person's perspective of that same incident might be absolutely different. Like Patricia Hampl, Mimi Schwartz also advises the creative nonfiction writer to write what for him is the emotional truth. Schwartz argues that it is eventually the writer's story to tell and so it should be done according to what the writer remembers.

Another obligation of the creative nonfiction writer, according to Tracy Kidder, is to write what is believable. She invokes Coleridge's famous phrase, the "willing suspension of disbelief," which is a privilege the writer works with. According to Kidder, the writer's job is to entertain without violating the reader's faith in what he is reading. "In fiction or poetry," she writes, "believability may have nothing to do with realism or even plausibility. It has everything to do with those things in nonfiction.... the nonfiction writer's fundamental job is to make what is true believable" (282). Thus, the writer should not aim merely to tell a good story and entertain, but also to tell the story as realistically and truthfully as possible in order to sustain credibility with reader.

However, the creative nonfiction writer writes as much for himself as for the reader, using genre as a vehicle for exploration of the self. In his anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Philip Lopate talks about how Montaigne wrote about seemingly trivial aspects of his existence, "as if the self were a new continent, and Montaigne its first explorer" (qtd. in Lott 311). Thus the self as a continent to be explored is another useful definition of creative nonfiction, and offers insight into why we write creative nonfiction at all. Creative

nonfiction is often written to satisfy the urge to write about one's unique experience. It is about letting others see the point of view with which one lives, loves, admires or judges. It is about not letting a memory or a thought be too minute or too mundane to be recorded. As Peter M. Ives writes in "The Whole Truth":

But as I write, I am not consciously dissembling, creating instances and scenes to fit the awkward angles of a story line. My past is not inhabited by a cast of stick figures awkwardly dramatizing a plodding, unimaginative plot line. And just because I can't remember everything doesn't—shouldn't—mean I have to let my past evaporate, or say that it wasn't real. I am not ready to surrender my past, my life, to fiction. The world is a strange place as it is. (271)

One may ask what is so special about a person's life that it would need to be recorded in the form of creative nonfiction. As Virginia Woolf puts it in her essay "Modern Fiction," the mere events of "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day" is exactly what novelists should try to portray. Creative nonfiction writers attempt to do so, while others shed a new light on the most mundane things, drawing our attention to appreciate them. Brett Lott writes that "Life appears to me such a curious and wonderful thing that it almost seems a pity that even such a humble and uneventful life as mine should pass altogether away without some record" (309), a statement reminiscent of Virginia Woolf. Thus, creative nonfiction is "the attempt to keep from passing away altogether away the lives we have lived" (Lott 309). Further, it is also a means of making sense of the chaos of experience through writing about it. Writing about one's life imposes a kind of retrospective order on it, helps us understand what happened, and why, and what it means to us. Besides, we are curious by nature, and we are curious about other people's lives. We write about ourselves, but we also bring in the lives of others around us. And so, "creative nonfiction is frequently

about people. We are curious about how other people live, what they do, and how they think" (Berman 7).

When we read about other people, we try to draw parallels to our own lives or appreciate an aspect of character, strength, or weakness. The writer's aim is to write what they did not know about the person or an experience. It is not just about writing down the history of an event but about discovering how the history has transformed the persona over time. The creative nonfiction writer wants to understand how particular people, or times, or experiences played a role in one's life, how the external world can be connected with a person's innermost life. It allows the writer to find an angle to talk about pain or searing loss, to understand it, and achieve catharsis. As C. Day Lewis puts it: "In a very real sense the writer writes in order to teach himself, to understand himself, to satisfy himself" (qtd. in Root 252).

If creative nonfiction is concerned largely with the self, it is easy to fall into the trap of always writing in the first person, with the story centered on an 'I.' Needless to say, this can be overdone and become tiresome. Philip Gerard, in his article "Taking Yourself Out of the Story: Narrative Stance and the Upright Pronoun" talks about how the writer can make his narratorial presence felt without necessarily always being present in the first person.

Although this method is also used in fiction, first person narrative is a useful tool to write creative nonfiction because of the establishing of one's presence in the story. When we write creative nonfiction about ourselves it is helpful to have the narrator involved so that we can relate to the story in a better way. Philip Gerard speaks of the necessity of the proper presence of the author's persona in the story so that it can be felt by the readers. He refers to the earlier generation of writers who believed that the reporter should never enter the story except as "this reporter" or "the reporter" (Gerard 50). Unlike that generation of writers,

Gerard believes the writer should be involved in the story and not remain a distant observer. In his article, Gerard writes about the three different aspects of the narrative stance. He mentions that these three methods: the use of first person narrative or 'I', the use of tone and the psychic distance, are a better method of writing.

Gerard calls the use of first person narrative 'I' the frustrating hallmark. It is the most used in writing creative nonfiction. Gerard suggests that the narrator be present in a more subtle way, for instance through the tone of voice used in the piece, so that the reader senses the narrator's presence even though the narrator isn't present as 'I'. He writes that, "Tone is nothing more or less than the attitude of the author, expressed in the words he chooses, the selection and ordering of events, and the rhythms of language" (51). The tone is capable of creating just as effective an impact as the narrative 'I', yet it is a form that requires a more skillful involvement. Therefore, Gerard commendably mentions that, "Tone, as we experience it in the lines and between the lines, tells us the author's sense of right and wrong, his sense of proportion and outlook on the world. It's the reason we trust a story or don't, either turn away in irritation or remain captivated. It's not voice, exactly—it's the *tone of voice*" (52).

Another technical element Gerard discusses is what he calls "psychic distance," which checks "how near or far the writer, and reader remains from the people and the events in the story" (53). With this element the writer and the reader are privileged to move closer to the scenario created in a nonfictional piece. This allows the writers to gauge his/her emotional involvement, along with assisting the readers to enter the story they are reading. To exemplify this, Gerard speaks about his creative nonfiction piece titled "What They Don't Tell You About Hurricanes." He explains that his immediate reaction was of "hot anger" (55) towards the destruction in his community. But later on, he realized that he needed to

keep a psychic distance by replacing the 'I' of a victimized writer who fails to relate to the readers with a coherent 'us' bringing in a sense of involvement and relationship for the reader. So he concludes by confessing, "That was the lesson: it wasn't about *me*: it was about *us*" (56).

Before concluding this discussion of creative nonfiction, it might be worthwhile to examine closely two creative nonfiction pieces that exemplify the characteristics of and embody the tensions inherent in the genre. The first, "At Herring Cove" by Mary Oliver is a piece that evokes the life of a place called Herring Cove: its tides, its seasons, its creatures, its human visitors, etc. Oliver is a poet and she makes use of several poetic devices such as imagery, half rhymes, rhythm, repetition, alliteration and assonance, which make the piece a good example of how creative nonfiction can adopt techniques from poetry.

In the first paragraph, Oliver sets the scene by describing the height of tides and the shape of the pebbles on the beach, which shows her familiarity with the rocks and the atmosphere of the place. She then introduces herself into the scene as the observer who has, similar to the tides, been "rolled" into the familiar surrounding to monitor the life of the cove "from one year to the next" (159). This provides the transition into the listing of the deserted objects she finds at the beach: "beer cans, soft drink cans, plastic bags, plastic bottles ... plastic glasses, old cigarette lighters, mustard bottles" (159), and so on. These are all objects discarded and left behind by people who must have visited for an afternoon, perhaps come for a picnic. But now all that remains is what they have cast away.

After listing the objects left behind by people, Oliver moves on to sea creatures she finds on the beach, the life that still manages to emerge despite the human trash all around them. Oliver's rhythmic listing of items evokes images of creatures that make their home

there. By merely naming the creatures, she recreates with empathy, and even a bit of humor, the life of the cove and its creatures that we normally tend to overlook:

Sea clams, razor clams, mussels holding on with their long beards to stones or each other; a very occasional oyster or quahog shell; other shells in varying degrees of whiteness: drills, whelks, jingles, slippers, periwinkles, moon snails. (160)

The piling up of details with commas and semi-colons provides frequent pauses, lends a rhythm to the text, perhaps mimicking the soothing pace of the tide. The alliteration, assonance and half-rhyme in “drills, whelks, jingles, slippers, periwinkles” is another instance of her use of poetic devices. The energetic rhythm and sound patterns keep the list from becoming monotonous.

From this energetic and varied description of life she moves to the glum descriptions of dead animals. The sound of the list immediately changes from fast-paced fluidity to the grating sound of the ugly and disgusting reality of decay: “Dead harbor seal, dead gull, dead merganser, dead gannet” and so on (160). With the ear of a poet, she makes the sound of the language reinforce the tone and meaning of the passage. And through her listing of the creatures, she shows how life thrives as well as decays, how this cove is a microcosm of the whole cycle of life of death.

Having begun with life, Oliver ends the lists with the mention of life once again: egg cases of fish and snails. Then she abandons the list form, and writes in long, descriptive sentences about one particular life that held more meaning it seems than the rest: a moth. Using this unfortunate dead creature Oliver brings the essay to an end. The announcing of this creature is, to some extent, distracting. It takes our focus away from the cove, to the life of something so minute and yet so important. We forget that she speaks of an ordinary moth and begin to visualize the wings “six inches across,” “powdery and hairy like the finest fur

closely shorn," the body with its snowy white cylinder "and the stripes of the body, and the fringe of the body, and the rust-colored legs, and the black plumes of the antennae" (161). We can see the colors "white and cream and black, and a silver-blue, wine red and rust red, a light brown here and a deeper brown elsewhere" (161).

This vivid description of the moth makes it appear majestic and larger than life, and yet, its beauty is one of perfect stillness on "the first morning of its long death" (160). Having evoked the cycle of life at the cove, and the transience of its creatures, Oliver focuses our attention on this single creature that is so beautiful even in death which has reduced it to "the bright trash of the past, its emptiness perfect, and terrible" (161). Through writing about it, Oliver pays homage to the creature and gives it value, which is contrary to what life gave it, reminding us the dire end of life.

Besides noticing Oliver's use of poetic devices, another thing to note is the importance of research in creative nonfiction. Oliver could not have possibly known the names of all the creatures she lists if it wasn't for research. An integral part of creative nonfiction, research enables the writer to enhance the realism of their writing by helping to fill the gaps in the writer's knowledge. In Oliver's case, for instance, it is obvious the cove was a place of she frequently visited, but she probably would still require research in order to create the realistic picture she gives us.

The second piece I would like to discuss, Anne Panning's "Remembering, I Was Not There," is the story of an ill-fated marriage told from the point of view of their unborn child, and serves as a good example of how writers of creative nonfiction make use of techniques borrowed from fiction. Panning's use of fictional devices, such as characterization, shifts in time, and the use of an omniscient narrator help the reader experience the grief that the narrator has experienced.

In "Remembering, I was Not There," Anne Panning writes about the marriage of her parents. She effectively sets the scene by beginning with the year of her parents' marriage: 1963. She characterizes her mother, Barbara Louise Griep, as a docile romantic, who "will give up The School of Nursing ... [and the] delicate white hose and the starched white caps with pointed wings she has so dreamed of wearing" (55), to marry regardless of her mother's wishes. She describes her father as "wild already though oddly charming" (54), a man very fond of his "vodka and beer" (55), showing us how dissimilar her parents are in the very first paragraph.

Panning uses the vantage point of an unborn child to admonish her parents about the marriage that they are getting into. She switches back and forth between the lives of her docile, unassuming mother and her charming, wild father, showing how their bad choice of marriage will affect the family's happiness further along in life. Since she is speaking about her parents' life, we can see the uncertainty the wedding plans create for her father as he "contemplates kissing all the fun that is his life good-bye for a wife" (56), and the sacrifice it requires from her mother as she will give up her own career ambitions. We understand the hidden meaning of her parents' grief because Panning continually shows how she is unhappy because she understands what the effect of those feelings will be. She will be the victim of this wrong choice. She will eventually suffer the consequences of what is taking place right before her eyes.

As an omniscient narrator, Panning keeps a close watch on her parents, struggling to be heard, trying in vain to warn her mother of the forthcoming misery this marriage will create: "Do not marry him, I wish to warn her. He's wild already.... I would stop them surely, but this: impossible. They cannot hear me. I'm born two whole years later" (54-55).

Panning shifts from the past into the future to speak of the coming tragedies in the family. This effectively portrays the eventual consequences of the marriage, along with revealing the harsh emotions that the narrator is trying to restrain because she has already experienced the trouble with this relationship. She introduces her father's grandfather to show the generations of "no touch, no hugs in the Panning family" (56), so that we understand the extent of her father's unfortunate inheritance. This also helps us realize that Anne Panning has been born into a similarly loveless family, so there is nothing that can prevent her from suffering in the same way. She speaks of the love her father has for his prized young fiancée when they are engaged; the prize that he was longing to own as "he has been waiting for her to finish school so they can finally do it, marry" (56). Unfortunately, very soon he will discard her as that forgotten trophy that gathers dust on a shelf.

The narrator is actually unable to change the situation at hand. She is unheard. Her tone is one of anger and helplessness, even bitterness, as she explains the role that she and her brother will play in the lives of her parents after the wedding. She is a self-conscious narrator as she cannot help but become involved in commenting on the story, her father's drunkenness, her mother's naiveté, and the family's future. As she tells the story she is commenting on every situation showing how she is the one affected by the decisions her parents make.

The wedding takes place and the glitter of the ring is soon forgotten. Panning moves on to describe the life of Barbara Louise Griep, as a forgotten entity. Her dreams long forsaken, Panning shows her mother as an emotionless woman who has mindlessly adapted to her environment to survive for the children: "She's in it for the kids, she tries to believe and stand by" (58). The vivid image of her mother sitting in front of the television, knitting, is heart-wrenching. The loneliness comes out in "a dry long wail" (58). There is little left to

wonder after these lines. We can foresee the tragic end of the story; the expressive, bitter tone of voice completes the thought for us, as we too want to yell at her to leave, but she is too wrapped in her tragedy.

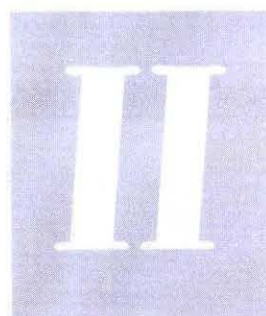
We forget how involved the speaker is in this narrative because of our concern for Barbara. But the grief has been experienced already by the unborn narrator: "Before I was born, I knew this would happen" (58). The fact that the narrator knew all along that this would happen is reminiscent of Greek tragedies like *Oedipus Rex* where the inevitable prophesy has been made and will unfold in due course of time, with no way to stop it. The soliloquy of the omniscient narrator is unheard by anyone else except the reader: she is helpless to stop the unfolding of events, and can only watch as the tragedy comes to pass.

As these two pieces illustrate, the creative nonfiction form is very malleable and can accommodate a wide range of subject matter, as well as incorporating elements of fiction and poetry. This 'fourth genre' is still a very young genre, and will no doubt continue to evolve as its practitioners grapple with the ethical and technical issues it entails. Perhaps the multiplicity that it encompasses, and its ability to absorb the best of fiction and poetry, are the sources of its strength. As more and more literary journals start publishing creative nonfiction, it will no doubt continue to evolve and flourish in the 21st century.

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Learning to Discover

One Sunday morning in Lagos, in my fourth year there, I noticed the change that comes in winter. At four, I could not have cared any less about the weather than I would about eating. However, at eight, as my appetite for good things grew, so did my interest in the world around me. I began to notice the increased amount of fog as I leaned against the car window on my way to school. I smelled the dew in the trees and plants. I watched in awe as the sun played hide-and-seek with the clouds. The weather was moderately cool, as it usually was in the mornings. I was in awe of it all. That morning, I offhandedly remarked to my teacher that it was very beautiful outside. She nodded, surprised that I took notice.

I never thought of that conversation again, until the next year. I was waiting on the playground for my friends. It was games time. And I was entitled to an entire hour after a very long and tiring period of exams. As I waited, I kicked a granite pebble around the yard and sang a tuneless Sesame Street song. I noticed how the pebble glinted in the sun. I picked it up and observed its rare grey and white stripes, so fine that one would think it was grey from afar. I could feel the smooth body and yet its edges were sharp. And it shone.

Tired of walking in the paved playground, I moved towards the trees and the open field. I immediately noticed a difference, a new smell. It was clay. It was soil. And it was wet. I had never been fascinated by nature and I do not know any other nine-year-old who was. The earth had a smell, and it was wonderful. It was a discovery.

I recalled that that morning it had rained gloriously for hours. The day had passed, as gloomy as ever and, to my delight, the soil had had no opportunity to dry. I sat in the wet grass and thought for a brief moment of the wallop I might get for ruining my shorts but I was concerned about other things. I was wondering how the smell came to be.

As I grew older, I have heard many comments on the sweet smell of the earth. I've heard many people remark on the fine droplets of dew that cover the grass in the early mornings. But the earth still remains a mystery to me. Do people feel the dew like I did? Do they smell the same smell I had? Can they understand the feel of the almost-clay-like-soil in their hands, do they rub it between their palms to feel its texture, only to find granules of stones?

We discover many things in life, but our childhood discoveries are the ones that remain most vivid. Just like I discovered the *Krishnochura* trees in our yard. Most of the year it seemed dead, dry and barren. Then right after the rains, it blossomed with the bright, red flowers shading our house from the harmful sun. It was like a big mother tree. I had thought it was over a thousand years old. I had studied in school that the age of a tree could be known from the width of its trunk, and my little arms were not able to encircle it. I declared to my friends with confidence that this was the greatest tree ever. As I grew up I realized that this tree was everywhere, the same size.

I declared many foolish things when I was little. That I was going to know all about the earth and the trees, that I would take care of all the trees that are in my compound (a very Nigerian term for yard), and never let anyone harm them. That I would make sure everyone had a tree of their own. And that we would climb our trees everyday. Someone reminded me that we would not be able to climb them if we got older. So, I declared I was not going to grow old.

Now I hardly have the time to look at nature. I live in a bustling city where it is difficult to even find a tree. And if I suddenly spot one, I don't think of any sweet thoughts. I am thinking of my next assignment. I am thinking of how to please the world around me. I am thinking of getting to my destination safely. I am thinking of my thesis. I am thinking of

the confrontation with a friend, or a family member. I am thinking of the work that is piling up at my desk.

But sometimes, when my thoughts are calmer and I am at peace with everything, I suddenly notice a *Krishnochura* tree and marvel at its vibrant colors and I feel my face lighting up. And perhaps there is that childish awe somewhere again, briefly.

Lal Shak

The sun glares overhead and our shoes squish in the occasional puddles of mud until we enter the courtyard. A sudden gust of wind precedes us, blowing the covering off her hair as she crouches over the clay stove, stirring something with a bronze spatula. Inevitably, she is wearing an unstarched cream sari which had aged just like her, gracefully. My sister and I enter the grounds noiselessly, creep up behind her as she concentrates on the quality of her *lal shak*, red spinach, and erupt with a sudden yell. She pretends to be frightened, prompting us into fits of giggles. After a tight hug or two, depending on how long ago she had last seen us, she goes back to her cooking, making sure the *lal shak* is the right shade with the smell of the burnt red chilies stinging our nostrils. Nanu is preparing the feast for her little sparrows.

* * *

An active member of her community, Nanu was well known in her village for her unerring wisdom and sound judgment. People asked her advice about what to name their newborn child, how to settle disputes, how to start a vegetable patch. She always knew who should marry whom, whether her neighbor on her left should continue to live with her selfish son and daughter-in-law, or if the neighbor on the right needed rice or lentils to make dinner for her large family. I once asked if she knew everything there is to know in the world, and she laughed and said she did not know farming. It wasn't just for advice that people came. Sometimes they would drop in while she was cooking and stay on for the meal. She could feed the whole village if she had to. She knew every family in the village and every single child by name.

But most of all, Nanu loved her grandchildren. Whenever we would go to visit her in Bikrampur she would make sure she had slaughtered the fattened chicken or bought the

best Hilsha fish. She has over thirty of us to cater to, but never all at once, which was fortunate. I enjoyed the undivided attention, and in fact, craved it. She never said everyone had to eat *lal shak* just because she had cooked it. No, that was for me. Just like my sister had her tomato lentils and my favorite cousin had her potato or coriander mashes.

Nanu prided herself on her spinach garden, her *lal shak*. She knew it would be the one dish I would ask for in my shrill five-year-old voice. That was the year I started liking it, my memory informs. And it was usually this very dish that she was cooking whenever we went to visit my mother's village.

She knew when we were in the vicinity because the neighbors often ran ahead to tell her that her youngest daughter had arrived from Nigeria with her family in tow. She loved each of her children but she adored her youngest especially because she hardly got to see her and her children. And the preparations would begin. She would make sure she picked the freshest new leaves of the red spinach for my feast. Although I didn't quite understand the details of how she kept her garden at the time, she explained more as I grew up.

Lal shak has its season and although many people have the expertise to grow it all year round, its best flavors are out in the winters. Nanu knew this of course, but we arrived in Bangladesh only in our summer vacations. So although she complained about the quality of her cooking, I usually gave her my best wry look and gobbled down as much as possible.

There was no particular secret to cooking red spinach; everyone I knew could prepare it with ease. But the particular taste of Nanu's cooking never left my tongue. I tried it once or twice at most in my teen years in Nigeria but I never had the guidance of Nanu, so I would mostly trust my tongue. I remembered that it was the dry red chilies that did the trick. They had to turn a certain shade of brown and sometimes burst open as they are lifted

over the open fire which would choke us even if we were a few yards away. This was the final touch.

* * *

In 1998, Nanu fell ill. We couldn't make our annual visits anymore due to financial constraints, although mum went home to tend to her mother. But I made sure I tried my hand at *lal shak* more often then. I wanted to feel close to her. This was our bond. She knew I was cooking for her during those times, imitating her every move as though offering a prayer to the one beyond who knew my pain and hers. I never found out what she had fallen ill with. I didn't want to know.

Dad bought spinach at my insistence. It was difficult to find in Lagos. I would wash it thoroughly and make sure not one precious leaf strayed from the bunch. I would strain the leaves and leave them in the strainer as I heated oil in a small pan. I would fry the onions until they turned golden-brown, then add the spinach and some salt. Slowly the water from the salt would cook the leaves, turning them rusty brown with a hint of a dark green here and there. Then the final touch, the fiery smell of red chilies. Mum never let me try this part in the kitchen; we had to burn the chilies outside so that the house would not be filled with that pungent, fiery smell.

The task done, food in hand, I prayed with every bite that things in Bangladesh would be fine. The next time I called, she had forgotten my name.

* * *

Nanu has now been gone for ten years. People keep saying that it doesn't feel like ten years, but I've felt every minute of it. Mum tries to compensate even today when the *lal shak* is served. She thinks calling me her little sparrow will cheer up the gloom that settles over me when I see it served on my plate. My mother does not look anything like Nanu, but in

our conversations I realize she is becoming like her mum, a woman of wisdom and will power and the capacity to love everyone around her. That is the piece of Nanu I have left, and soon it will be the piece that mum leaves me.

Box of Treasures

One Saturday morning in 2003, as I was trying to help my mum and sister arrange the furniture and unpack our precious possessions in Dhanmondi Road 6, I came across my treasure chest. It was a small Cadbury box with a deep purple lid and the picture of exquisite brown chocolate being poured into the word *Cadbury*. I had once loved this box. It was a beauty; it once held that which brought me great joy: chocolate. Now it held things that had grown even more precious: my treasure, my letters. The box hadn't worn off. It was still as shiny as I remembered it. There were a few chipped edges at the bottom and a little dent from when I had thrown it across the room, but that was all.

I carried the box out of the carton tentatively, praying not to be affected by the intensity of emotions that might engulf me. Not all memories that were attached to its contents were pleasant. But I thought of them as my treasures now. I removed the lid and realized how the box still felt as strong as before; perhaps that was why I was able to keep my treasures in it, knowing they would be very secure. Inside, the box was glossy gold, and there was still the smell of chocolates I imagined. I enjoyed the texture of the box for a few seconds, noting that it was rusting from inside, starting from the top. I realized then that the letters that were right under the rust were affected; they had turned slightly brown and orange.

The first one I touched was from the previous year. The picture of our puppy came to mind, the little brown mongrel we had for a day before dad threw him out, or rather, made us throw out. I was sure I would be heartbroken, but we had managed fine without him. Then I came across one in which I had written about my favorite girls sitting on the terrace on the edge near the antennas, trying to hide their cigarettes in case I uttered something judgmental. They had smiled almost apologetically at my cough. The letter was tearing, the

cheap quality of the paper obvious. Then I gathered my strength to look at the colored papers. My dead poetry from every crush and its recovery. Did I write those words? Odd, pathetic, shocking. If I wasn't dark-skinned, mum would have noticed me blushing. The letter from my first boyfriend. This was what had sent me on a poetic roll. Embarrassed, I thought of how much solace I had found in that trashy writing and sobered up.

A piece of pink chalk from Lebanese Community School, something I had picked up when I was leaving the grounds for the last time. Wasn't that years ago? Perhaps it was 1993. The chalk had had many homes since that year. That transition was the beginning of many, helping me learn that nothing in life remains the same.

A picture of a boy I had worshipped. How ridiculous it seems now. Why did I keep his picture? What is he even doing now? Selling drugs perhaps. A small voice urges me to have more faith: *Perhaps he curbed his old habits and is making something of life now, since he isn't sixteen anymore.*

A spoon from the kitchen set I used to play with. It was actually my sister's and I hardly touched it. The voice again: *But how many times you craved for something like that for yourself.*

A white ribbon. The need to feel feminine when I hit puberty. *Something you wanted to own desperately because your cousins had it. You thought it would make you as gorgeous as them if you wore your hair in plaits like they did.*

The Swiss army knife. A bad imitation. Chipped paint, the stainless steel dark with rust. I had acquired it from a cousin's discarded collection. He had said I could keep it. *It had made you feel important and strong. You thought owning that had something to do with the freedom boys get.*

A notebook from Sumona's dad. A recycled paper notebook with dried flowers stuck on the cover. Where is she now? *The many people you pushed away.*

A family photo, very old. That ancient yearning, the hope of the perfect family. *Nonsense. You still dream of that life. The perfect life.*

As I look closely at the picture, a tear slips down my cheek. Mum looks beautiful. She is wearing a purple and yellow *kamiz*, her hair flowing behind her. Dad is smiling, holding her tight with one arm and trying to catch hold of me with the other. My sister is right in front. I think I was trying to catch her before she got too far way. Snap! My sister and I had surprised looks, but my parents looked absolutely content. They were leaning on mum's dressing table. Many times I had sat there trying to look prim and proper in some weird dress. Looking very closely, I could see the flash of the camera in the mirror too. *Who was the man taking the picture? It must have been one of dad's weird friends. He had had plenty of those.*

Was it possible that anyone else collected things like this? Maybe there are some. Maybe there are people like me who hang on to mementos of the past, a continuing record of how life changes and keeps changing. But no story would be the same as mine. Nothing will be similar. But my box of treasures means good memories, perhaps, and the hope that things will be better. *But things always have a way of getting more complex.*

I quickly drop the picture, tucking it under some letters. I carry the box to its new home, my window sill, and leave it there. As I return to unpacking, I turn to it once more, thinking to myself, "Things will change." And when that happens I will open that box again.

Daddy's Girl

My father is a short man with a protruding beer gut. He claims to have gobbled eggs a dozen a deal in his teen years. He boasts of catching the chicken in the neighbor's compound at dawn and heading off to a secluded part of the village to make a good meal out of it. When he started living abroad, he made sure he found a good Bengali home to go to for meals. I smile as I sit beside him and think about the many weddings he went to with his buddies even when he didn't know the bride or groom. I used to think you can hear of these in movies. He was the one who could have the best piece of meat during lunch, by pursuing his nine other brothers and sisters to spare him some, or threatening dire consequences and then stealing it off their plates when they weren't looking. He was a man to be reckoned with. His family encouraged his wayward lifestyle when it came to eating habits. They taught him to eat big and serve big and become big. And now he alone has to carry the weight of it all.

He is wearing off now, as he lies in his hospital bed, his face gaunt with worry, his salt and pepper stubble growing steadily. He looks at us as if he has done us a great deal of wrong.

As we were growing up he gave us food. When we learnt to question his absence, he gave us cakes and chocolates. When we began to wonder at his lack of propriety he took us out to lunches and dinners. When I asked why I couldn't go to my high school prom, he took us to formal dinners with his friends and their families, where they served fancy decorated food instead of normal food. When we admitted him to United Hospital for his bypass surgery, his first suggestion was that we check out the cafeteria.

I haven't been into hospitals as much as I have in the last few days, making sure the beds are in the right position and the pillows are soft and the covers are clean. Then I read a

book as I sit beside him and he asks "Want to have a samosa?" This is his way of dealing with the tension. He loves me. I know he does. He adores me for being brave and yet his face betrays anxiety about what is to happen in the next seventy-two hours. He is afraid for his family. Perhaps he should have thought about that much earlier, but he didn't.

In the last few months, the more I look at myself closely I realize how much my appetite for food and life is like his. The night dad got admitted to the hospital, there were three Cadbury chocolate wraps on the floor of my bedroom. The week we found out he needs a bypass I started eating four meals a day instead of three. In the month and a half since he arrived in Dhaka, I have gained about five kilos. As I look at him in his hospital bed awaiting surgery, I picture myself lying there someday.

Dad turns and asks, "Have you eaten yet?"

Prescience

It is 1982. My mother, Shahida Begum Chowdhury, studies for her Matriculation Board exams. Like all the other students, she paces back and forth in the room, memorizing all the forms of essays in her suggestion paper. Right outside the room her parents are arguing with her older brothers about the proposal that has just come for her. They say their family status is not compatible with the prospective groom's. Mother is upset. Tears are streaming down her face as she listens to the arguments and tries to concentrate on the "Seasons of Bangladesh." She had known she would be next in line for marriage. She was the seventh daughter in a family of twelve children: it was inevitable. Her parents had hoped they would be rid of her at eighteen. But there never seemed to be the appropriate suitor. She is their gorgeous one and she has a temper to go with her beauty. She had refused many before, mostly because the proposals came from second cousins, but this time it was different. She couldn't fight this one. The cousin who had brought the proposal would soon be coming to set up a meeting with her soon-to-be husband, Nafis Ahmed.

At that exact moment, Nafis Ahmed is drinking his fourth peg of whisky, and wondering how his bachelorhood is finally coming to an end. No more parties, no more traveling, no more acting school and casino trips. What will this be like? he wonders.

I want to grab him by the shoulders and shake some sense into him. He hasn't seen the girl before. So far, all he knows is that one of his third cousins knows her very well. You don't want this, I tell him. You're not ready to lead a claustrophobic life, dad. To my mum I want to say, you don't know what you want in life. Say no to your parents. Then I look at

him. Handsome, charming and eloquent, a man with "pots of gold," he is wild already. Can't anyone tell?

I want to stop them but it is impossible. I am not born yet. I am to be born a year later, the first grand-daughter in a family of ten sons and daughters. I want to sit them down and make them see sense. I wish there was a personality test that could help them see how extremely different they are. But they cannot; tradition has them blindfolded. They are on the path to ruin their lives and ours.

* * *

My dad, Nafis Ahmed, wanted to become an actor. He tried to make it big in the non-existent film industry in Bangladesh, but being an inconsistent man, he can't keep the job. He gets bored very easily. And so, two years into the industry, and a flop film to his name, he wants out. So do the producers. A cousin of his takes pity on his wandering lifestyle, and offers him a job in Kuwait. He does well as an overseer in a major hospital. He is gathering money for his marriage, right after which he will lose this job. My pleas are unheard, and I watch sadly as he plans to go out to dinner with some lousy friends right after the evening shift a week before his wedding. He is to return to Bangladesh with enough money to begin married life well.

One day he will tell me about all his friends, and the reasons why he got into so much trouble with his drinking habit. They will always be to blame when twenty years later he sits at the dinner table with blood shot eyes, and yet he adores each one of those lousy people. He will tell me about all the adventures and his many women friends. And I will listen wide-eyed, and yet not totally surprised.

* * *

The day before the wedding the negotiations takes place. What needed to go to the daughter's new home and the number of new clothes and what was to be given for the in-laws? The plan is to give so that there will be no fingers pointed at the girl's family. They are to gain their respect and honor from how much they are able to satisfy the son-in-law's family with gifts and dowry.

The night before the wedding, my mother goes to bed in their tin shed house, on Green Road, beside which their house is being built, and she dreads the outcome of this wedding. She already had the wedding night talk with her sisters. She is wondering what it will be like living with such a handsome man. She knows that her family already liked him. She knew that he was vain. She knew she would be going into a family that was very different from her own. She knew that she will be marrying a family, not just the man. She noticed how her sisters-in-law looked at her. She realized they were tugging at her hair, unnecessarily fussing over her when they came to put the ring on her finger. She also knows she will be bullied by them. They are all older than her. And she is going to be the oldest daughter-in-law. She can smell trouble. I want to tell her to see the sense in her thoughts, and trust her instincts. But she didn't know they were her instincts, and she wasn't allowed to listen to them. All she was taught was "Honor thy father and mother." She doesn't even know where that commandment comes from. She doesn't know much about life at this point. But she will have to learn.

* * *

My father finally meets the girl he had heard so much about. He is ready to marry her, to keep her as his prize. No one else had a fiancée so pretty, so docile or so young. He will be able to live his life to the fullest still. All is not lost. He would be able to control, maneuver, and manipulate, although he didn't think of his loving her in exactly

those terms. He is able to imagine his social life unhindered. He is going to drink tonight to his freedom, not imprisonment. His grandmother warns him to take good care of this sheep of a wife that is coming to live among wolves. He laughs heartily at the comment, and walks out of the door.

The honeymoon is simple and unadventurous. Dad drinks on their second night together, and mum is shocked. She cries to sleep. The next day, he promises it will never happen again. I want to be harsh and tell them what I think of both of them, but I can't. It'll just cause them more heartache. Both of them realize the amount of lies they will have to live with. This was after all, the beginning. I cried out one last time, hoping they would reconsider, but by now it's too late.

* * *

Mum soon loses her cheerful nature. She is an asset to dad. She is the cook at his parties. Whether there is something to celebrate or not, people stream into our home every weekend. Cocktail parties, dance parties, Eid parties, being-alive-parties. Mum feels she is dying a little each day. She cooks, cleans, gets mad at us, then cooks and cleans and entertains. Life becomes a pattern. She learns to live with plenty and with nothing. She learns what it means to sacrifice.

Dad loves the attention his wife gives to his guests. His friends are everything to him. He knows how to be a father. He provides for his family after all. He gives them love; big hugs in front of people, things that can fill their rooms and everything they want, except himself. He doesn't know how to be there for them. He doesn't know their friends or their interests. He doesn't know if they ever had any. His wife was to take care of them. After all he made sure there was enough money for that. I can see the end coming. There will be a time when no one will be able to live this robotic life. Even dad will be bored of providing

for others. He would want an exit from this claustrophobia as I demand his attention. They are tired. Communication lessens. They think they are doing us a huge favor by living under the same roof. We hate the silence and the bouts of anger. The shouting and screaming and tears. I want to say "I told you so." I want to tell them I knew this would happen. Even before I was born, I knew this would happen.

Contentment

When I was eleven, we moved to our fourth house in Nigeria. The property had been donated to the company where my dad worked. The building was set on a small hill, surrounded by very old *krishnochura* trees. During July, the trees would be in full bloom, filling the entire compound with their bright red blossoms. When I first entered the compound and surveyed the land with my juvenile expertise, it struck me as a park that needed great care. The building, with six flats, was set right at the center of the compound. There was a huge S that marked the route from the gate to the front porch. The cars had to take a U-turn from the entrance around a boulder to get to the parking lot in the back yard. There were garages at the back, right next to the huge generator, which had a room of its own. There was a badminton court whose faded lines were faintly visible through the moss, the net torn in several places. There were two huge holes in the backyard where the water tanks went in. The space around it looked like a snake pit.

Everyday, at 4 pm, I would stand on the boulder in the front yard and shout to my friends in the five other flats. Whoever was out first was the caller; it wasn't necessarily me. We played badminton, catch, pretend, hopscotch and many crazy games in good weather. Luckily, there was only the dry and wet season in Nigeria. If it was raining we would play in each others' homes, and our mums would provide us with snacks. Apart from a series of bad grades that Mitesh once had, nothing really kept us apart. When the electricity would go out we would all gather with our parents in the front yard to sing silly Hindi songs. We would sit on the huge boulder and listen to our parents' raucous melodies. This cheered them up quite a bit, building bridges after having fought for the best bargains from the vegetable vendors in the morning. Meanwhile, the dads sat together and discussed the price hike of oil or stocks.

One summer, someone's car got wrecked and was left to rot on the premises. Soon it was the best spot for playing hide-and-seek. I was the first to notice that the doors were left unlocked. After a little coaxing, my sister agreed that it was the best place to hide. Nobody else was brave enough to look inside, so I was never caught. Two years later, a family of moles was discovered under the junk. I remember all seven of us peering through the window after we heard the delighted squeals of our housekeeper's kids at having discovered 'bush rats.' It's true they had an appetite for exotic animals, but I found it difficult to understand how an animal they call 'bush rat' could be palatable. It was fascinating to watch them celebrate after the great catch, although I was not brave enough to visit for lunch that afternoon.

Once, during the summer vacation, which lasted three and a half months, I made sure I looked under every nook and cranny for a new adventure. This was the time I discovered my love for the juicy kernels of palm nuts and the pungent smell of diesel. It was the year I left the front door open and the poisonous, black and white, striped lizard entered the living room. It was also the year I decided I could chat with every other person in the world, and should not necessarily be restricted to kids my age. The gardener, gatekeeper, and our housekeeper's children became my confidantes. They seemed to understand life and its ordeals much better than anyone else I knew.

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A few years later, when the family's financial situation was more stable, we lived in a beach house every weekend for six months. It was the perfect place to go and let loose. It was a duplex made of bricks and cement in an area where there wasn't a solid house in sight. Everything else was made out of dried coconut leaves. The sturdiness of the place always baffled me. The first floor was an open lounge area, where I sat to enjoy the wind

and sun playing hide-and seek on my face. I could taste the saltiness of the sea and listen to the sound of the crashing waves in the distance. I often yearned for that melodious harmony later on in life. How it was possible for the wind, the sea and the sun to play in such harmony was beyond me. I was awakening to my senses as I listened, felt and tasted the beauty of the seashore.

The sea was hardly calm. Each day, we would wait for the sunset. Then mum and I would slip away to walk beside the sea. I didn't understand much of what she spoke about but it sounded pleasant. The moon brightened everything in silvery hues. And I listened. Mum gibbering, waves crashing, my sister screaming and weird laughter in the distance. It wasn't much and yet there I had everything.

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Last summer, I stayed with a host family in the US for four weeks. The word 'America' had inspired great thoughts of comfort, gleaned from the media. So I was slightly dismayed at the home I was to share with an Indian girl, who was from the same program as me, and this very young couple. The cottage was not much bigger than our average garage, with a little bit of a gardening space. My bedroom was at the very end of all the rooms. This was supposed to be my home away from home.

I was glad to be away from family. Sometimes I feel stifled with the love that comes with a sack of expectations. Here I was going to be free. I decided to be myself. I wanted to live for me. I decided to start with my room. It took two steps from the door to jump into my bed. And stuffed into the room was an old comfy leather chair, a television set with a DVD player, and a small desk with a laptop. There was very little breathing space. But it became my sanctuary. I learnt how to make myself comfortable in what space I had. The walls

between the rooms seemed paper thin. The windows were the compensation. They opened to a world I had never experienced.

The windows covered an entire wall. I could see the parking lot and several other cottages from there. But what I loved the most were the smells that filled my room in the morning. The sunlight brought with it the sweet smell of cool days: the fresh smell of moisture and greenery, and the sound of dogs barking at joggers. I would have never thought of doing this before, but everyday for those four weeks, I lay in bed and listened to the sounds of the morning unfolding. Slowly the sun would ride higher and the rays would fall on my face as my bed was turned toward the window. This was when I learnt what it meant to soak up the sun. With the weather in Seattle often being cold and wet, I understood their tradition in my four weeks. I would close my eyes and enjoy the warm rays for several minutes, and feel my cold cheeks soften and turn red with the heat. It was part of waking up.

I hardly had the time to look around the house since we kept busy, but returning after a day of canoeing, sightseeing and meeting people, the room made me feel welcome and the bed beckoned. At night, the small lamp in my room was all the light I had, yet it felt as though the light was glaring at me. So I turned everything off an hour before bed just to feel the calm and quiet again. It wasn't much and yet I was content.

Driving Lessons

When I was fourteen, I started taking driving lessons from Suraju. I was offended by my dad's lack of interest, and decided I would learn to drive anyway, without him. I had wanted to bond with my dad, but instead I was locked up in the car with our driver of five years. I wanted to be unhappy and unpleasant. But this did not affect Suraju.

Uncle Suraju was a man who kept to his work. On my first day, he introduced me to the car, its qualities, and abilities. I had to know the names of the main components I would be dealing with, and the others could be dealt with later. While I struggled to get my legs to work on the clutch and brakes, Uncle Suraju would listen to music on the radio. There were times we would be in the middle of nowhere, and I wouldn't be able to start the car after braking abruptly. He would whistle and wait patiently, wanting me to keep trying, increasing my frustration and my blood pressure level. One time I was at a crossroad, and there was a car coming from my left, and another from the front; I panicked and froze on the road. I had thought both those cars would stop to let me go. They didn't and I nearly made a huge dent in the bonnet. Uncle Suraju laughed all the way through, taking the steering from my hands at just the right moment. He then apologized to the drivers, who later winked at me. I had felt stupid and embarrassed.

He was someone I knew I was safe with at fourteen. Nigerians had a habit of wanting to make everyone 'their wife,' regardless of who you are or where they meet you: at the club, at the market, in the doctor's waiting room, anywhere. Inevitably, there would be someone lurking close when I was outdoors waiting to run off with me – the landlady's son, the older brother of the boy next door, the other drivers in our compound, the fruit-seller down the street, and so on. It was just a joke, some good-natured Nigerian fun, but it scared

me. And Uncle Suraju knew this. He would shoo them off frequently and later we would laugh about how they wouldn't have made a good husband anyway.

Uncle Suraju was tall man with a very big nose. He was far from the typical six-foot-tall, muscular, mean-looking Yoruba. He was quiet, kind and charming. The first thing I noticed about him was his nose. It was huge, bigger than any other I had ever seen. But it suited his humble manners. Nigerians were loud people and Lagosians even louder. But he defied the stereotype.

I wonder now about his life. I am trying to recall whether we talked about his family at all during our months of driving lessons. I gather we did not, otherwise I would have remembered something. All I knew was that he had a wife and a daughter, whom he was fond of. He came to our house at six in the morning and started work. And he would go home very late. What did his family think of his profession? Did his daughter like the idea of him giving us chewing gum? Did he take some for his daughter sometimes? I do remember that he smiled a lot. I imagine he must have enjoyed listening to his daughter's stories and fending off her overzealous suitors, just as he did for me.

Uncle Suraju worked for us eight years in all. During that time, we were the happiest and safest on the roads. One day he solemnly reported he needed another job. It shocked and upset me. I wasn't ready to let him go. We honestly thought he would be present on my wedding day, that he would finally see the person that I end up with. Instead, he got a new job. Recently, when I mentioned Uncle Suraju to my dad, he remarked that Suraju was working at a bank now, as a head driver or something of that sort. I was surprised that dad remembered him, but also pleased. It was fitting that he should remember Suraju. After all, it was because of dad that Suraju ended up having such an influence on my life.

On the Bus

Seven o'clock. Colored umbrellas stand over ticket counters. Commuters cuss at the heat of the glaring sun. Routes, ticket prices, haggling. The sudden rush when a bus arrives. The screeching of brakes. Anxiety, anticipation, release. A mad dash -- shoving, pushing, tumbling. Stragglers chasing the bus as it takes off, leaving a cloud of dust behind. More commuters arrive. School children in uniforms. Traders, shop keepers, laborers. University students. Mother and child. Impatience. Grim, stern looks. The rustling of newspapers. Finally, my bus arrives, braking as the conductor whacks its side, and screeches to a halt. Another mad rush, and I am buoyed up by the crowd.

Inside: cheap, velvet, garish seats. Cigarette butts, candy wrappers, peanut shells. Overhead, plastic rings to hang onto when standing. Claustrophobia. Ticket collection. The shrill laughter of a young girl, the incoherent babble of children. Squalls, squeals, squeaks, shoves, pulls and pushes. Giggling teenage couples. Men with cheap perfume that chokes. The occasional outspoken female. Complaints of the elderly: Bhai, have you seen the price of potatoes? Look at the traffic jam! What is happening to our country? Will it be Khaleda or Hasina?

The standing passengers sway with the movements of the bus. A misstep and someone yowls. Women in heels. Someone reluctantly offers his seat to a lady. The droning monologue of the man selling Teach-Yourself-English pamphlets. An old lady discreetly opening a packet of potato crackers. A mother with giggling girls smartly dressed in blue and white uniforms. The younger one smiles at me before turning shyly away. A sudden jolt as the driver jams on the brakes. The culprit: a rogue rickshaw taking a sudden turn. A volley of insults, muttered recriminations from the swift-retreating rickshaw puller. A lesson on good driving and on we go.

Outside the cracked windows: newspaper boys reciting headlines, pitching their products. Leaflets on herbal remedies flung through the windows by women in veils. Hawkers selling books, popcorn, cotton candy, kitchen towels, pens with torch lights. Children selling flowers and candy. Beggars with toothless grins, missing limbs, deformed bodies. Passengers coughing, hacking and spitting out the window. The occasional retching.

Buses racing, tearing, scraping past each other. The screeching of tyres, the fight to load passengers. Passengers trapped at the back missing their stop. The roar of the engine as it shudders to life, stragglers lifted in by the conductor. Cars cutting in, school buses with sleeping children, rickshaws, auto-rickshaws. The constant smell of smoke. The vibrations of the bus, the swaying passengers.

On summer days, the sun glares and people fight for the window seat to get some air. Sweat, anger and cussing. Claustrophobia, asphyxiation. On rainy days, we get splattered by raindrops from someone struggling to close an umbrella. Unintended pokes here and there. Sometimes the culprit is me.

My reflections are just as fleeting as the images around me on the running bus. Occasionally, I wonder where the grandmother with the potato crackers is going, where she lives, who she is, does she have a family, do they care, does she care? Sometimes I compare people, and their personalities wondering who would fit into whose household. I imagined my sister as the squalling, annoying baby, my cousin as the rambunctious male, my grandmother as the annoyed elderly woman, and myself as the smart and sensible one. I think of my dad in Nigeria, my mum at work, my day ahead at university, classes, homework, the weather, everything important and then nothing altogether. Suddenly, there is a final screech. I get off the bus reluctantly, leaving a whole world behind.

In Praise of the Humble Speed-breaker

Along the lines of "Let there be light," perhaps one day man said, "Let there be speed-breakers." And thus they came to be a divine intervention in our daily lives. It lies there chest out and alert for the over-zealous rickshaw-puller who just gained momentum, the impatient office goers in their cars and SUVs, the reckless bus drivers who race through their routes, the truck full of vegetables for the morning and midnight bazaar, and the suicidal loner speeding because there isn't much thrill in life. The speed-breaker has seen everything. And yet it gets no respect. In the vast miles of roadways it lies year in and year out, waiting for the traveler to show some appreciation.

The speed-breaker was created to maintain law and order. They are magnificent benchmarks that help us slow down the hectic pace of our lives. This is the point where we reduce speed, rethink, and prevent the vehicle from jumping too high if we don't decelerate from a far way off. The speed-breaker never complains, but it does take its revenge. It has grown very subtle and wise over the years. Its paint worn off, its surface worn out and uneven. The unwary driver cannot see it until it is very close and then there is a panic. And it gets its revenge. It was never this violent, but we have been unkind to its years of warning.

In the last few years we have seen them doubling their force. The speed-breakers have appeared in places they did not think of visiting before. The Banani cantonment area has suddenly sprung quite a few of these, causing riotous traffic every evening. The Airport Road has been captured by several sudden speed-breakers, reminding us we can never have a free sail. The unusual ones in the Dhaka University area, the speed-breakers on steroids, make your teeth chatter, creating that atmosphere of fear when appearing for the 'O' and 'A' Level exams. The many odd ones on already broken roads, making us wonder how one could speed on such roads anyway and right then a motorcyclist swooshes past and once

again we marvel at the wise speed-breaker. It is as though the humble, faithful speed-breaker is aware of how much we need it in our lives, and solemnly places itself in front of us, almost like our conscience, or God's reminder to be good.

One particular speed-breakers for which I have a growing fondness is the one that lies at the corner of my street. This old man is bent and crooked; I can see its iron rods, its ribcage, protruding from the corners. Many a truck has bumped over it, chipping it at first but eventually breaking it. I can imagine it was a mighty one in its day, perhaps just a little too high for its own good. Now it is the cussing point of all pedestrians whose feet are caught in its uncovered ribcage. It is the place where mothers hold on to their children, making sure the hood of the rickshaw will not give them a concussion as they go over the speed-breaker. It is where the rickshaw-puller huffs and pants and CNG drivers exclaim profanities in disgust.

From the entrance of my house I can see various expressions on the faces of the travelers: squeezed faces receiving their bumps, triumphant faces having dodged the bump by lifting their rear end from the seat of the rickshaw. Angry faces from the stress of another speed breaker, placid faces thanking God they are in a car and not on public transport, and children making faces as they bounce over this hurdle.

As the roads have deteriorated in Dhaka, their faithful partners, the speed-breakers, have deteriorated hand in hand with them. All they ever wanted was to uphold righteousness on the roads, so people slow down their reckless pace, and think a moment about this small hurdle among the huge ones in life.