

The Pick

Celebrating
the
Writer's Voice

Volume
44

Southeastern
Louisiana
University

Spring
2013



The Pick



The Pick
Volume 44
Spring 2013

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Editor's Note

First and foremost, thank you, Dr. Jayetta Slawson. This Life Writing edition is not only evidence of your patient guidance, but also of your wonderful abilities as a teacher of writing. Thank you.

Dr. Jason Landurm: Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of the Writing Center staff as well as editor of *The Pick*.

Marie Lunt: Words cannot express how much I appreciate your help and understanding with this process. Your willingness to provide any and all assistance possible has been an invaluable support throughout this process. Thank you.

Student Editorial Board: Thanks for taking time out of your spring break (and finals week, Dusty!) to help me with the editing of these essays. I couldn't possibly thank you enough.

To Jacob and my family: Thank you for your infinite patience and love. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Bridget Powell
Editor, *The Pick*

Disclaimer:

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
<i>Jayetta Slawson</i>	

Life Narratives

The After Life	3
<i>Janiia Banks</i>	
A Father's Love	9
<i>Lauren Larson</i>	
Snapshots of an (Un)Happy Family	13
<i>Allen LeBlanc</i>	
Memories of Penryn College	25
<i>Bronwen Hunt</i>	
The Grand Theft	29
<i>Austin Cradic</i>	
Perfection Comes in Essay Form	35
<i>Brittanie Stein</i>	
A Week of Hell	39
<i>Taylor Swain</i>	
The Breaking Point	43
<i>William Dew</i>	
The Death of a Salesman	47
<i>Chris Chrisman</i>	

Culture Narratives

Shifting Boundaries, Crossing Cultures <i>Victoria Tangi</i>	59
In the Shadow of Dracula's Tomb <i>Jeanne Northop</i>	89
This Girl Who Is Me <i>Jeanne Northop</i>	95
At the Crossroad <i>Jeralyn Spiehl</i>	99
His Garden <i>Caroline Derbes</i>	101
Galveston Bay Breakfast <i>Caroline Derbes</i>	105
Broken Heart, Broken Family <i>Priyanka Mehta</i>	107

Oral Histories

Oral History as Service Learning <i>Cheryl Edwards</i>	113
A Year in the Merchant Marines <i>Hilarie Lognion</i>	115
Vietnam: The Forgotten War <i>Jessica Darby</i>	119
The War Within: J.J. Witmeyer <i>Tanya Mair Culpepper</i>	127
A Different Perspective on Life <i>Samantha Fiddling</i>	135

Introduction

During their time at Southeastern, students have opportunities to compose writing that reflects on their real-life experiences and observations. This special issue of *The Pick* devotes itself to displaying some of these individual narratives that contain teachable moments for both the student writers and the readers who serve as audiences for these true tales.

The pieces included in this issue span educational levels from Early Start classes to graduate writing projects. As students create texts that reflect on “the personal,” they are learning to grapple with and to make sense of the world they inhabit. These insightful stories touch us, talk to us, and instruct us.

In class assignments, undergraduate students may be required to collect and to document the oral histories of others, while graduate students may conduct research locally and abroad. Students may find themselves as participants/observers and social actors charged with creating nonfictional writing that reveals the liveliness of an art form through which we understand a little better the space we occupy as individuals in a human community.

The reflective, serious, humorous stories and research contained in the pages that follow burst forth as memoir, autobiography, creative writing, and autoethnography. The study to make sense of culture and events of “the self” and “the other” sings with a plurality of ideas and is, ultimately, what we celebrate and contemplate in this collection.

Jayetta Slawson, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, English



The After Life

Janiia Banks

Instructors: Ms. Alysia Anderson & Ms. Claudene Cockrum
Course: Early Start/English 101: East Ascension High School
Genre: Valedictory Memoir

I want to welcome all parents, students, teachers, and friends to the class of 2013, East Ascension High School graduation. It is a great honor to be able to stand here tonight as valedictorian. Another year went by and another class has come and gone. Everyone at times wishes that they could stay at their high school forever, where they are protected from the real world in the hands of those who have gone before us. When reality strikes, we realize that we are only here temporarily, and we are just a part of an on-going process. Well, Class, we have come a long way from where we started, and this ceremony is only the beginning of life's bittersweet journey. The last four years came with many smiles, laughter, tears, and sometimes headaches but, in the end, all of these emotions gave us the strength that enables us to be here on a night we will never forget.

East Ascension has taught me many great things, not only academically, but also morally. One of those things is to value the important things in life while they are present because another day is never promised. This reminds me of my grandmother whom I loved so dearly. This lady was just like a mother to me. I told her everything, and she made me laugh all the time. We were like best friends.

I remember this particular day in my life like it was yesterday. The scent of freshly brewed coffee filled my nose causing me to arise from my sleep. I got out of bed and walked to the

kitchen and found my grandmother sitting at the table with her jewelry box open. The cool draft in the house made me shiver because Granny always had to be comfortable. I heard the clanking of beads, bracelets, and other vintage jewelry, but I was not sure why she was going through all of it on this particular morning.

“What are you doing with that, Granny?” I asked.

“Finding my pearl necklace to give to you,” she replied. This pearl necklace she spoke of cost a little over a thousand dollars. She had treasured it for years, so I knew something was not right.

“But Granny that is the most expensive necklace you have,” I told her.

She paused and just looked at me, “Always remember that nothing material in life will last forever. The value of life can never be put on the same scale as a necklace. So you go ahead and take care of these. Value them, but value life and yourself even the more. Make me proud,” she said. She got up and placed the smooth and shiny pearls around my neck. They felt heavy. I thanked her, and she gave me an enormous hug that made me feel warm.

It was then and there that she began telling me about something that would change my life forever. She held her head down and sighed as she closed her jewelry box.

“What is wrong Granny?” I asked.

She paused again before she answered, “I do not want you to graduate and go off to college without me telling you that I have cancer.”

My heart broke into a thousand little pieces. I thought I would never be able to recover from the news I just heard. Tears fell from our eyes and fell onto the cold floor. There was not much I could say or do besides cry. She hugged me once more,

trying to assure me that everything would be okay but, deep down inside, I knew my whole world would soon be changed by her sickness. I knew I would have to prepare myself to let go of the woman I felt that I could not live without.

This experience works the same way in high school. We long to stay in our comfort zones, afraid of the realities of this world. Granny hid her sickness for so long because she did not want the family treating her any differently. But as the cancer started to spread, she had to tell everyone. I was in a trance and wasn't able to focus on anything. I distanced myself from everyone and felt depressed as the days went by. I prayed every night for her healing.

About a week later, my mother told me that the doctors said she only had a few days left to live. All of my grandmother's daughters flew in from out of town to comfort her and pray with her. She was so sickly that I did not even recognize her. She was comatose and would not respond when I talked to her. All I could hear was her favorite gospel songs coming from the radio by the bed, and her frequent groans from pain. I sat at her bedside and held her hand knowing I would never be able to hold that hand again. I did what she told me to do, and that was value the important things in life, and surely she was one of them. I sat there and valued what was left of her life. Then, later on that night she died. I watched her take her final breath, departing from this life. I ran to my aunt to hold me because I knew what I just experienced would scar me for life. I saw her pale, ice-cold body just lying there, and all I could ask is God, why so soon? I wondered, did she hear me when I talked to her, did she feel me touch her when she tossed and turned in the middle of the night, and did she feel me kiss her on the forehead before I left her room? I suddenly started thinking of all the possible things I should have said or should have done before she left me. Reality

did not strike until I saw her body in a lavender casket, and that is when I knew she was never coming back. Although it was the ending of her physical life, her teachings, prayers, words of encouragement, and her motherly advice would never depart from the special place in my heart I had built for her. With tears in my eyes, it hurt me inside, but I knew her after-life in heaven would be much better than the life she just left.

From that day on, I decided that everything I did was to make her proud like she told me to do. I promised her and myself, that the decisions I make would reflect where I am trying to go in life. East Ascension, this is how it is for us. We have been holding on to the comforting hand of our parents, grandparents, and teachers, not realizing how much we will miss their help when we leave high school and move into the real world alone. We do not truly know the value of the people close to us until they are gone. But what is in our future will be much greater than what we could ever imagine if we put our minds to it. Reality may hit now, or maybe later, but when it does, do not panic, do not fear, do not throw in the towel. In order to succeed, we must take what we have learned and apply it to our everyday lives. Even if we ignored or brushed their advice off back then, the real world will bring back those same things to forefront, and we will appreciate the very thing we did not want to hear. So now, I value that pearl necklace with my life, and every time I wear it, a piece of her is with me everywhere I go. Take a little of what our elders taught us everywhere we go. I can still hear her stern yet gentle voice saying "Make me proud." I can now laugh at the times she was hard on me and sometimes embarrassed me knowing that it was all for my good and for the betterment of the young lady I have grown to be.

Although she did not live to see me walk across the stage, I know she is smiling on me in heaven because I did what she

asked me to do, and that is all that matters to me. Many said our class would not live to see 2013 because the world would end in 2012, but we are still here on one of the most precious nights of our lives. I see success in our after-lives, 2013. We are the lucky number. We will survive.

A Father's Love

Lauren Larson

Instructor: Ms. Ramona Cutrer

Course: English 101

Genre: Memoir

The pain in my stomach was overwhelming. I was recovering from having raced in a four-by-four hundred meter relay at a track meet in Walker, Louisiana. Awards were being called over the fuzzy speaker. I was waiting to see if I had won an award. Like an out-of-tune radio station, the names of the MVP runners crackled through the static across the stadium. I did not drink much water on that warm day in March and ran in four events. I did not just run. I sprinted to my full extent, knowing this was my last time to compete at the Parish Meet. I was a senior in high school, just shy of eighteen.

"Lauren, are you ready to leave?" asked my father who was beside me.

"No sir, can we please wait till the awards are done being called?"

"Well, I guess so." My father had work the next morning, but the awards would not take much longer. Dad knew how important this meet was to me. I sat down, hoping that holding my knees to my chest would dim the pain. The stabbing feeling in my gut was continuously fading in and out. It felt like someone was tying and untying knots in my stomach. Soon the awards were finished. The placings of my events had not given me enough points to receive an "Outstanding Track" award at this meet. My father and I started the trek to his tall King Ranch truck to leave. In the end, I guess I did "leave it all on the track,"

and my father was there to pick me back up.

I was trying my hardest to make it to my dad's vehicle. He knew my stomach was bothering me and had his arm around my shoulder to guide me. All I wanted to do was lie in my bed and sleep the pain away. I wanted to hear the comforting thrum of the fan on my ceiling. Suddenly it hit me, the dizziness. I could not walk straight. Then, I could feel the bile creeping up my throat and I began to shake. My skin turned cool and clammy.

"Dad, I think I'm going to be sick," I said before breaking away and attempting to get to the grass. My father suggested I go to the bathroom, but I knew that I would not have made it. Heck, I didn't even make it to the grass! In the gravel parking lot, outside the track entrance, where all the people exiting could see me, I vomited. I felt so embarrassed that I did not look at any of the faces turned in my direction. I hated feeling completely exposed. I could not hide myself from all of the eyes, including those watching from a nearby van. I could hear its engine in my ear and smell its exhaust. Footsteps hit the gravel as someone approached me. It was my dad, who had quickly rushed to my side, shielding me from the peering eyes of people passing by. He kept his hand on my back as I wretched up my insides. Despite my father's own squeamishness toward sickness, he stayed with me and endured the horrible gagging noise escaping from my throat. Finally, I was through with having to taste the foul acidic substance.

I could not move. I clung to my father's shorts, rocking back and forth, whimpering. I still felt extremely dizzy and my stomach was angrier than a five year old throwing a temper tantrum because I had hacked up all that was left in it. My head was pounding.

"Lauren, please let me at least take you to a bathroom,"

my father pleaded. I complied and shakily brought myself to a standing position. I took a few steps and told my dad that I honestly could not walk. I felt like toppling over with each step. I was also moving at point-two miles per hour or, in other words, slow. My father swiftly lifted me in his arms and cradled me to his chest. I wrapped my arms around his neck in a feeble attempt to hold on. He ran as fast as he could with me to the nearest bathroom. It was locked. Next, my dad did the unexpected.

He turned, with me still in his arms, found the opening to the gate of the track, and ran across the grassy football field. I could not believe it! Here was my dad being a true hero! He was carrying me like a princess, though I am sure I did not look like one, across the football field. My dad, a forty-five-year-old man, ran with me, his full-grown teenage daughter, in his arms across that field. I could hear his uneven breathing and saw the grass passing by as I held my head down. I felt bad for him having to carry me and I knew he must have been hurting. I did not know what force compelled him that far. Perhaps it was God and his love for his daughter. When we reached the bathroom, I went and sat in a stall in case I threw up again. Then, I could hear my coach outside the bathroom.

At first, I did not know why the coach was outside the room or how he found out I was sick. I then realized he probably saw my dad run across the field with me, along with every other person still in the stands. I could not actually hear what my father and the coach were conversing about, but I could hear the resonance of their voices. My dad cracked the door.

“Can I come in, Lauren?”

I said, “yes.” I was the only person in there anyway.

He felt my forehead and said, “Try splashing some water on your face.” I did as he suggested. The water felt refreshing on my skin. My father then went out of the bathroom and came

back with a bottle of water.

Soon after I drank the water, I was feeling better. I walked out of the bathroom and was met with the concerned faces of my coaches. I was flattered that they cared enough to make sure I was all right. I really was feeling better.

I told them I was “All-good.” I had most likely pushed myself too hard and was dehydrated. After the coaches were assured, my father and I backtracked to the truck. This time I made it there “a-okay.” On the way back home we stopped at a gas station. I picked out a Gatorade and something small to eat from inside. I was a battery and once both energy sources were in my hands, my body began to be recharged with new strength. The whole ride home I replayed the scene of my father carrying me across the football field. I remembered feeling secure in his strong arms and the determination he had to make sure that his daughter got somewhere safe. I decided then and there that he was my hero.

Snapshots of an (Un)Happy Family

Allen LeBlanc

Instructor: Ms. Ramona Cutrer

Course: English 101

Genre: Memoir

Happy families are all alike;
every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

—Leo Tolstoy

“If I had a dollar for every time something stupid came out of your mouth, I’d be driving a car with a functioning air conditioner far, far away from here.” My father always had a way with words when it came to speaking to my mother. I agreed with him though. The last place I wanted to be was in the back of my mother’s dilapidated Grand Marquis with no air conditioning, next to my plump older brother. He smelled like stale Cheetoes on a regular basis, but with the temperature of the car rising in the April heat, his stench was unbearable—and we were just getting started. My family knew better than to put ourselves in these kinds of situations. But, here we were, driving in an un-air-conditioned car, to go on a hiking trip together.

We set out for a place called Tunica Hills in eastern Louisiana. Why hiking? My parent’s marriage counselor insisted that doing group activities would improve our family’s relationship. Naturally, if you take a group of people that hate each other, stuff them into a small, hot car and then force them to navigate through a bug-infested hell-bog, they will emerge on the other side in a state of perfect harmony. So, we packed the car lightly, anticipating the trip to be cut short. In our jalopy were a pile of maps, folded incorrectly; a half-empty can of bug

spray; and a picnic basket, containing a pan of lasagna. The trip, if everything happened as it should, was supposed to last all morning and most of the afternoon. My brother was less than pleased about this because he was missing an all-day marathon of James Bond movies. But still, we all agreed to go. My mind wandered to the only safe and quiet place in the car, the image of my own reflection—staring hopeless and miserable right back at me. My father began fiddling with the three buttons controlling the functioning windows in the car, overwhelmed by their simple, slightly chipped labels. He cursed as the windows fell and rose, apparently of their own volition. Meanwhile, my brother dug in his feeding trough to sate the gluttonous beast within him. He retrieved what I imagined to be a sandwich, but he consumed it so quickly, I only caught remnants of partially devoured bologna on his face, suspended by globs of mayonnaise. Disgusted, I turned my attention to the commotion in the front of the vehicle. The windows, now bending to my father's iron will, descended—much to my mother's dismay. "The wind is gonna mess up my hair!" she whined.

"It's hot enough to melt iron in here, woman! I'm keepin' the window rolled down." My father put his arm on the windowsill. I wiped my forehead, leaving my hand moist, salty, and glistening. I was sweating. Not cool.

"Why is it so hot in here?" I barked. I swept my hand near the vent by my feet. There was no air current.

"The air conditioner's broken. Can't handle a little sweat, princess?" my brother sneered. I would have loved to round-house kick his grubby, ugly head clean off his shoulders. But, I decided that would only add to the smell of decay coming from his side of the car. My mother was attempting to navigate using a road atlas, but was having trouble reading the map because she had to constantly swipe her hair out of her face.

“Harold,” my mother said to my father, “I think we should pull over at that post office. We ain’t got no clue as to where we goin’.” She set the atlas on the floor.

“For the last time,” my father’s face changed colors, “I know exactly where I’m goin’! I don’t need no directions.” He had no idea where he was going. And he did need directions. Mere seconds later, my father yanked the steering wheel to the right, careening us into the post office parking lot. This detour left us all silent except for my mother. Surprise, surprise!

“You see, Harold! I knew we were lost. Just like ya father to never admit when he’s wrong.” She was addressing the air in the back seat of the car. My brother was rapidly texting on his phone, and I was staring out the still-standing window, imagining I was somewhere else.

“I ain’t asking for directions. I just need to orient ma’self.” Beads of sweat were forming on my father’s shiny, balding head. This meant he was nervous. “Now, if you wanna be a yuppie and go in that office and ask them nice people for directions, be ma guest.” My father rolled his eyes.

“Fine! I just need a moment to freshen up.” My mother bent down to dig into her massive purse. She retrieved a comb and began brushing her hair into the perfect black bob that she always wore. She straightened her flared pink glasses on her nose, and then returned to her purse.

“Oh for the love of God, woman, you’re not gettin’ married again, just go in there,” my father snapped at my mother. My mother looked up from her purse.

“You’re right,” she opened the car door, “and it’s a damn shame.” She trotted off towards the Tunica post office.

My mother returned moments later with good news. The woman she spoke with in the post office explained that the hiking trail we were looking for was only eight miles up a cliff

littered with wild coyotes and potential cannibals, over three bridges that may or may not still be there, and along a road that was responsible for several annual deaths. “Better to be eaten by crazy people than to be in this car anymo’,” my father said enthusiastically as he spun our hearse out of the parking lot, and back along the crater-filled road.

The only sound that occupied the car was the harsh crunching noise our rattletrap made after crossing a pothole—and there were plenty of them. Even still, the silence from my family was most certainly welcome. I’d prefer an orchestra of fingernails and steel wool on a chalkboard to their constant bickering.

After half an hour of bouncing up and down in my seat from the anatomy of the road, my nausea began to subside. Outside my window lurked amorphous terrors—shadows of inscrutable horror. The canopy of trees was completely impermeable by the sunlight, that was desperately trying to reach the sparse vegetation choking to death on the knees of great Red Maples. An amalgamation of werewolves, cannibals, and jungle cats most likely stalked our car, hiding in the shadows, marionettes in our headlights.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, we reached what we thought was the trailhead. It was a small, round dirt pit with a sign-in board in the middle. The “parking spots” were on the perimeter of the pit, up a ridiculous incline. My mother bent down to dig in her purse again, “Anyone want a mint?” she asked. She continued talking to herself, “I can’t find anythin’ in this darned purse!” The babble continued as my father slammed our car into any number of gears, trying to heave the exhausted vehicle up a nearly fifty-degree incline. My mother was in her own World of Purse, giving everyone a chance to relax. For almost a moment, we were complacent. Then, it happened.

My father tapped the accelerator a tad too hard with his steel-toed boot. The car stalled, and then with all the great force of a handicapped, senior Bingo team, accelerated forward over a hole the size of a small planet. Everything in the car, including my mother's purse went flying in the air. "MY MINTS! Harold! My mints!" She was screaming so much you would have thought she was giving birth to a cactus. Her mints had flown through the air and onto the floor by my father's feet.

"Woman! What the hell are you doin'?" Get up from under there!" Mom had dove under the steering wheel to retrieve her mints. However, she didn't realize that slinging her flailing torso over the stick shift was a bad idea. At some point in this episode, my mother hit the stick shift, and put the car into reverse. My father was cursing, my mother was floundering, my brother was choking, and I was dying. Our car accelerated back down the hill and crashed into the sign-in board. Surely, the park rangers were now aware of our arrival.

As soon as everyone recovered from the initial shock, the blame game started. My father threw accusations at my mother, and she deflected them with insults to his midsection. To avoid being hit by the verbal shrapnel flying through the air, I turned my attention to the newly created crash site. The sign-in board was missing a leg, but was still intact. The trunk had opened during the collision, but aside from that minor damage, the car seemed to function up to its regular tin foil standard. The yelling soon ceased and my mother began prepping us on bug safety and how to properly step over a log in case of snakes. "Allen," my mother called to me, "get the bug spray outta the trunk so I can demonstrate howda put it on." I rolled my eyes and stuffed my arms into the slightly ajar trunk. Feeling around, I recovered a tire iron and a first aid kit, but no bug spray.

"It's not here, Ma," I told her with frustration. After an

exasperated sigh, she began a Homer-esque narration, complete with her own Southern invocation to her muse, the holy Virgin. “Oh sweet Virgin motha of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, please come down an’ bless the stupid outta ma boy. Tell him that we look with our eyes an’ not our hands, an’ help ‘im to see that his momma is...” Blocking out my mother’s babble, I treaded towards the car only to find my brother’s portly torso worming into the trunk. I pushed him aside and used my God-given eyesight to locate my mother’s precious bug spray. My brother maintained a hawk-like eye on the picnic basket sticking out of the trunk.

“Don’t worry, chubs, the food’s all yours.” I pulled a can of Pam cooking spray from the trunk. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” I turned back to Mother Angelica, “Excuse me, Reverend, there’s nothing but liquid butter in here.” Flabbergasted, she finally paused her Lord loving lips. The silence highlighted every corner of the universe, and all the children of the world were happy and fed. Then she spoke again.

“We’ll just spray it on, and the bugs will slide right off!” She gave us a perky grin, snatched the can from me, and trotted off towards the trailhead.

“Where the devil are you goin’, woman?” My father growled. She spun around and tilted her head.

“Why, I’m goin’ to apply this fine repellent, and then hike with ma boys. You can sit ya fat ass on that rock and bake to death, if you would be so kind.”

“You tol’ me we was havin’ a picnic, so I says we havin’ a picnic.” My father’s face was the shade of a chameleon that had one too many Red Hots.

“Oh, good heavens. How’d I forget? Eric!” My mother bellowed, “Eric!” My loving brother, the spitting image of Ignatius J. Reilly, perked up from the trunk of the car—his face slath-

ered in marinara sauce. I let a small chuckle out but my father was less than pleased.

“Boy! I swear to God.” I swore I saw steam wafting from my father’s sparkling dome. Eric wiped his face with his sleeve, and nabbed the picnic basket. With our supplies gathered and our morale slightly intact, we set off down Trail C, not knowing what could possibly lie ahead.

We marched together in a line. My father walked in front, then my mother, then my brother, and I brought up the rear. A peaceful silence overtook our party. Perhaps we were exhausted from all the yelling, or, more likely, we were waiting until we were deeper into the woods to kill one another. At that moment, I thought of our hokey next-door neighbors, the Killderoys. Oh, I could only imagine how they were spending their Saturday. They were most likely sipping apple martinis on their yacht, named Lucille Ball, slowly drifting away from their four-story mansion on their dainty private lake. Picket fences and white—painfully white—teeth filled my memory. My brother smacked his neck and ate the bug he killed with the blow. I was back in reality. We were the Flintstones, and they were the Brady Bunch.

After a few minutes of trekking, we reached our first obstacle. On each side was a drop of over 100 feet, and, naturally, the only way down the path was a very narrow slither of land littered with very thin, rotten trees. My father cleared his throat, “Alright, I ain’t gonna have nobody flyin’ off the edge of this thing. Imma gonna go down first, then the women, then you, Eric.” My father often referred to my mother and me as “the women.” My father assumed a tactical crouching pose and shimmied down the narrow path. My mother was next. She grappled onto my arm, anchoring half of her body to the top of the incline, while stretching her other half as far as she could—

like a turtle stretching its neck out into oncoming traffic. My brother, arms at his waist, was not far behind us. I gave my mother a slight nudge, to catalyze this very slow process, and she almost toppled over. "Boy, I swear to God if you knock me down this hill you'll be on the first bus to the military!" my dad said.

My brother chimed in, "Yeah, watch your step. I'd hate for them to have to shave your ..." and then my brother's foot got caught in a small hole. His legs rolled over his head, followed by the picnic basket, and finally, into me. Our entire family dominoed into each other until we were one great, big rolling LeBlanc ball. We hit the bottom of the hill with a thud, my father breaking each of our falls. He cursed my mother, the ground, the picnic basket, his shoelaces, the Democrats, someone named Carl, the color yellow, John Wayne, my mother again, and the Russians. We pressed on.

Before us was an empty riverbed, baking in the hot sun. My brother's stomach grumbled as his disappointed eyes met the remains of our smashed picnic basket. We trudged along in the cumbersome silt, moaning and groaning in the torrid sunlight. A swarm of insects descended upon us like a jaguar on a sickly llama. The buzzing of my mother's babble and the insects was too much for me to handle. I am normally adept at blocking out my mother's rambling, but the heat was so overwhelming that even she was having trouble articulating her inane thoughts at a decent pace. Far ahead of the crowd was my father, simmering as always. I couldn't imagine boiling on the outside and on the inside. "This heat ain't nothin'! You shoulda been in 'Nam. Dis heat ain't nothin' like jungle heat. Plus, you got the Vietcong to worry 'bout. People fallin' into booby trapped holes in the ground, feet rottin' off, it wasn't pretty." My father liked to pretend that he was in Vietnam. Or any war at all, really.

“Ma shoe!” My mother cried out. Her foot was caught ankle deep in the slosh beneath our feet. My father rolled his head in a semicircle,

“Can’t we go for two minutes without one of you ninnies wettin’ ya’ pants?” My father tried to move forward to pull my mother out of the muck, but realized he couldn’t move either.

“It’s a damn ambush! Man ya’ stations! Down! DOWN! GET TO COVER, BOYS!” In a hysteric rage, both my mother and my father were thrashing about, ankle deep in quicksand. I sprung forward, leaving my shoes behind in the mud. Eric was claimed by the muck, so I waded to my mother.

“Ma new shoes! Oh, Allen, help ya motha! Oh, lord. Oh, Jesus! I’m ...”

“I promise I’ll get you out if you shut up and grab my hand!” I reached out to her, grabbed her hand, and pulled hard. She came loose and collided with me in a spastic fashion. My father, who was now also shoeless, managed to spring from the snare, leaving only my brother trapped. Because he weighed roughly one metric ton, removing him from the goop was going to be difficult. My father, my mother, and I lifted a hefty tree branch up off the ground and extended it towards him. Eric grabbed onto it and, with several coordinated heaves, we extracted him from the goop.

“Bastards. Settin’ booby traps. Nobody messes with Harold LeBlanc! USA! USA! USA!” My father continued chanting. I was amazed that we were able to accomplish anything together other than demolition or collisions. With my father’s chanting in the background, we, now shoeless, in true Flintstone fashion, journeyed towards the woods to avoid the gathering storm clouds. “God damn it! I will not be blown to bits by this lightnin’! Let’s get a move on! I ain’t dying today!” My father’s voice, cracking like a whip, echoed the booming thunder and

flashes of lightning. Scurrying up the massive cliff before us was no easy task, but was completely necessary.

I took inventory of our misery: we were lost, sunburnt, starving, covered in whelps, potentially afflicted with West Nile Virus, shoeless, and slathered with mud. In a state of pure exhaustion, I dragged my feet up the massive incline leading back into the woods. My father was barking orders from the top of the hill, and we all kept our heads down, trying to avoid his gaze. My mother, who was somehow ahead of me, collapsed and, landed face first in the mud. She hit the ground with a delicate, but audible thud. "Oh, for the love of Christ. Boy, help yo' momma up." My father threw his arms in the air. I looked at Eric, who he was clearly addressing as "boy", but he simply crossed his arms and stared at me. I moved my mother to a nearby tree, and sat her up. She looked up, her face covered in mud, quivered her lip, and began to cry. She cried, and cried, and then the sky opened up and starting crying too. I was petrified. I had never seen my mother so exposed before, or my family so quiet. My father waddled over to her and put her on his back, carrying her piggyback style. A conundrum, a miracle, I thought. Unity among the fallen? No. This was, instead, a unified effort to escape hell and one another but unity nonetheless.

We hiked over mountains the size of molehills for hours, my mother strapped to my father's back—calm, peaceful, and silent. The heat that returned at the end of the storm dramatically reduced the bounty we had placed on one another's heads; so the bickering was slightly less cutthroat. "Finally! Salvation." My father rejoiced as the tattered remains of the sign-in board came into vision. He set my mother down gently on the ground. "My back's probably broken. Men ain't made to carry elephants, ya know."

Her hand lingered on his arm, "yeah, well, lucky you

ain't a man, then."

I got into the back seat of our un-air-conditioned car. The stench had worsened dramatically. And, yes, we argued just as much on the way back. But, there we were, sweating, coated in mud and bug bites, miserable as could be, but unified in our misery all the same.

Memories of Penryn College

Bronwen Hunt

Instructor: Mr. Paul Crawford

Course: English 101

Genre: Memoir

January fourteenth of two thousand and six was my first day of high school. I was in eighth grade at Penryn College, a large school situated in a gorgeous bush field sitting on a hill overlooking Nelspruit and the Crocodile River Valley in Mpumalanga, South Africa. I was fourteen years old when I enrolled in high school. In South Africa, eighth grade was the beginning of high school. Penryn College is a private Christian school. It was a drastic change compared to the other schools I had previously attended. Our uniform consisted of a blue, white, and red plaid skirt and a white blouse with the school's badge and logo, "One And All." Mondays and Fridays we wore a blazer and tie, because we had a short morning church service in our school chapel.

The first day I ambled down the pathway to my new school, it was overwhelming. The school was enormous compared to what I was used to. The largest school I had been a part of was composed of about ninety students. There was a vast number of people who went to Penryn. I only knew a few individuals who went to pre-school with me. It was exceptionally loud with people chatting, giggling, and catching up with each other since we had recently come back from summer break. I will always remember the smell of the first day, freshly cut grass and the smell of food being cooked in the hostel. It was a clear, sunny day with a cool breeze. There were plenty of things

happening on the first day. Students were trying to find their classes, teachers rushed to get their classes, and eighth graders were panicking, not knowing where to go. School pictures were taken outside, and then all the scholars, except the eighth graders, were led into the chapel. When we entered the chapel, everyone applauded and cheered as we marched down the stairs to congratulate us in making it this far. We were given a sincere welcome speech by the principal, Mr. Greg Theron, and then introduced to the Student Executive, the twelfth graders. For the remainder of the day we stayed in the chapel doing orientation activities and getting to know the school as well as other students.

From that day on, I have made many close friends, worked diligently at my lessons, and had many wonderful experiences. One of the highlights of my ninth grade year was going on the Fanie Botha Hiking Trail. It took us five days to tread the trail with backpacks. The entire ninth grade went on the hike, and later we had to reflect on our experience in an Afrikaans report. I was really touched by the beauty of nature. When we came for a holiday in 2002 to visit family in America, my mother submitted her resume for a job as a teacher. The fifth of February two thousand and eight was a turning point for my family. We were moving to America! My mother was offered a job as a second grade teacher in East Baton Rouge, so my younger sisters and I had no choice but to come. Leaving the school and all my friends created considerable regret. I had to start over yet again by meeting new people, getting to know St. Francisville, and trying to adapt to my new surroundings.

School is different in America. I had to get used to spelling words differently, and had to pay close attention to what people said in order to understand what they were trying to tell me. I got to choose which classes I wished to take because they

were not prescheduled for me. I found it easy to make friends. Since I was from another country, people wanted to know what it was like where I was originally from. It has taken me a long time to get used to living in America, but I realize now that we live a safer and freer life here. By that I mean, we do not need electrical fences or bars across the windows, nor do we worry about people breaking into the car or house like we might in South Africa. Most people do not realize how dangerous South Africa is. They go for a holiday expecting it to be a safe place to relax and enjoy the beauty of it all when it is actually the opposite. Some of the people who live in South Africa are demented. They hide behind bushes to attempt rape, mugging, and killing. This has all changed for us, however.

My friendships have not ended thanks to Facebook and Skype, and I have made many new friends in St. Francisville and Hammond. The change has been a challenge, but I have had many new experiences. Some of these experiences are riding in the creek with friends on three wheelers, being able to wander around without worrying about people jumping out from behind bushes, being able to graduate from high school, and moving out of my parents' house. We are all grateful for how well the move has turned out for us and hope our paperwork will all go as planned for getting our green cards. It was a huge transition for my family and me, but we are all enjoying America and plan on being here for a long time. We still visit my dad's side of the family in South Africa during the summer break and have a tremendous time seeing them and sharing experiences, but we genuinely look forward to coming back to our safe environments in St. Francisville and Hammond.

The Grand Theft

Austin Cradic

Instructor: Ms. Birgitta Ramsey

Course: English 101

Genre: Memoir

By far the scariest predicament I ever got myself into would be the time I almost got arrested for robbing a house. I can still remember the police officer talking to me with my hands on the hood of the car: “Now I want you to slowly grab your license and registration, and don’t make any sudden movements because I won’t hesitate to pop a cap in your ass!” That was the day I learned how temperamental cops can be and how suddenly the tides can turn in life.

Now, before I can explain how I ended up in this predicament, I must first explain the series of events which led up to this unfortunate situation. It was a Monday morning during the spring break of my junior year of high school when my friend, Jeremy, invited me to come with his family to Destin for a week. I lived in the dormitory at my school, so some of my room appliances were packed into my car like my TV, desk lamp, clothes, etc. We were planning on leaving later that afternoon, so we decided to get up and go get breakfast at 9:00 in the morning with our friend, Jack. There was nothing wrong with that. As I pulled out of his street, I came to a rolling stop at the STOP sign expecting that no one was around to see it. Then, we rode through the drive-thru of Dairy Queen and Burger King for breakfast for the three of us. After we acquired our greasy nutrition, Jeremy told me to pull up by one of the duck ponds so we could sit down and enjoy our breakfast with a compli-

mentary morning cigarette. I skeptically asked him if that was all right and if anyone was going to make a fuss about it. He replied by telling me that many people park by the pond all the time. So, I did as he said and lit up a cig while drinking my cup of Joe and enjoying my DQ morning snack. Seconds after I did this, my friends and I saw a neighborhood security truck pull up to the pond with a Hancock County sheriff's car following him.

As the cop car slowly approached, we could hear him on his intercom instructing, "Driver, get out of the car and put your hands up." As confused as I was by the situation, I nervously tried to take the keys out of the ignition in a calm manner. The impatient cop then warned a second time, "Driver, get out of the car now or I will shoot you!"

I then turned to my window, frantically rolling down the window with the manual window roller and spoke in a strong yet cracked voice explaining, "I'm trying to get the keys out of the ignition!"

After accomplishing this task, I got out of the car with my hands up in the air to continue following the next instruction from the intercom system. "Now put your hands on the hood," demanded the sheriff. Out of sheer nervousness I immediately put my hands on the top of the car by the driver's window. The officer repeated again, "Put your hands on the HOOD of your car, sir!"

Realizing my mistake I walked to the front of the car putting my hands on the hood as instructed. Then, he told my friends to get out and put their hands on the back of my car. As they did this, the officer finally got out of his car and then proceeded to handcuff both of my friends, telling them, "This is for my safety," which made us think that he was convinced we were dangerous criminals. I stood in the grass barefooted with rockachaws, twigs, and needles stuck into the soles of my

feet. I smelled the fresh morning dew mixed with the collected dust on the hood of my car as another cop car pulled up with a German shepherd in the back seat. He conveniently parked his vehicle where the seat with the dog was right by my face and then cracked the window before he turned off the engine and got out, allowing the dog to bark ferociously in my face in order to intimidate me. It worked. "Oh shit!" I exclaimed still keeping calm and my head down. Finally, the older cop who looked to be in his fifties began to ask us questions.

The officer just threw questions into our faces without giving us a chance to breathe. "What were you doing on Fairway Drive? Is this your car? Where are the masks?" The younger cop with the dog who appeared to be in his twenties ran up, looked into the back of the car and yelled, "There's a TV in the back!" over and over again. The older officer then added to the list of questions, "Why is there a television in the backseat of your car?" This was the first question I could answer coherently, "It's my TV from my dorm room. I'm on break right now and I put it in my car to take it home." After I had answered this question, he asked to see all of our ID's and my car's registration while taking the handcuffs off of my friends. Meanwhile, he was threatening to "pop a cap in my ass" if I made any sudden movements in getting my identification. After looking over my papers, he asked us the two remaining questions: "Why were you on Fairway Drive? Where are the ski masks?" Jeremy knew the answer to this one because that was the name of the street he lived on. "That's where my house is, sir," Jeremy stated. This only left the question of the masks unanswered.

We knew what he meant by a mask. We were, however, confused by the plural form and the fact that he said "ski masks." While ordering our food, we decided it would be funny to go through the drive-thru with one of us wearing a Guy Faux

mask, from the popular movie and graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, while keeping a straight face the whole time like nothing out of the ordinary was occurring. In the Burger King drive-thru, they thought it was hilarious, especially since Jack was ordering in a funny, rich noble voice. However, the Dairy Queen staff did not have the same sense of humor and we ended up waiting 15 minutes for our food with no line inside or in the drive-thru. During that large gap of time, we suspected that maybe they were calling security on us, but shook the idea away since it did not seem like a big deal at the time. Now, we were proven wrong.

I opened the door to my back seat and grabbed the mask and handed it to the officer telling him this was the mask he was talking about. He shook his head and asked us where the rest of the masks were. I told him that this was the only mask we had and the multiple ski masks must have been a miscommunication. That was when we found out the real reason we got handcuffed and questioned. Apparently, as we left Jeremy's street, one of his elderly neighbors accidentally set off the house alarm while going for a morning walk. When the older policeman heard this alert over his radio, he drove by the street to check on the alarm and saw my friends and me run the stop sign exiting Jeremy's street, a traffic violation that seemed suspicious. He immediately got our license plate number in case he needed it for further use. Later, when he heard a report that "a car full of masked guys were going through the DQ drive-thru" with the same license plate, he became even more suspicious. Then the neighborhood security man saw us parking by the duck pond and identified us to the officer, leading us to the predicament we found ourselves in. The only problem we had now was to find a way to convince the officer that we had nothing to do with the alarm going off. Instead of checking the house to see if anything had actually been stolen, the cops went straight for us.

Finally, I pleaded with the officer, giving him the most down to earth and personal statement I could think of on the spot, "Please, sir, we are only a bunch of nerds who were just messing around." Surprisingly, the expressions on their face became less tense as they started to look at who they were dealing with. I didn't have shoes on and was wearing a Beatles t-shirt that said, "Let It Be." Jeremy had a t-shirt of an 8-bit video game from the '80s, and Jack had on jeans and a white t-shirt that still had fresh grease stains on it from breakfast. The young, arrogant cop who said nothing the whole time but still had a smug look on his face started nodding in response to what I said, "I can see that."

"Hold up," broke in the older cop still dissatisfied, "We still don't know why the alarm went off at the house or if you guys are lying. And even if you guys did not rob the house, I can still tack on a moving violation for running that stop sign, an offense for miscellaneous mischief, and supporting the corruption of minors since Jeremy is seventeen and you are eighteen."

Not even a minute after stating this, we heard a voice over the radio, "Officer Brigat, the neighbors just called and said that they accidentally set off the alarm at their house and not to worry." As soon as we heard that call, he responded back in confirmation and looked back at us with a more relaxed look on his face.

"Just go home," he said to us. I looked at him extremely confused, "Wait, what about the other charges sir?" He just shook his head, "I did worse things when I was kid. This is nothing. There's no reason to have a dirty record over something as stupid as this. We're just going to send some field questioning forms to your friend's house in the next couple of days so there are no lawsuits involved later on. You are free to go."

My friends and I just stood outside my car still shocked

as the two police cars and the security truck left. Even a minute after they left, we still stood there just staring at each other with blank expressions on our faces.

As soon as we got back to my friend's house, we all lit up another cigarette. I still swear to this day that it was the best damn cigarette I've ever had. Even today, I still look back at that situation and think about how fast predicaments can change. I know one thing, I'll never mess with a drive-thru lady again!

Perfection Comes in Essay Form

Brittanie Stein

Instructor: Dr. Lisa Moody

Course: English 101

Genre: Memoir

Starting my Senior English class was scarier than facing a swarm of cockroaches. I walked in my first day, seated myself next to two of my best friends, and waited patiently for my teacher. As soon as the bell rang, she strode through the door in high-heeled black boots. She stopped in the middle of the room and said, “I am Ms. Buckley and my mission in life is to fail you.” If that did not make our jaws drop, the next part surely did.

She went on to explain that all seniors at Covington High would have to participate in the Progressive Research Project or PRP as we so fondly called it. To add to the fears, if we did not complete the project in a timely manner we would fail Senior English. Ms. Buckley handed out a syllabus with dates for which each annotation, essay draft, PowerPoint, product, and the completed binder would be due. This was going to be fun.

Every senior would choose a controversial subject to research. The entire first semester consisted of compiling our research and forming our own opinions. We would then create an eight-page paper to turn in. This paper would be accompanied by our annotations, both used and unused. Then, we would have to make a PowerPoint to show to our panel of judges. That is right, judges. Oh yes, they would be giving us our overall grade. I would also have to make a product to show the judges. This was the broadest part of the PRP. A product

could be anything from a booklet to the deer head that hung in your living room. Somewhere in between all of this madness, we would compile all of our research, essay drafts, final draft, PowerPoints, and at least a picture of our product in a binder.

Obviously, the first task to accomplish was to write at least ten annotations. These annotations would show our primary research done for our project. But wait, I still had not chosen a subject. Perhaps I would choose “Killing Cows for Food is Beneficial to the Amount of Methane Gas Let Out into Our Atmosphere.” Maybe, “Which Came First: The Chicken or the Egg?” Both were very good topics that have been argued for centuries, but neither satisfied my hunger for research.

Finally, while talking to my step-mom, it hit me. She was a special education teacher for a local elementary school. I had asked her what she thought caused children to become autistic. She replied that she was not sure, but there were several theories, including childhood vaccinations. That would become my topic for the most well-written, awesome, fantastic paper ever. For the next two months, I found many scientific articles on childhood vaccines and their connections with autism. Some of them made sense, while others contradicted themselves greatly. However, this all helped me form my opinion that childhood vaccines could in no way cause autism. Once I had my ten annotations and many more articles that were highlighted, I was able to write my eight-page paper.

As the second semester began, I started compiling my binder. I had heard horror stories of not starting your binder early enough. So, I took a little time every day to delicately put all my articles and annotations into clear plastic slips. They were all placed in alphabetical order and then placed in an order which showed whether or not I used them in the paper. I also slid my beginning and final drafts of the essay into the slips and placed

them in the back. By the time that was finished, my three-inch binder was nearly full.

I finally began my work on my PowerPoint. Surprisingly, this was one of the most nerve wracking things I had to do for my project. I had to present it to the judges in an understandable way so that they would be convinced that my viewpoint was the correct one.

The product was equally as intimidating. This would aid in my explanations. The only product I could think was appropriate enough would be to make a pamphlet on autism in children and on vaccinating a child. Almost as soon as I finished my two final tasks and added them to the massive, three-inch binder, it was time to give the presentation.

I walked into the computer lab with chattering teeth and wobbling knees. I shakily shook each of the three judges' hands and introduced myself. I set my binder in front of them and turned to the computer to pull up my PowerPoint. When the image of my first slide appeared on the screen, I let out a breath and turned back to my judges. These were the people who would decide the fate of my senior year. It seems funny now how I related the three professionals in front of me to the three fates from Greek mythology. I wondered who would be the one to cut my string. Without further hesitation, I begin talking. When I finished my presentation, I handed them the pamphlets (all of them surprisingly wanted to keep a copy), thanked them, and left.

Two days later, I sat in my first-period class taking notes. Suddenly, I felt a small vibration in my jean pocket, indicating I had received a text message. Making sure the teacher was focused on her lecture, I pulled my cell phone out and read the text message: "Did you hear?" The message came from my friend who was in first-period English. "Hear what?" I replied.

A minute or so later, my phone went off again, “OMG wait ‘til you get to English.” Confused, I put my phone away, and went back to my notes. Soon enough I was in English class. Everyone was staring at me as I walked in.

As Ms. Buckley came into the classroom, she stopped right in front of me. “Did you hear yet?” she asked. Hesitantly I replied with, “No.” With the biggest smile I have ever seen grace her face she stated, “You are the first and only senior to receive a perfect score of one hundred percent on PRP.” I could have died right then and there.

I realize now that all of the stress I caused myself at the beginning of the year was useless. I found every step of the project to be easier each time. I believe the fact that my teacher wanted to “fail” the entire class might have put the fear of God in me. However, the more I think about it, the more I see she just wanted us to take English class seriously. The phrase, “I am Ms. Buckley and my mission in life is to fail you” should go down in an historical phrases book. If it were not for hearing that, I would not have tried as hard. The harder you try, the closer to perfection you get—even if it is in essay form.

A Week of Hell

Taylor Swain

Instructor: Dr. Lisa Moody

Course: English 101

Genre: Memoir

My dad and I left early one Sunday morning headed to the Buffalo River on a nine-day canoe trip. The seven-hour ride to Arkansas was plagued with broken-down cars, flat tires, and speeding tickets. These mishaps set the tone for the remainder of the trip.

We decided, as we entered Arkansas, that it was time to get groceries and plan the remainder of our Arkansas experience. We shopped for about an hour and felt like we were getting an ample amount of food for the two of us. After leaving the store, we headed to the outfitter where we would launch the canoes and begin the trip. They told us we would be picked up ninety miles away at the end of the ninth day. We packed our canoe with the tent, food, and other necessities and then we set off. Finally, being on the water lifted our spirits from the bad day we had just experienced, and we felt as if the trip would be one to remember.

After spending the night on a sandbank five miles down the river, we woke up early and headed out. We figured we would need to cover about twelve miles a day. Half way through the second day we had covered ten miles, so we slowed our pace for the remaining two miles and made camp early. The twelve miles we had just traveled worked up a ferocious appetite in us that was unexpected. We did not think about rationing the food we had for the remainder of the trip and feasted

instead. The next two days were just like the first. We covered twelve miles and over indulged at night. The beginning of the fifth day is where our problems began to occur.

A thunderstorm began that morning and did not let up for hours. We only covered about five miles due to the rain, and realized that our over indulgence in eating the nights before meant we may not have enough food for the remaining four days. My dad said, "Son, I believe we may have gotten ourselves into a bad spot." The reality that we may have to travel the remaining forty-something miles with little to no food hit us hard. We had both let ourselves down by not preparing more for this trip and relying solely on the good luck of past trips. My dad and I, being outdoors regulars, felt that no matter what happened we would be able to overcome the situation.

A decision had to be made. We did not know if we should turn around and travel back up the part of the river we were familiar with or instead continue down the part of the river that was unfamiliar. I told my dad, "It is up to you what we do. You have been canoeing longer than I have." We decided to paddle our canoes with the current and continue down the river to the pick-up point.

We were going to try and cover more ground per day in order to make up for the lost miles during the thunderstorm. On the sixth day, we covered about eighteen miles. However, that was the day we ran out of food completely. That night we made camp and just sat around the fire. Our attitudes were slowly becoming worse and worse. We knew the next three days would be physically exhausting without food, but we remained hopeful we would get out of the situation unscathed. As we were sitting around the fire, we heard thunder in the distance and our spirits immediately began to shrink. During the night, the rain began once again. As the rain hit our canoe, it sounded like a

never-ending drum beat. This rain did not cease until well into the seventh day.

This day was a complete waste as we only covered a single mile. We made it to another sandbar and set up camp for the night. The rains continued and the feeling we both had that said there was no way we were going to make it to the pick-up point on the ninth day became a reality.

With the rain continuing to fall, we hunkered down for the next three days. The next morning my dad and I woke up to a somber feeling, but it was necessary to paddle on. With our spirits already depleted and our stomachs rumbling like a hurricane we paddled down the river. A distant roar could be heard. "What's that?" I asked. My dad desperately looked back at me and said one word; "Waterfall!" We paddled faster than we had the entire trip, forcing ourselves to the bank, trying to avoid the falls. Exhausted and starving, we sat on the bank. In the distance, the pick-up spot could be seen. This sent chills down our spines. We had made it.

This canoe trip tested me in many ways I had never been tested. Physically, it was an exhausting trip that pushed us to the brink of what any person could handle. Although this trip was physically exhausting, it was more a mental challenge. When faced with the fact that they may not get out of a situation unharmed people must find it within themselves to persevere. The most important thing is that my father and I remained resilient and never gave up. This canoe trip taught us lessons that should never be forgotten.

The Breaking Point

William Dew

Instructor: Dr. Jayetta Slawson

Course: English 101

Genre: Memoir

It was one of those moments. One of those moments that defines a life. One of those breaking points that you persevere through or you do not. In this moment, faith became more than just an abstract. In this moment, it became real. Though many see faith as nebulous, in this moment it became simple and tangible. It became like trusting a chair enough to sit. If the chair did not hold, I would crash to the floor. This moment forced me to sit. I had nothing left.

Three months earlier, I had been married. After a dream-like honeymoon, Tanya and I settled into a little half-a-house apartment and began an exciting new life together. We worked the same job, had the same friends, and did everything together. Yeah, we had misunderstandings learning how to communicate, but life was great. We would lie in bed sharing our dreams, excited for what life had in store. Those three months were incredible.

Then, out of nowhere, the accident happened. Though awful in itself, this was not the moment. I cannot even remember what happened. I remember laughing and driving around on a Polaris Ranger, a sort of ATV golf cart, on our friend's wooded property. I remember hopping out after asking the guy we were riding with if he wanted to drive. After that, I do not remember anything.

I remember bits of the first ten days in the hospital, with

some of those memories being medicinally altered. I remember lots of concerned faces, darkness, and confusion. However, that last week in the hospital is, unfortunately, clear. I lucidly remember the slow realization of my new reality, a confusing explanation of complex surgery, prodding needles, unquenchable fevers, pounding headaches, and tubes. I remember looking at someone in the mirror that I didn't recognize. Though this was easily a breaking point, there was more to come. I knew I was not in good shape, but no one would tell me how Tanya was. No one wanted to add to my already-overwhelmed state. Now, after a two-and-a-half-week hospital stay, I found out for myself.

She recognized me, which was a surprise, but she did not think she was in a hospital. She was in France, in school, and the people were nice, but sometimes they were mean. Nurses explained that Tanya was progressing far better than they had anticipated, but she would have to stay another few months. This extended stay did not come with the promise of complete recovery. Instead, it only offered a hope of stability. The brain is complex and, when damaged, there is no way to predict the outcome. On the uncomfortable ride home, it was hard to think of anything else. I was happy to see her, but it was more than my fragile, broken body could handle. I could not feel it yet, but the moment of my breaking was inevitable.

Now I was at my house, but I was not home. It felt different. It felt foreign. I walked into our little half-a-house alone, without my wife. My mom was there, but I was too detached to be present. Instead, I was in a dream. I was alone. Craving warmth, my body floated over to a little window unit that was supposed to heat this half-a-house. As the stale air slowly warmed me, I started coming to. What I came to was the breaking moment. The dam that medicine and my subconscious built began to crack and reality came rushing in.

Waves of overwhelming uncertainty pummeled me, and my knees began to quiver. My present flashed before my eyes and it was too much. I was in our house, without my wife, and would be for months. I am no longer in a distant hospital, but instead the real world. This world is cold and demanding. I need to work, things cost money, and hospital stays are expensive. Two weeks—no, a few months—in the hospital add up to an expensive stay. These bills are worth more than my life, and I am incapable of work. I cannot drive. I cannot talk without covering the hole in my throat. I have metal in my mouth, a tube coming out of my stomach, screws and staples in my head, and I don't recognize my own face. I lost my wife. I am lost. A nervous breakdown is fast approaching and right before it all crashes in, I eke out a pitiful prayer. "God, I got nothing. You have to, because I got nothing."

Nothing changed physically speaking. My face, my wife, and our finances were still the same. In that moment, however, something happened more profound than the accident. In that moment, a peace that passes as understanding came over me. Though I cannot explain it, a strength that was not inside me originally filled me and kept me from crashing. This moment has defined me. I needed to sit in the metaphorical chair and my faith in a loving God was rewarded.

The Death of a Salesman

Chris Chrisman

Instructor: Dr. Jayetta Slawson

Course: English 370I

Genre: Life Writing

As I stroll through the glass bullpens that pass as offices for us salesmen, I feel confident that I'm on the right path in my car sales career. It's mid-July in South Louisiana and I grab an ice cold Coke from the vending machine. It's the middle of the week and all the veteran salesmen have staked their claims outside, like vultures ready to catch any prey that wanders onto the lot. I head back to the desk I share with Chucky, a friend I have known since junior high school, who got me this job. Chucky has been selling cars for a couple of months now and he vouched for me with his boss. He has been pretty successful so far and is coming off of a great month of sales, but this month has been brutal. Since he's rebounding, he tends to be studying product knowledge and sales techniques with me. We study over our material when it's slow (mostly on the weekdays). But more often than not, we get bitched at by our sales managers for not being outside, as if our presence will summon hordes of customers.

Chucky busts his ass when dealing with customers. He runs back and forth from the prospective buyer to the dealership to get test keys. There's a running joke that he looks like a man on the moon when he hops from foot to foot, hustling to get the possible sale. He's a shorter guy, so sales managers have to look for his shadow or his feet under the cars because they can't spot him when he's around SUVs or trucks. I don't want

to know what the salesmen and receptionist say when my fat ass waddles out to greet a customer.

Chucky has a streak of bad luck, two weeks in particular. He has a customer walk out in the middle of negotiations because the guy wants a car worth 25 grand for 18. Another customer forgets to sign part of her contract so Chucky has to drive out to her house, then workplace to secure an angry signature all because the finance manager has screwed up. The worst is yet to come as a customer Chucky has sold to takes his brand new car home and a coolant line breaks. So, Chucky has to soothe an angry man whose new car is already in our service department.

I quickly learn that salesmen have to deal with a ton of pain-in-the-ass follow-ups and procedures in between trying to sell cars to actively hostile and extremely reluctant customers.

I pop the top on my Coke and stride past Frank, an old salesman who had owned a successful furniture store and is still recognized when he mentions his nickname. Frank knows these vehicles inside and out, but has a bad habit of spitting when speaking. Even Daffy Duck would be disgusted with Frank. We joke that people eventually give in to his tsunami and just buy to get him to shut up.

Frank helped me close a deal on an Indian family once. I had demoed the car and brought them in and Frank negotiated with them. One gimmick the dealership used was a 500 dollar coupon that was applicable to any vehicle on the lot. The family wanted to use this coupon on a vehicle that we would have to trade with another dealership for. This dealership dealt with several others within a large area that spans three states, and any vehicle from an inventory in that area is available for trade.

Back to business, the matron of the family Frank was ne-

gotiating with management to agree to the numbers Frank offered with the caveat that they get the \$500 off as well. Frank, in his hurry to close the deal, agrees and shakes on it. On our way to the desk to retrieve final paperwork, I tell Frank of the mistake.

“Mr. Frank, you just took the coupon on a car that’s not on the lot.”

“What? That sneaky sonnuva ...”

As I wipe the saliva off my chin, I follow him back to his desk. I don’t expect Frank to go back in and hardball the lady the way he does. He explains that she isn’t gonna pull a fast one on him and the handshake didn’t matter. She is adamant that a handshake is a deal, like we’re cattle farmers in the old West. The family gets up to leave (which is the ultimate power move available to the customer) and the sales manager bites the bullet on the 500 bucks. I earn a measly 25 dollars on the sale of a 30,000 dollar car.

Frank is still there, schooling all the young salesmen in sales tactics and product knowledge, all the while giving them an unwanted saliva shower.

I nod to Sam as I pass his desk and take a sip from my can. Sam is the best salesman in the new car department. He’s an immigrant from Africa who has earned his bachelor’s degree in business, but just loves selling cars. Some of the other salesmen refer to him as “King Sam” because of his tendency to get his way and his germaphobic use of a handkerchief to open doors, only to later use it to wipe the sweat off his face. There’s a myth that hangs around the dealership that the old management allowed Sam to physically block the doorway to his cubicle when people attempted to leave and essentially hold them hostage until they agreed to buy a car. Although this is now frowned upon, considering customers often provide feedback

to corporate headquarters, Sam is still known as old school, able to knock anyone's head off.

Sam was involved with several of my customers. The first customer I greeted wanted a basic, stripped-down pickup with power seats. Had to have power seats. Following my training, I told him it would be no problem and we sat down at a desk to go over some numbers. Sam was sent in by the sales manager to make sure I wasn't screwing up. Turns out, I had told the customers around six incorrect pieces of information, most importantly the power seats weren't available in any iteration of the truck he was looking at. The gentleman was nice considering my incompetence and stormed out grumpily. Needless to say, I was punished to study product knowledge for the rest of the day.

Sam also assisted in my first sale. I walked out to a lady looking at an SUV and got some information from her. Sam came out at the request of the sales manager to make sure I wasn't screwing up again. Sam, being an aggressive salesman, took over and closed the deal in no time. I was just glad to help, and it wasn't until one of the sales managers came up and shook my hand that I realized I got partial credit for the sale. My utter surprise outweighed any pride I felt.

Sam is still at that dealership, still atop the sales board. He makes selling look easy. I know I will never be as good as King Sam, but I can dream.

I pass by Johnny's desk and make a quick joke. He laughs and looks around to see if anyone will catch him going for a smoke break. Johnny has only several months of car sales experience, but is just a natural salesman. He's able to fast talk a customer into a car before they know what happened. The most irritating thing is that the sonnuva bitch doesn't know a thing about the cars he's selling. He's just so smooth, he's able

to sidestep questions or just straight-out lie when he doesn't know something. Once Johnny and I were watching Chucky in a heated sales battle, trying to lock down a customer and his wife on a 50,000 dollar luxury SUV. The stakes were high, the couple had driven a considerable distance from home to look at this particular model.

I said to Johnny, "I hope Chucky can sell this guy."

"What are they looking at?"

I told Johnny the name of the vehicle and pointed at it on the lot.

"Oh, is that what that is? I haven't had anyone ask about one of those yet. What's it called again?"

Are you fucking kidding me?! I knew the engine, the horsepower, how to remove the rear seats, whether or not it came with GPS and how to connect a Bluetooth device to it, yet this guy sold more cars in a day than I could in a week. Unfortunately, Chucky couldn't make the SUV come down to the couple's 30,000 dollar requirements and, as it often was, they didn't want to settle for anything less.

The dealership isn't always concerned with trying to make a sale. Once, a sales manager turned out the lights in the dealership on Chucky and an Asian family battling over a small sedan because the manager was convinced they weren't buying at closing time. Needless to say, Chucky didn't hear back from those customers after they stormed out cursing.

In a separate incident with Johnny, he and I took a test drive with a couple of customers looking at a mid-sized truck. The customer started quizzing him about sway control and how it worked. Johnny gave me a look that said, "Fuck if I know. You got this?" I proceeded to explain several different aspects about the truck and when we got back to the dealership, Johnny knocked their heads off at my desk. We made some good mon-

ey off of that deal, despite his assertions to the customer that we would be making less than nothing. When you hear that one from a sales person, they often do make just 50 bucks if you beat them down far enough, but slick sales people like Johnny can use it as a tool to shut you up and tug at your heartstrings.

The single most impressive display of sales I witnessed involved Johnny and a large gentleman. Johnny took the customer out on a test drive of a micro-car that looked like the customer could pick up over his head and carry if he had a flat tire. Upon returning, Johnny came over looking amused and disgusted all at once. I saw no sign of the big customer and Johnny confirmed he had gone to the restroom. Apparently the oversized customer had to struggle a little getting out of the car. This strain must have caused some intestinal distress and well....

He shit himself.

Violently.

The nastiness was so severe that the gentleman's socks had suffered the wrath of the brown bomb. The customer came out of the bathroom and spoke with Johnny. I assume by using witchcraft, Johnny managed to convince the gentleman to sit and attempt to complete the deal. Incredibly, he sat the gentleman at the desk next to Chucky and me and closed the deal deftly. The first offer the customer countered Johnny with was accepted by the managers' desk without argument. The finance manager assigned to Johnny's deal unconventionally shot out of his office, paperwork in hand. Intent on sparing his office and furniture the stench that flowed off the gentleman, the finance manager oddly managed to complete the paperwork in record time.

Of course, lightning speed regarding a car deal, still means about an hour. Chucky and I, studying over product knowledge, caught an occasional whiff from Johnny's customer

and the smell of that man and the image of him signing a contract with soiled khaki shorts and white socks that didn't originally have brown polka dots will stay with me forever.

The running joke became the sales managers' scolding the new guys that failed to close a deal with, "Johnny sold a car to a guy that shit himself, you have no excuses!!!" The sales managers jokingly tortured Sam that day by threatening to bring the soiled chair into his office. Sam decided that he was going to call it a day after that.

While brilliant at sales, Johnny tended to bend the rules or flat-out break them when he saw fit, and often just chose not to do paperwork. I helped him sort through several customers' names and addresses while he forged their signatures on customer satisfaction surveys. Johnny also found several discrepancies with his paychecks and what he had tallied up. It appeared that since Johnny bent the rules, the dealership decided to dock certain accessories that Johnny promised for free from his pay.

Almost a year later, I saw Johnny doing what he does best, selling a truck to a shopper at a dealership in a town an hour away. I'm sure he sold him the truck, the only question is whether the customer drove away with clean shorts or not.

I let my mind wander and think about the shittiest encounters I've had so far. I had a young lady and her overbearing mother come in and break down the cost between trims of a specific sedan dollar-by-dollar. I spent an hour showing her the cost of each feature and they walked out on me unhappy with my answer with my offer firm in hand. They bought the same vehicle down the street that afternoon.

I had a married couple come in looking for a cheap car. The gentleman asked for a car that hadn't been in production since the '80s, specifically a Toyota Tercel. He proceeded to tell

me that his truck was bought in the '70s and had well over two million miles. It came down to money, and he took my numbers and bought a different make the next day.

A cougar and her boyfriend came in and loved a vehicle that I demoed for them. It came down to money as it always did and, as Johnny helped me negotiate, the lady took out her smart phone and proceeded to shop a different dealership right in front of us. We couldn't work out a deal, and she bought a similar car down the street a few days later.

I know these customers bought elsewhere because management has us dog them day after day on the phone. Never, ever, ever give your phone number to a salesman. Even if they don't want to call and bother you, the dealership makes them. I had several more unsuccessful sales attempts, but these stick out in my memory.

I shake off the bad vibes and instead ponder the sales that were in hand only to be foiled by other circumstances. I had a great two-car deal fucked up because the used-car manager that evaluates all trade-ins completely forgot that I left an evaluation slip on his desk. I kept the customer busy for almost an hour, stalling and waiting on the evaluation to get back to me before he became enraged and stormed off leaving behind some choice words for me.

I had a young lady and her parents come in ready to buy a car. I killed the demo and had them ready to talk numbers. She informed me that she was an intern at her university, earning no money. I asked her how she intended to make car payments, and she replied that she had student grant money come in every month. Dumbfounded, I checked with my sales manager to verify my belief that such an arrangement was on the shady side. Unfortunately, it was. Completely satisfied customers had to leave empty handed because they had no way to pay

for a vehicle.

I sit down at the desk and choose to drop the gloom and doom and think about my successes. Four sales in my first official month aren't too bad. At least, according to other salesmen, that's not too bad. I'm painfully aware that my sales to customer ratio is nowhere near the dealership average. Also, I've started showing the two newer guys all the ins-and-outs of the paperwork that I've learned that no one bothered to teach me.

Chucky comes in and sits at the desk we share and tells me that he's quitting sales and moving to the service department. I know that he's had a rough time recently, but who knew that he's pulling the plug already? I feel bad that he feels so defeated, but I completely understand where he's coming from. This business is fucking rough and getting information from customers is like pulling teeth from a shark. He packs his items and waves good-bye. It's a sad situation because he had high hopes for this job and had walked away from a different job, looking for a long-term career.

The veteran sales guys have already warned me that they should install a revolving door to the dealership with all the turnover they have. I've seen four salesmen quit just since I've been here, and I can't help but agree with them.

I return to my desk and as I finish off the last of my Coke. I hear a whistle and look up.

Don, the big boss manager, summons me to the sales desk. I follow him to his office towards the rear of the dealership. I hope he reassigns the new guy that isn't an asshole to share my office.

Don is a no-nonsense manager that enjoys making salesmen uncomfortable. He is concerned with selling the greatest amount of vehicles and making as much money as possible. There was one incident that occurred that enraged Don. He was

concerned that salesmen were spending too much time sitting on the benches outside and using their phones. He chewed the veteran salesmen out one at a time then addressed Chucky and me.

“I don’t give a fuck what anyone else says, just get out there and sell some goddamn cars! If I see someone sitting on that bench I’ll throw that motherfucker in the dumpster! I’m not pissed at you two, but this situation makes me want to take a machine-gun and blow the windows out of this motherfucker!”

Needless to say, everyone was on their best behavior the next day.

Grinning, thinking about how absurd that explosion was, I sit down at Don’s desk.

“We’ve got to let you go. You’re numbers aren’t good enough.”

Blindsided, I listen to him explain that it’s not personal. I hear the trite explanations that I’m a good guy and that he likes my personality and work ethic, but I’m just not cut out for sales.

I want to argue, to say that I deserve longer than a month and a half to prove myself, but who am I to argue with someone who has done this for over thirty years. I thank him for the opportunity, and shake his hand. The last thing he says to me is, “If you ever need a car, we’ll treat you right.”

I grab my computer from my office and shake the sales manager’s hand. I head to the receptionist’s desk to tell the other salesmen that I’m gone. Before I can say anything, Sam asks me what shift I have tomorrow and I say, “None, I’m fired.”

They all reply with the same platitudes about one door closing, etcetera, etcetera. For some reason, this particular failure cuts deeper than any other I’ve faced. I still don’t know why that is.

I can’t look people in the eye and lie as easily as other

guys. I'm not that much of an asshole. That's my rationalization of why I wasn't a good salesman but I'm sure if you asked Frank, Sam, Johnny, or Don they would give you different opinions and you'd be driving off in a new car you didn't necessarily want.

Shifting Boundaries, Crossing Cultures

Victoria Tangi

Instructor: Dr. Jayetta Slawson

Course: English 610

Genre: Autoethnography

Collecting and writing the cultural stories of others has been a significant part of my work as both an oral historian and creative writer for a history museum. My earlier professional training in collecting oral histories demanded removal of the self in order to neither influence nor bias the informant, and my professional training as a teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL) called for clear boundaries between the professional and the personal. However, in the same way that environment, personal history, and experiences shape the story of our informant, we as writers are framed by our own cumulative life experiences in the texts we write. I argue that just as our experiences in the various roles we play give each of us a unique perspective, “the personal” figures into the story and informs our writing. As a university student, I examine this conundrum from the stance of a writer. As such, I find it impossible to categorize my writing as fitting a single genre. Instead, it weaves back and forth between English student and oral historian to the discourses of biographer, memoirist, and ethnographer. The insights gained from these conversations have clearly shown me that to make an authentic contribution in writing the stories of others, I cannot avoid this blending of genres. In *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, Gluck and Patai remark that the overlapping of various disciplines shows “the artificiality of the academic division of knowledge” (3).

Furthermore, in using narrative as my goal and method of argument, I cannot delete my own presence and voice. As Clandinin and Connelly explain, “narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (20). They attest that when researchers begin a project, they are actually “beginning a new story,” and as the participants become part of the researchers’ stories, the same process is occurring from the perspective of the participants, each becoming part of the other’s story (71). In support of this, I draw on a case study of my field work with a man known only as Gaúcho, due to his birthplace near the border of Argentina, and compare it to narratives of other academicians, such as Shostak and Wafer. They too crossed into a different culture to write the stories of others and immersed themselves in those cultures in order to capture the essence of their informants’ lives, removing artificial barriers that often impede what information is given in interviews with writers and ultimately becoming part of their informants’ stories.

With this in mind, I introduce my own writing which began as collecting the oral history of an elderly man in Brazil who had decided before we ever met to give me his life story, including his purported guerrilla involvement with revolutionary, Che Guevara. With different languages, lifestyles, political and religious beliefs, our only commonality was that I wanted to write someone’s story in a deeper and more meaningful way than I had ever done, and he had a story that he wanted recorded and told, not to glorify himself but as his legacy to posterity. That he chose me, a stranger from a strange land, has much bearing on the story and also gives answers to the questions once posed by Hayden White, “What kind of insight does narrative give into the nature of real events? What kind of blindness with respect to reality does narrativity dispel?” (5).

Although the concept of mixed genres in academic writ-

ing is not new, my own embracing of this merging has been further supported by the work of other writers who were already proving the validity of this long before my own work began. For example, the work of Marjorie Shostak (*Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* and *Return to Nisa*) and Jim Wafer (*The Taste of Blood: Spirit Possession in Brazilian Candomblé*) coincide with my own in significant ways. Just as Shostak and Wafer visited the countries and people they wrote about for more than one field trip, I also made numerous trips to the country of my informant. And like Shostak and Wafer, I too discovered how vulnerable I had to become in order to earn the trust and respect of my informant. Likewise, only as I myself became a participant in the ongoing stories I collected and wrote was I able to understand the truth of what was being given to me and to distinguish between factual truth and the underlying human truth of the stories I was told.

My university training of oral history, influenced by the reading of Hoopes, Portelli, and Ives, along with my museum work, had equipped me with the techniques involved in collecting oral histories. However, I was taught the importance of maintaining an objective professional pose in an effort to prevent the informant from unwittingly slanting the story, based on his perception of what he thought I wanted to hear. In preparing to interview Gaúcho, I knew I wanted the real stories, not something embellished to impress a foreigner who did not speak his language and that he in all likelihood would never meet again. But beyond that, I wanted to fully understand Gaúcho's larger truth, something that transcended the events of his life so that whatever resulted from my writing would reflect that truth. However, in order to reach that depth, I would have to leave behind some of the impersonal objectivity I had been taught. I would have to immerse myself in this man's culture, his beliefs,

and his language, as did Shostak and Wafer. I did not anticipate that this elderly gentleman would become such an important and ongoing part of my personal and professional life, or that my project would become our joint work, with narrative discourse binding it all together.

In conjunction with this, I refer to White who regards narrative discourse as a valuable tool that permits the concept of viewing

its universality as a cultural fact and for the interest that dominant social groups have not only in controlling what will pass for the authoritative myths of a given cultural formation but also in assuring the belief that social reality itself can be both lived and realistically comprehended as a story. (x)

White continues to explain that the stories, whether myth or fact, are quite able to represent “the reality whose meaning they purport to reveal”(x). He makes note of writers in various disciplines as re-examining the value of “narrative representation in the preliminary description of their objects of study” (xi).

Again, this is not a new concept. Clifford Geertz also affirms this in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, when he discusses “genre mixing in intellectual life in recent years ... [as] such a blurring of kinds, continuing apace” (ix).

In my situation, what began as an oral history became a memoir that ultimately became an autoethnographic, academic text developed in a social setting that was not my own. The gathering of Gaúcho’s story and the respect and friendship that developed between us, the shared goal of my getting his story just right and his belief in both my integrity and skill, led to the subsequent blending of my own story into his. Indeed, even Gaúcho’s eventual death led not to closure, but merely served as

a milestone in the journey. My research into his personal history and the history of the political events that informed his choices continues. White argues that what “historical narrative literally asserts about specific events is that they really happened, and what it figuratively suggests is that the whole sequence of events that really happened has the order and significance of well-made stories” (177).

Little did I know when I made my first trip to Brazil in 2004 to meet this elderly man that my life would take a dramatic turn, ultimately becoming interwoven with that of this particular man who lived a solitary, self-sufficient existence, close to a river on the edge of a forest in a remote and sparsely populated part of the country. He was the Old Man of the Pantanal, a true pantaneiro, and he had a story to tell. For reasons that I would later learn, he had decided before we ever met to give me not just a few stories, but his life story which would turn out to encompass politics counter to my own, spiritual beliefs unfamiliar to me, a lifestyle that in no way resembled my own, and communication in a language of which I had minimal skills. Armed with a tape recorder, a video camera, and a notebook, a Western-educated teacher prepared to assume the roles of both audience and observer of his story, feeling a sense of great responsibility as well as privilege.

Extending to my own goals of what I hoped to capture in the stories I was about to collect and write, I refer to Lindahl, who introduces a collection of Louisiana folktales with a discussion of “the daunting problems involved in attempting to translate even the greatest oral performances into readable stories” (4). He quotes Ball who states that the style revealed is “that of the individual narrator, that of the narrator’s community, and that of the type ... of tale being told” (qtd. in Lindahl 7). What I did not expect was to become a participant in Gaúcho’s story, or

that he would assume that same role in my own story.

As a stranger from another culture, I was acutely aware of the commitment I would be undertaking, to present Gaúcho in a manner that readers would find interesting and admirable, and also to frame his story in a way that others could connect with. As Trimbur argues, it is not to “just re-create moments of experience,” but rather “to seek to imbue [the memoir] with a significance readers will understand” (qtd. in Trimbur 95). Trimbur further claims that writing memoirs not only assists us in remembering past events and the way things were at a different time, but also helps us understand how we ourselves once were. Because memoir writing requires self-reflection and self-revelation, it puts the memoirist at risk, allowing vulnerability, the possibility of being judged as indulging the self or attempting to play on the sentiments of the audience (96). These assertions complement those of Clandinin and Connelly when they state the necessity of “ongoing reflection” in narrative inquiry (184).

Unfortunately, at that time my knowledge of Brazilian culture and history was so lacking, that I almost destroyed my opportunity to connect with Gaúcho myself. In addition, my own ethnocentric biases threatened to interfere, as I was uncomfortable with this man’s reputed communist leanings, not to mention his self-proclaimed involvement in guerrilla warfare. Fortunately, our cultural misunderstandings and linguistic barriers were overcome by something that made us trust and care about one another, a connection unlikely and initially inexplicable.

In the fall of 2003, I accepted an invitation to visit Brazil the following summer for the purpose of collecting stories and writing. Professor Flávio Aristone, of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS) in Campo Grande, proposed that I

visit the university as a visiting instructor and writer, and then travel to the university's research base in the Pantanal, an immense wetlands wildlife preserve on the Brazilian border with Bolivia. Although I did not have the same kind of financial backing or support team that researchers typically have, I was most fortunate that UFMS provided me with room and board and permission to freely utilize the facilities of their research station in the Pantanal as often as needed for my work with Gaúcho, as he was considered something of a regional treasure because of his story-telling and unusual adventures. In addition, various faculty members and employees of UFMS assisted me with translating and cultural guidance, as well as overseeing my personal safety in a wilderness setting. Beyond that, I subsequently received an offer from the university to publish my final writing about Gaúcho.

However, my writing about Gaúcho's life and involvement with Che Guevara did not end after a few brief interviews. In fact, even after Gaúcho's death in 2009, my ongoing research led to more sources of information, some recently translated into English and some released as declassified documents from the U.S. government. For example, the once secret diary written during 1966-1968 in Bolivia by one of the revolutionaries in Che Guevara's guerilla band, Harry Villegas, was translated and published as *Pombo: A Man of Che's Guerrilla*, edited and prefaced by Mary-Alice Waters, and accomplished by the collaboration of a large team of professionals. The publication of similar writings, underwritten by universities, foundations, and governments made me realize that my writing of this one man's story could have scholarly value as well. Thus, my original intention of collecting an oral history and writing a story about a man and his culture has evolved into the domains of academic texts and memoir.

Upon my arrival in Brazil, I was graciously welcomed into a world I had little previous awareness of, one that I certainly would never have found on my own. Very soon I would embark on what would become a life-altering journey, becoming friends with Gaúcho, an almost octogenarian who had not only survived in the wilderness by his wits and his bare hands, but who also professed to still be in hiding some forty years after the death of his hero, Che Guevara. As a great believer in the value of story, and having been intrigued by other cultures and languages, I first saw this as an exciting opportunity to record regional folklore and an old man's wilderness tales. I wanted readers to feel something deep inside that they might otherwise have missed. Thus, my authoring of Gaúcho's story begins.

In June of 2004, Flávio Aristone transported me away from civilization as I had known it, to the UFMS research base, where scientists from all over the world go to explore the unique bio-systems of the Pantanal. After miles of bumpy red dirt road running between waterways banked by jacarés (alligators), we finally reached the road's end, entering a small compound of buildings built high up on piers and overlooking a river, the Rio Miranda. To the left, a trail followed the river and ended in a deep, wooded jungle. Behind us were those creeks and streams teeming with jacarés and an abundance of fish and other water creatures.

All around us were birds of every size and color. Charreuse parakeets flew right up to the railing of the veranda to wait for their expected crumbs from the cook or Geraldo, the custodian; majestic toucans with bright blue feathers and golden beaks came gliding by in pairs. Huge hyacinth macaws kept a higher perch in the trees, squawking their presence. Giant tuiuiu staggered around in our midst like ostriches with ruby red turkey wattles, and a little brown joão de barro peaked out from

under the domed roof of her red clay nest. When I looked over to the swampy area to my right, I could see a family of hog-bodied rodents, the capyvaras, rooting around for something to eat. Unfortunately, it was feeding time not only for the birds and the beasts; mosquitoes instantly appeared in swarms of thick, black clouds. Even in Louisiana, I had never experienced so total an assault by such a large mass of insatiable, blood-lusting insects.

Accompanied by Geraldo, the gregarious custodian and groundskeeper for the base as well as a renowned teller of tall tales, Flávio and I made the short drive to Gaúcho's house, a quaint raised cabin surrounded on two sides by a screened porch, and not far from the river. He was a small wiry man wearing an old Panama hat, his white hair wet and slicked back as if this were a great occasion. He wore a long-sleeved dress shirt with all but one button opened over what appeared to be his cleanest undershirt, cut-off khakis, and rubber flip-flops on his feet. His rheumy blue-green eyes twinkled as he kissed me on both cheeks, his neatly trimmed beard scratching my face as he performed the traditional Brazilian greeting. His still handsome face, however, was marred by huge, oozing, ulcerated growths that sprouted and opened from one side of his nose. He spoke with an old smoker's gruff and muffled voice, which would have been difficult to understand even if I had been proficient in Portuguese, but his gestures and his smile communicated such a sincere welcome that I had to blink back tears. He offered us cafezinho, tiny cups of strong, thick coffee, sweetened with honey from the bees living in his attic. I would soon discover that his hospitality extended to a great variety of living things, including wild birds for whom he kept seed sprinkled on the kitchen counter, the holes in the porch screen large enough to guarantee easy access; at least three lime green tree frogs who kept vigil in the bathroom, effectively reducing the insect prob-

lem; and a whole colony of bats who shared attic space with the bees, depositing copious amounts of guano that drifted through the ceiling onto the bed of his spare room, rich fertilizer for Gaúcho's salad garden if his pyramids ever stopped working. He would reveal his pyramid beliefs to me only several years later. It was apparently easier for him to acknowledge his leftist political beliefs to a stranger than his spiritual beliefs.

The afternoon was chilly and drizzly, much like Louisiana in winter, and it was indeed winter in the Pantanal in June. We sipped our coffee and accepted refills. I sat quietly and observed the interaction between the three men—intellectual Flávio, professor of physics, cosmopolitan, and multi-lingual, easing into the informal, down-home role he enjoyed in this setting; laughing Geraldo, shivering despite the warmth of his long-sleeved short and patched trousers as the dark clouds overhead burst into a drenching downpour, worn-out flip-flops barely cushioning his cold feet, similar in stature to Gaúcho, but clean-shaven, and with the bronzed complexion and features reflective of the many races that make up Brazil; and then Gaúcho, a dapper little man taking delight in playing host.

At a mutually understood yet unspoken signal, I got out my recording equipment, asking general questions at first, with Flávio translating between Gaúcho and me. Gaúcho told about the many careers he had explored, from fishing the Atlantic Ocean, navigating his course by the Cruzeiro do Sul, the brilliant Southern Cross that is never visible to those of us who dwell above the equator; to rice farming; to plantation managing; to contraband running during World War II. He told of his early desire to become a doctor and the taxidermy training he undertook as a prerequisite. He told of lying about his age to enter the last stages of World War II out of concern that the fascists would win and overtake the world. Yet when he was old

enough for mandatory military service, his contempt for the government caused him to become a draft dodger, joining a circus to hide from authorities (Aristone trans., 10 June 2004).

The dynamics of this three-way conversation required much questioning and explaining as I tried to make my inquiries as clear as possible to Flávio so that Gaúcho would understand exactly what I was asking and why. Gaúcho, thriving in the limelight, became even more animated as he described the various circuses he had traveled with across South America, disguising himself as a clown to avoid being identified. He described a girl he was madly in love with. A tight-rope walker, she was the daughter of one of the circus owners. Paternal intervention toward the object of his affection ended Gaúcho's romance, and he took to the road again, traveling on foot, relying on the Southern Cross to light his path.

In another meeting, Gaúcho gave his reason for never marrying, acknowledging that he had never gotten over one particular girl, the true love of his life. Her father was a powerful politician, and her association with Gaúcho was potentially dangerous for her. Therefore, in order to protect her, Gaúcho affirmed that he gave her up. This professed noble sacrifice continued to that moment, as he refused to reveal the woman's name to anyone, even after half a century. He said that as she was still living, he would not risk her safety by allowing her name to be connected with his (Aristone, 10 June 2004). Was this his imagination, augmented by the passage of time and the loneliness of old age? I will never know. But even with our separate languages, I could see that the memory was painful for him, or perhaps bittersweet, and I did not press him for more information. In that interchange, I experienced what McAdams refers to as "such moments of sincere disclosure ... so rare" with "real people telling the truth through stories as a sympathetic

listener takes it in" (252).

Slowly we segued into the Che Guevara story. Gaúcho's tone changed; his voice became lower, his speech slower, more careful. He was no longer smiling. He went into a detailed explanation of the socio-political situation in Brazil between the 1930s and 1950s. As a very young man, he had developed a passion for promoting change in his country's government, mainly to improve the plight of the oppressed. At that time, the country was under the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas, a man who made many reforms, yet who increased his own powers to the point that his opponents considered his form of government to be a Brazilian version of fascism (Bishop 130).

During that time, Gaúcho was influenced by Luis Carlos Prestes, an idealistic contemporary of Gaúcho's father from his home state of Rio Grande do Sul and leader of the Alliance of National Liberation, a communist group seeking unsuccessfully to overthrow the Vargas regime. Gaúcho had joined a local communist organization and was editor of their small newsletter. At the time of hearing this story, I was aware that my professional objectivity was waning, as I felt some discomfort in participating in a conversation that glorified communism and condemned the government of the U.S. However, sensing my unease, Gaúcho explained that in those days there was no concept of democracy in South America. The rich became richer and controlled the government. The poor became poorer and increasingly more hopeless; the concept of civil rights was an unfamiliar term. As the government became progressively more corrupt, Gaúcho saw only two options: fascism or communism. He believed that communism would bring equality to all people and that without this change, the nation would be lost to the limitless greed and fraud of the government (Aristone, 10 June 2004). The momentary reversal of roles, with the informant try-

ing to put the interviewer at ease, was a new experience for me.

Following this visit and continuing into the present, my research of the history of socio-political issues in Brazil confirms all of what Gaúcho told me. However, without the deeper understanding gained from my conversations with Gaúcho, I would neither have appreciated nor fully comprehended the roots of his passion, a passion shared by many human beings not only in Brazil, but all over Latin America at that time. Geertz, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, explains the tremendous shift between 1945 and 1968 when sixty-six countries became politically independent from generations of colonial rule (234). He refers to the tremendous dreams and expectations of social and economic equality, popular rule, and national greatness among other things (234-35). He asserts that the charisma of new leaders can generate huge “concentrations of social energies” leading to considerable accomplishments (235). However, when the leaders are gone, the causes fail. Geertz refers to Che Guevara as an example of that kind of leader (235). My research into that phenomenon led to my eventual understanding of Gaúcho’s passion.

Meanwhile, during the interview I was aware of the clock ticking, and I wanted to transition into Gaúcho’s professed connection with Che Guevara as quickly as possible. This was, after all, quite a big story. Yet at that time, my embarrassingly weak knowledge of the acts and deeds of Che Guevara, and even less awareness that vendettas still occur in South America for all kinds of reasons, I asked the wrong question. Quite suddenly Gaúcho, his face purple with rage, jumped up, pointing his finger in my face and screaming, “Jornalista! Jornalista!” I was frightened, not of what he might do to me but that at worst, he might have a stroke; at best, our golden moment had in that instant shattered as if hit by a grenade. My gentle host was shak-

ing from head to toe, shouting at Flávio, but looking at me with terror and contempt.

In an urgent undertone Flávio told me to turn off the tape recorder. He explained that Gaúcho had suddenly decided that I was a journalist, determined to get his story and sell it to the newspaper. He earnestly believed that the CIA or a Bolivian assassin would then find him.

I was trembling with concern and shock at how something so innocuous to me could have ruined everything for all of us—the pleasant afternoon, the easy camaraderie, the comfortable roles we had all slipped into, especially my own role of serious writer. How quickly everything had changed, and I did not like my new role as perceived opportunist, spy, traitor, user. And then, just as quickly as a summer shower can start and end, Gaúcho explained that once before two young women had come to visit him, pretending to be friends of another friend of his, flattering him with requests to hear his stories. In the midst of the interview he discovered that one of them had a tape recorder hidden in her pocket. He said she was really a journalist, deceiving him for her own gain. So great was his humiliation that he almost wept with the re-telling. After that, I promised I would not use the recorder and would not ask him any more questions about his political background for the time being. As I had learned from Ives, when this kind of thing happens it is of course necessary to stop the recorder at once, yet to simultaneously make a mental note of that moment and wait until another interview to ease into the topic once again when the informant will most likely signal his readiness to approach it (48–9).

I was unaware that I would be embarking on a quest that would weave its way back and forth across genres, with my English studies crossing over into anthropology and ethnography. I had no idea that this relationship and the resulting

ethnographic-type memoir would become an entity unto itself. Initially, I just wanted to meet this interesting man and write down the remarkable stories he was known for telling.

This experience underscores the necessity of developing a relationship between the oral historian or ethnographer and the informant over time, not assuming that a brief interview will give conclusive evidence of anything. There must be a mutual-ity of trust and respect which simply does not occur in a few hours of interviews, even if over a number of days. In her experiences in Botswana over several years' time, Shostak makes frequent reference to the changing nature of her interviews with the !Kung women (*Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*). She remarks on the changing dynamics that occur over time, as trust begins to build on both sides, not just by talking, but by her own sharing in the daily life of the people.

Research into the socio-political history of Brazil would alter my thinking about the powerlessness and hopelessness of the masses and the subsequent appeal of communism. Page provides an in-depth view of political and economic oligarchy wherein government was controlled by a small number of corrupt leaders who favored wealthy coffee and sugar planters (131–32). Fifteen years of the Vargas dictatorship, followed by two decades of military dictatorship increased the divide between the wealthy few and the impoverished majority (140–41). Bishop provides a closer look at the conditions that increased the allure of communism and “revolutionary fervor” that arose among the “misery” of so many (135–42). Election fraud, rebellion, suicide, and assassination went hand-in-hand with change. Through my research, I understood the many decades of corrupt government that the people of Brazil had suffered under, and that a new dictator would quickly prove to be as bad as the previous.

As time passed and my own investigation continued, I began to comprehend the evolution of Gaúcho's convictions. My passion to understand what had motivated and informed this man continued to increase, such that I would make many more trips to visit him, our communication and trust strengthening, our roles shifting.

That first evening, however, we experienced a return to calm congeniality. Attempting to prepare Louisiana jambalaya and gumbo for my host, but lacking the necessary ingredients, I managed to produce a meal that was almost inedible. However, Gaúcho and Geraldo swore that it was the best they had ever eaten. During the meal, I was able to observe the relationship between the two old men as they each began trying to outdo the other with tales of wilderness adventures, encounters with wild beasts, and the size and number of fish each had caught. Periodically, one or the other would abruptly slam his drink on the table, standing up to indicate that he had had it with the other one's exaggerations or inaccuracies of oft-told tales. Then just as quickly, they would work out a compromise or apology and resume the conversation as if nothing had happened. This I could recognize without benefit of translation. Their interaction depicted a universality of behavior that could have occurred between two elderly men anywhere in the world. I wondered if they were performing for the benefit of the privileged writer, but I confirmed with others that this was quite typical behavior for them.

As the evening wound down and we prepared to leave, Gaúcho insisted that I return to the Pantanal as soon as possible. In parting, Flávio made Gaúcho promise he would go to Campo Grande to see the university doctor about the growths on his face. Gaúcho half-heartedly agreed, then changed the subject. As a parting gift, he offered me a photo of himself from

several decades past, writing a message on the back and signing it with his real name: Jadyr da Frota Hermel. As I had been told that this man never revealed his true identity to anyone, I pondered the significance of this. Shortly, I learned that Gaúcho had recently been given a diagnosis of terminal skin cancer, the knowledge of which had driven him to tell his story to me. Confronting his own mortality, Gaúcho did not want his story to die with him. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by the weight of this gift and by the sadness that my new friend's days were numbered. Our roles were swiftly changing, and I was beginning to feel as though he were my elderly uncle, someone who needed me to take care of him. Perhaps this was my own need to be a surrogate daughter taking care of a sick elderly man and bringing him back to health.

In examining this dynamic, I agree with McAdams about "the strong feelings of affection and intimacy" that interviewers often develop for the people whose life stories they are recording and that these feelings are frequently mutual. He views the experience of giving one's life story to a stranger as a means of: "(1) identifying, (2) living, and (3) changing the personal myths that give meaning to our lives" (253). From my own experience, I believe this to be true.

Meanwhile, I tried to learn more Portuguese while studying many books about Brazilian history and culture, feeling that I must do this in order to be able to fully understand Gaúcho and therefore be able to represent him as authentically as possible in writing. He absolutely wanted me to write his story, but instead of the documentary, biography, or memoir I had planned, he now said I would have to fictionalize his story while he lived, that he had too many enemies who would find him if the story revealing his location and his history became public. Flávio and Geraldo laughed at Gaúcho's fears, saying

that he was becoming senile, but I knew that I had to honor his wishes. Yet to write a convincing story that truly portrayed the man, I would need to become much more knowledgeable about the country and culture, the terrain Gaúcho had covered on foot, the foods he had eaten, the music he had listened to, the women he had loved, his family background, his methods of survival in the wilderness, and how he had managed to conceal his identity for so long.

Back home in Louisiana, while considering the immense task ahead of me, I was informed that Gáucho had been found unconscious on the floor of his home. He was taken to a small rural hospital, where he was diagnosed with a nearly fatal case of bacterial pneumonia, caused by unsanitary conditions in his home, specifically something contracted from the droppings of the wild birds that had free reign of the kitchen and eating area. Although Gaúcho would survive this illness, a long convalescence would be required before he could undergo surgery for the skin cancer, which fortunately turned out to be slow-growing and not a death sentence. Meanwhile, I grieved for him and wished that I could be there to nurse him back to health.

In the same vein, Shostak, in her study of study of Nisa, a woman of the !Kung culture in the bush country of Botswana, relates similar feelings of a special closeness and connection she and this woman developed. By learning the very difficult language and by living under the same conditions as Nisa and her people, Shostak was able to feel Nisa's life experiences in a way that would not have been possible with brief encounters following the prescribed tenets of an ethnographer. By being vulnerable to emotions that arose during many times together, by participating in the way of life of a culture, and by listening to many retellings of the same stories, Shostak and I as academic writers were both able to reach an extremely high level

of communication and understanding of our informants' spiritual beliefs (259–66). While Shostak was able to understand and to write about Nisa's culture through the study of her belief in spiritual trancing and laying on of hands (216–17), it was not until October of 2007, that I learned something of Gaúcho's spiritual beliefs. Now, I too came to discover firsthand how an ethnographic text can be more academically sound when understanding an informant's belief system. Accompanying me to the Pantanal for further meetings with Gaúcho, Regina Vieira, a university professor of English from UFMS, served as translator. Only during the second day of our visit did Gaúcho respond to my questions about religion. Refusing to accept the doctrine of any organized religion, despite his Catholic upbringing, Gaúcho had developed his own belief system, a moral code of causing no harm to anyone, asking nothing of anyone, performing small acts of kindness, and making the least possible impact on the environment. Although he did not believe that one would necessarily be rewarded for good deeds, he did believe that those who deliberately caused harm to others would eventually bring suffering upon themselves.

Regardless of his non-involvement with organized religion, however, Gaúcho revealed both his scorn and fear of the regional practice of Macumba, "which combined Candomblé with black magic and Indian animism" (Page 360). Candomblé is rooted in African tradition, spreading through Brazil after the abolition of slavery in 1888 and continuing today, not only among Brazilians of African descent, but also for whites (361–62). While both Candomblé and Macumba contain traces of Catholicism and the supernatural, the concepts of sin and guilt are not present (362). According to Page, "the spirits of long-dead Africans and Indians as well as orixás [deities] made appearances in Macumba ceremonies" (365).

By reading the works of Page and Wafer, I was later able to better understand Gaúcho's strong emotional description of his experience as the victim of Macumba practices. He said that he had once been greatly deceived and cheated out of wages and property by a man he worked for. Gaúcho was convinced that the man's known involvement with Macumba was responsible for the misfortunes that he himself (Gaúcho) had suffered, certain that the man had called upon evil spirits to harm him. According to Gaúcho, the man's subsequent loss of his own business and health was the result of dabbling in a religion whose practices involved casting evil spells and praying for harm to others (trans. Vieira, 2007). It follows that if Macumba, like Candomblé contains no concept of guilt or sin, then a practitioner of this religion could, without conscience, invoke the Exus to harm someone.

For some of the interviews in which Regina Vieira served as interpreter the dynamics of the interviews shifted noticeably. Gaúcho was increasingly more animated, more open to discussion of his spiritual beliefs, and more revealing of his revolutionary history than before (trans. Vieira, 2007). I realized that he was flirting with Regina, putting more effort into his grooming and behaving with more charm than at other times. Observing Gaúcho perform in this previously unseen manner was an opportunity to note the influence of gender on the conversation. Whereas all the Brazilians who had assisted me previously were male, Regina was an attractive female, and Gaúcho was clearly attracted. Yet it was more than that. He presented a much more refined side of himself, taking greater care with explanations by using maps and other visual aids, adjusting his tone of voice to one that seemed more serious and more intimate. As Gluck and Patai explain, "It is how individuals communicate in particular situations that reveal their assumptions about gender"

(35). In the situation described above, I believe that Gaúcho's gender assumptions allowed him to feel safe enough to reveal his deeply personal feelings with a woman translating and negotiating meaning back and forth between us. Also, McAdams describes in his own experiences as an interviewer recording the personal stories of others, comparing the listener to the protagonist in a movie. He regards the informant's motivation to tell his story and "to share that which is most private with ... a virtual stranger" as a result of the as the interviewer's listening "with such intensity" and with the unconditional acceptance of the informant "as the center of another person's consciousness" (251–52). In this case, Regina was the direct listener.

It was during one of the times when Regina accompanied me to Gaucho's home that we noticed what appeared to be small cardboard triangles placed in pans of water around the house. He brought forth a book that explained what he believed to be the power of the pyramid to draw positive elements of nature to things positioned under them. He told us that he never used water for drinking or on his garden without first empowering the water with something the pyramids drew into it. To demonstrate, he produced plants that he said had sprouted and grown almost overnight. He attributed the phenomenal plant growth to the pyramid-treated water and explained in great detail, with the illustrations in his book, how this made scientific sense. Upon later investigation, I learned that although the history of pyramidology can be traced to cultural beliefs of many ancient civilizations, and also to religions such as Christianity and Judaism, it became newly popular in the early 1970s due to the works of several writers (Markovsky and Thye 25), among them Toth and Nielson, authors of *Pyramid Power*, the book Gaúcho had shown us.

Also during this visit, Gaúcho revealed many more de-

tails of his involvement with Che Guevara. Swearing us to secrecy while he lived, he gave us a thorough account of what had led him to search for Che and what he experienced during this two-year search, walking or hitch-hiking across several South American countries. When he found the guerrilla band in Bolivia, he had to first allow himself to be taken captive in order to prove his sincerity. According to his story, he spent only eighty days with Che before the assassination. After inconspicuously attending the public viewing of the body, Gaúcho was warned that he must leave the area immediately or he would be caught and killed. Alone, he traveled to several countries, including Peru, where he sought another guerrilla group, the Shining Path. As Regina translated for me, she said with somber conviction, "Vicky, this is not an old man's attempt to impress us. He really was there, and he really does have reason to be afraid" (trans. Vieira 2007). He would not disclose his nom de guerre, his secret name known only to the guerrilla group, but did say that for some time after Che's death, he received money from Russia, sent to a secret bank account on the other side of Brazil. He then urged me to read about Olga Benário Prestes, the German Jewish wife of his afore-mentioned hero, Luis Carlos Prestes. Gaúcho assured me that I would then see the Soviet Union and communism in a different light. It was very important to him that I understand what he considered to be the only hope of the oppressed people against dictatorships or fascism.

The following year I was called to Gaúcho's presumed deathbed. My friend had fallen ill to pneumonia once again and he was not expected to live. Although it was difficult for me to leave home again, my family and my employer supported me in this endeavor. Getting from Baton Rouge to the hospital in Campo Grande was a two-day journey, so the time I had to spend with Gaúcho would be very brief, if he even lasted until

my arrival. However, when I arrived, my friends were beaming with the news that once Gaúcho had been told I was coming, he began to improve. His doctor called it a miracle, but I believe it was the emotional affirmation to Gaúcho that not only I, but numerous others were deeply concerned about him, not to mention the attention from two very kind-hearted young nurses who alternated shifts taking care of him.

Once again, the old pantaneiro defied death, but due to his anticipated demise, his older brother whom he had not seen in forty years was located and came to visit, having endured a forty-eight hour bus ride. Ultimately, he took Gaúcho home with him to his faraway birthplace in the city of Cachoéira do Sul very close to the Argentine border. The relatives in Cachoeira do Sul were supposedly unaware of Gaúcho's involvement with Che's revolution. Gaúcho specified that he did not want them to know, not because he regretted that chapter of his life, but out of concern for their safety.

Although I was very hopeful of visiting Gaúcho in the place of his birth, as it would fill in many missing pieces of Gaúcho's early life and the even earlier family history that had informed Gaúcho's political and spiritual beliefs, the visit did not come to pass. Gaúcho's convalescence lasted for a year and a half, at which point family issues necessitated Gaúcho's departure from his birthplace.

Unfortunately, Gaúcho would never return to his beloved Pantanal. While staying in Campo Grande to recover from the long trip, he fell into a deep depression after a tragic betrayal by presumed friends, drowning his grief in alcohol. Shortly thereafter, Gaúcho was found unconscious on the trash-strewn floor of his tiny rented room, an empty whiskey bottle by his side.

This time I was asked to go there if possible, but with the awareness that Gaúcho might not survive until my arrival. Torn

between the wisdom of attempting this journey while leaving my family and my work behind and Gaúcho's need, I quickly realized that I had to go. However, it was not just for the sake of Gaúcho.

Just as Shostak reflects in *Return to Nisa*, published after her own death in 1996, "The decision to go had preceded the practical, starting with a need, the need to return: to see, to taste, to smell, to experience again, perhaps even to heal" (6). Although I was not suffering from cancer as Shostak was, I felt a deep personal need to be at Gaúcho's deathbed, to be immersed in his end of life experience right there in his world, an environment so different from my own, yet one that had saturated my being, informing my world view and my daily life. Just as Nisa was always present in Shostak's thoughts, informing and changing the way she herself lived many aspects of her daily life (234), so Gaúcho had become ever present in my own. And although Shostak and Nisa had not become best friends or even agreed with many things that the other believed or did, there was the bond that came from knowing each other so intensely that drove Shostak to make that most difficult journey. She remarks that it seemed like "the Kung culture and my talks with Nisa touched something beyond reason in me. As though ... I had imprinted on the people, on Nisa, on their way of life" (235). Such was my perception of my place in Gaúcho's life.

Yet in some ways, Gaúcho and I each disappointed the other. I wanted him to have softened his political views and developed a spirituality that I could identify with. I had misgivings about my ability to write in detail about those episodes of his life that I feared would make others think less of him. Moreover, although my original commitment to him had been to write his life story, I realized that his desire to be immortalized in print in some form while he lived equaled his fear of re-

taliation by presumed political enemies. For me as a writer, this posed challenges of its own. In turn, Gaúcho was disappointed that my Portuguese language skills were coming so slowly, that I was not staying longer at his side, and that my writing of his story was not nearing completion as soon as he had hoped, despite the restrictions he himself had set. Similarly, Shostak acknowledges that in some aspects of her relationship with Nisa, neither of them got what they wanted from the other, admitting that she had wanted Nisa to be “nobler, more selfless, more philosophical” (735). Regardless, she knew that her obligation as a researcher and writer of culture was to tell Nisa’s story as it stood, and therefore, she neither omitted nor minimized some of the more unpleasant realities of Nisa’s story (735). The same was true for my commitment to write Gaúcho’s story, yet I was bound to honor his request for discretion while he lived.

Meanwhile, praying that he would hold onto life as long as possible, I arrived in Campo Grande to find that once again, Gaúcho had rallied and was giving everyone at the hospital a difficult time, demanding to be released. However, it was clear that he could never again live on his own. His anger eventually subsiding, Gaúcho reluctantly consented to move to a nursing home. Yet upon his arrival at the facility, this by now frail and somewhat confused man exploded into a fit of rage and collapsed, leading to another hospitalization. Within a few days he passed away, covered by the quilt I had made him, his story written in a blend of fact and fiction around the borders. This story, although written in English, was the closest I came to immortalizing him while he lived; translation into Portuguese gave him peace that his story had been written, yet in a coded way that would not endanger him. He passed away, trusting me to finish the rest of our work on my own.

It is not one’s whole life then, but a story framed with-

in that life that comprises a memoir, an oral history, an ethnographic text—a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Therefore, my writing of Gaúcho's story could have concluded with his death in September of 2009. However, further details of his story continue to reveal themselves as I delve deeper into Brazilian culture, language, and history, searching for clues about Gaúcho's guerrilla life with Che Guevara, whether exaggerated, completely fabricated, or perhaps even drastically downplayed. With an ongoing effort to attain fluency in Portuguese, I continue to perform the role of audience member as well as writer of Gaúcho's story. I have recently been able to confirm some aspects of his revolutionary ties as factual, although others elude me still, as I have found no documentation of a Brazilian fitting Gaúcho's age and description in declassified published lists of the soldiers (Anderson 743–49; Villegas 324–51). Regardless, the verifiable events matter only as they impact the truth of his existence, the reasons behind the story he chose to tell, the way he framed it, and the student of English whom he chose to write it all down.

In conclusion, as a writer and oral historian who understands and values the importance of interdisciplinary discourse, of merging genres, of moving fluidly between the objective and the subjective, I reflect on my role in collecting information and writing about Gaúcho. I know that without the particular approach I used, I could not have learned Gaúcho's truth, a man who was by no means symbolic of all Brazilian culture, but a man who lived an unusual life and who was able to communicate his unique story to an American who had little prior knowledge of his culture and who initially could not speak the language. The evolution of our relationship involved an increasing amount of mutual faith in the value of this joint venture that we had undertaken. Gaúcho's patience with my ongoing at-

tempt to understand the nuances of Brazilian-Portuguese, with the idioms, expressions, and inside jokes or double entendres that were embedded in this particular man's life experiences, allowed me to enter his world. Also, my attempts to understand the motivation behind his revolutionary activities and his enduring belief in the value of communism, imposing neither a judgmental nor condoning attitude of my own, increased his respect for me. Likewise, my willingness to participate in his life on his own turf, sharing his food and drink, as well as my repeated presence in his time of need, let him know that I valued him for the human being he was, and that I was not just a "jornalista," writing for my own gain.

Although space constraints limit me in this one short paper, my research and writing share a commonality with that of others who have undertaken similar projects, collecting stories that required translation for a Western audience. Likewise, our projects were embraced and supported by a university. From this experience, I know that I will continue to explore the mixing of genres in my own ongoing efforts to make my ethnographic texts ring with a more holistic understanding of my informant's culture and beliefs. In that way, I can write the stories of others that demand to be told in the manner that I believe gives the most authentic representation of the informant, using what I consider the most effective means of communicating the truth of that person's story to my audience.

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In the Shadow of Dracula's Tomb

Jeanne Northop

Instructor: Dr. Richard Louth

Course: English 620

Genre: Creative Non-fiction

One's own death is not something most people want to think about, although the supermarket magazine racks and the Internet are replete with psychic predictions of the end of the world right alongside miraculous medical discoveries guaranteed to extend life. Readers of literature, theologians, and philosophers think a lot about death. Personally, however, I think of it mostly when I'm expecting someone to die, or when someone dies unexpectedly. Theoretically, death is the great equalizer, it's democratic, no one escapes, and we'll never get out of this world alive. The fact of the matter is that no one can prove definitively what happens to us when our breathing and brain activity cease. However, it's not just academics that ponder death. We often start to question the concept of death as young children, and the very fact that no adult has any concrete answers makes it seem like some kind of grown-up secret. Therefore, it is something we just have to know, so we take the incomprehensible answers that we get from adults and uncover the enigma of death on our own.

As a child, I developed a very romantic idea of death—maybe most children do. My cousin, and sometimes-best friend, Lynn had a cousin who died at the age of twelve. Lynne and I were nearly that age, starting to approach the perilous teens, and unconsciously afraid to leave childhood behind. But I remember us talking about death. I didn't know her cousin Rob-

bie very well, but he was cute. So, it was very impressive to us that, since one did not age after death, Robbie would therefore remain twelve forever while we would have to grow old and die ugly. We spent a lot of time in Oak Hill Cemetery discussing our options and what happens when one dies, aside from the evident—*the worms crawl in, the worms crawl out, the worms play pinochle on your snout*. . .

We spent most of at least one summer sitting in the sun on tombstones, morbidly conscious of our own mortality and discussing all the gory details that we assumed death entailed. Oak Hill Cemetery gave us the vantage point of overlooking the entire town, which at that point in time was a sleepy, boring typical 1950s town. However, the cemetery was old and curious. It even had a huge overturned tombstone, aptly designated Dracula's grave that we visited only during the height of mid-day. The cemetery was quiet and private; we seldom saw another living human being. At that time, being surrounded by the dead with all their secrets was preferable to being surrounded by boring grown-ups with all their secrets.

It was only later that I realized that a strong sense of spiritualism pervaded the lives and conversations of our older relatives, and undoubtedly contributed to Lynne's and my conclusions on death. I found out later that spiritualists believe that those who have passed are with us, just on the other side of the veil that separates the living from the dead. Furthermore, those dead desire to communicate with the living. Our relatives were of an age that had experienced the turn of the century as children, becoming adults at a time when spiritualism was at one of its many peaks. The Spanish Civil War, World War I, the pervasive scourge of polio, and the 1918 epidemic of the Spanish flu had stolen natural death's predictable pattern of picking and choosing its victims from mostly the weak and elderly. Thus,

many individuals were forced to face the deaths of children and young adults without any advanced warning. Between the American Civil War and World War II interest in spiritualism spiked and mediums and Ouija boards afforded the living the ability to communicate with the dead.

Our grandmother—Lynne’s father’s mother and my mother’s mother—was widowed when her youngest child was eight years old. She never remarried. She was Scots Irish and had two sisters, one older and one younger, who visited mostly on Memorial Day. However, in spite of regular attendance at the Methodist Church, they were very much spiritualists. Ghosts weren’t an “if” but a “when.” I remember them talking about the spiritualist community of Lily Dale, in New York State, not far from where Aunt Grace and Uncle Floyd lived. The older sister, Minnie, was also a widow, but all had undoubtedly experienced unexpected losses. And, like many who lose a loved one, they found solace in a belief that even though not embodied, the dearly departed were still very much aware of their lives and desired to solace them with wisdom from the beyond.

But when I was a child, I didn’t ask questions, and they wouldn’t have answered if I had, so Lynne and I had to come to our own conclusions based on fragments of overheard conversations, reading Edgar Allen Poe, watching *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*, and listening to the ghost stories told by Uncle Norm. Uncle Norm was a bachelor who lived in the big old house with his mother, our grandmother.

Grandma’s house was a perfect sanctuary for ghosts. It was on a corner lot on a dirt road that ended in railroad tracks. It had the biggest yard on the street, shaded by huge trees that had been planted by Uncle Charley. At the front entrance grew a really prickly shrub with brilliant red berries that kept wayward children from picking the bright-colored poppies that Grandma

grew. The house's siding was cedar shake stained brown. It had two stories with a roof over the big front porch that was accessible from an upstairs window, although children were not allowed out there. The porch was always shaded, and had a swing and a rocking chair, with a huge bay window that looked into the living room. Inside the front door was a mahogany staircase that led to the second floor. To the left was the living room with French doors leading into a dining room. Off the dining room was a sunny but mysterious sunroom full of ferns, our grandmother's bedroom, and a very small kitchen off of which were where a pantry, a laundry room and a back porch sat. But the scariest part of the house was the back entrance to the upstairs—a dark, narrow stairway with a real-life Grim Reaper's scythe on the wall! That entrance led up to a kind of apartment consisting of three rooms that opened onto the main upstairs hallway in addition to the back entrance. Two other bedrooms opened on the other side of the hall, one belonging to Uncle Norm, and another that was a kind of guest bedroom where Lynne and I slept when we were allowed to stay over, though we both lived within walking distance of Grandma's house. This guest room was the one that had access to the front porch roof and was the perfect spot for spying on the neighbors. It was also, according to Uncle Norm, the room where one of the resident ghosts had died. Over the hallway connecting the bedrooms and bath was the ever-enticing attic that hid a wealth of family secrets, and possibly even the ghosts. Of this Lynne and I were certain. Obviously, if there weren't any secrets why wouldn't they let us up there?

In any case, there were two actual ghosts in Grandma's house, and Uncle Norm made sure we knew about them. One was an old woman who liked to rock in the chair on the porch. The other was apparently a child who peeked in windows.

Everyone knows that child ghosts are the worst kind. All old houses creak like old people's joints, but to Lynne and I, with the help of Uncle Norm's frightening yarns, every unexpected sound and shadow was proof of ghostly activity. Just how does a rocking chair rock without anyone near it unless there are ghosts?

Lynne and I were on continual lookout for any evidence of a spectral nature. Though we heard a lot of suspicious creaking, there was only one real ghostly appearance that I can remember that occurred when we were sleeping in the guest room, and had been, of course, telling ghost stories. Grandma was at the gathering of "the girls," a group of grandmothers, mostly widowed, who played cards, gossiped and ate fancy hors d'oeuvres and bridge mix. Uncle Norm, though technically disabled with a breathing problem, was still able to be out at a bar. Lynne and I were alone when the doorknob to our room turned, and Grandma's Border collie was let into the room, the door closing after him. He didn't indicate anything unusual was happening, so we determined he must have been acquainted with whomever or whatever let him in. Lynne and I held our breath and squeezed Punkin into bed with us as quietly as possible.

We hid under the feather comforter for quite a while, just listening—no noise—nothing—no creaking bones or chains rattling. Nothing. And Punkin wasn't talking. After what seemed like a safe period, we tiptoed out into the hallway. The door to Norm's bedroom was open, but he wasn't there. We took Punkin back downstairs. Grandma still wasn't home, and neither was Norm. It was great. We were scared to death, but it was great. There really was a ghost! There was an exhilarating feeling about being proven right.

Later, when Uncle Norm's emphysema got worse, he took up yoga to help him breathe. I moved to New Orleans

where the veil between the living and the dead is very thin. We wrote letters to one another. He was experimenting with out-of-the-body exercises and reading Timothy Leary. He once wrote in a letter that if I came home from work one day and saw him sitting in a chair in my apartment not to be surprised. He never did, but I wouldn't have been.

In the intervening years, over forty of them now, I don't recall seeing Norm or any other ghosts, though I have experienced the deaths of friends and family, and I have read, reflected and learned a lot about death. I am pretty sure we can't control death. I am also fairly certain that something remains of an individual after physical death, even though I have no scientific proof. It is comforting to project our desires onto situations that we cannot possibly control. Our minds are tricky little devils that want us to continue to feed and water them so they indulge us our fantasies. But truth be told, we don't know, and if we ever do, most of us will be unable to share with the embodied.

This Girl Who Is Me

Jeanne Northop

Instructor: Dr. Richard Louth

Course: English 620

Genre: Creative Non-fiction

The girl leaves the run-down boarding house on Bourbon Street and in a few blocks reaches Jackson Square. She feels that she has finally arrived—somewhere. It is 1966. Artists all around the Square are painting and drawing under gaily-colored beach umbrellas. An old black man, surrounded by young white people soulfully plays a metal dobro. Further into the Square, a lanky young man with wind-wild hair plays a harmonica, accompanied by another strange man dressed like a gypsy who plays guitar, his tongue hanging out and his head tipped to the side, appearing at once both innocent and maniacal. He maintains a continual mesmerizing beat, rocking back and forth as the music possesses him. The entire Square is filled with young people—an impromptu festival—no adults need apply.

She smoothes out her bell-bottom hip huggers, tucks in her pale yellow lace-trimmed blouse, and sets her tan cord cap at a jaunty angle, very Mary Quant-ish, then walks through the black iron gates. The music is familiar, the sound of people singing along alluring, and the lack of authority figures exhilarating. This is where she belongs. She sits back on one of the park benches a little distant from the crowd, pulls a sketchpad out of a bag made from a Mexican serape, and begins to draw the group seated around the guitar and harmonica players. People pass around a bottle of wine and throw bread to the pigeons.

Others dance singly or together, each to her or his own beat. Some unabashedly neck with one another, rolling in the vibrant green grass like puppies.

It's a warm and sensuous fall day. The air smells faintly of coffee with a hint of the redolence of the river. Overpowering, however, is the scent of an as yet unidentified flowering bush that perfumes the breezes with a fragrance that will forever identify the French Quarter. The entire atmosphere tingles with anticipation, rainbow-colored like the young people's psychedelic clothing. Today is a Southern version of Haight-Ashbury, and she feels at home.

The afternoon passes languidly. People come and go. Musicians change places.

Entranced, though detached, she draws the tableau before her. She is the plain sparrow amidst a garden filled with exotic feathered creatures. Like Dorothy, she's not in Kansas anymore; she still visualizes herself in sepia.

Eventually, the bells of the cathedral ring the end of the workday. Perhaps somewhere adults leave mundane jobs, going home to a regular life of meals and chores and family. But not her; she left that behind. This place is new. This place is where she belongs and she is never going to be a part of a boring adult world that doesn't know how to have fun.

Daylight lessens and she begins to put her drawing supplies away. One of the guys from a group around the musicians comes over to where she remains seated. He is tall and handsome, with blond hair, blue eyes and a cleft chin, a very young Kirk Douglas. Unlike most of his colorfully dressed companions, he is conservatively attired in tan cords with a neat white shirt and a jacket sporting leather elbow patches.

"Let's see what you are drawing," he says, passing her a half-full bottle of Chianti as he sits down beside her. He seri-

ously considers her drawings and nods without comment.

“You an artist?” she asks.

“No, I’m a writer.”

“Wow, what do you write?”

“Poetry, mostly.”

“Wow.” She takes a swallow of wine.

“Do you stay around here?” he asks.

“I’ve got a room over on Bourbon, but I’m moving in with a friend soon. She lives someplace off the streetcar line. She gives him back the bottle.

He swallows and hands the bottle back to her. “Well, we’re having a party over at my pad on Decatur if you want to come along.”

“Sure, maybe I could read some of your poetry.”

“Yeah, and you can draw me a picture.”

The flat occupies an entire top floor of what was once a warehouse on the lower end of Decatur Street. Michael is his name, not Mike, and he hasn’t paid the electricity bill so the huge flat is dimly lit by candles sticking out of Chianti bottles that provide an unsteady, though somewhat romantic, light. A bare mattress, on which are sprawled several people of indeterminate age and sex, is placed before the balcony doors so that anyone needing a breath of fresh air must first navigate around it. A beat-up refrigerator right out of the 1940s hums asthmatically in one dark corner. Two walls are covered with cluttered bookshelves made of concrete blocks and rough lumber. There are no chairs.

Michael leads her to a makeshift table made of an old door held nearly level with the help of several large books stacked irregularly at each corner. The table is cluttered with books, ashtrays, bottles, cigarette papers and Baggie full of weed. In the center is a huge colorful hookah, currently not in use. Several

other young people sit on pillows on the floor around the table passing bottles, and what she assumes from her reading are marijuana cigarettes. One reads aloud from Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*.

"Wow," she thinks, hugging her art bag, "this is what Kerouac was writing about." To Michael she says, "Neat place."

"Certainly not tidily neat," Tom replies smiling. "Put your bag here on the table and let me introduce you around."

He takes a deep drag from a proffered joint and offers it to her. She shakes her head.

"I don't smoke."

"Nothing?" Michael laughs. "You will."

At the Crossroad

Jeralyn Spiehl

Instructor: Dr. Richard Louth

Course: English 620

Genre: Creative Non-fiction

His hair is short and the morning sunlight made him look bald. He was standing on the corner, nothing on his bony, lean frame except a pair of running shorts. He was suddenly taller than I knew him, or wanted him to be. The crossroad was marked only by a stop sign.

I took him by surprise when I approached him. “You look like my pawpaw standing here.” It struck me as uncanny that this restless soul should remind me of my patient, hardworking, long dead grandfather.

“I’ve been standing at this corner for a long time.”

I had no way of knowing if he meant for a long time that morning or for a long time in his life. I knew both to be true, and I wondered but didn’t ask, why he stands there.

Is he reckoning his life? Is the intersection a search for direction? Is he uncertain of which way to go? Does he regret now his wrong turns?

I’d watched him out the window the night before, just at dusk on the same corner. I’d wondered it then, too. Worried it over in my mind because that’s my job, worrying and trying to figure him out. It is hard to fathom someone who offers you no clues, no scraps to hang onto, to wring your hands over, to twist like worry beads, to pray over like a rosary. Can you ever understand someone who won’t understand himself?

I know you’ve been standing on this corner for a long time. I’ve been watching you.

His Garden

Caroline Derbes

Instructor: Dr. Richard Louth

Course: English 620

Genre: Poetry

His loving hands come toward me
Planting carefully chosen seeds—
Herbs—rosemary, dill, thyme, chives,
Flowers—verbena, impatiens, day lilies,
Tiara of zinnias, my crown.
Fertilizing the earth,
Culling every weed with care,
Watering me each morning,
Pruning bushes annually,
Protecting always,
Sacrificing time, giving of himself,
Creating his perfect garden.
While I, in turn, nourish him and his.
My tomato harvest provides
Nutritious, summer salads.
My herbs season delectable dishes.
My colorful blooms
Provide beauty for yard and home,
Offering a peaceful sanctuary
Yet, I cannot provide
The Eden he or she imagined.
Floating in her pool,
Behind her sunglasses—hidden tears.
Not refreshing enough

For her tortured, alcoholic soul—
My beauty, the pool's cool waters
In his garden.
Only temporary safe haven
From his acerbic tones,
His foul mouth,
His drunken cruelty,
I witness her lonely sojourns,
Her desperate searches—
Finding his supposedly hidden beers
Not nearly far enough
From her demanding need.
Why does he continue
Creating temptation for her?
He knows
She is not strong enough
To resist the luring call.

Intoxicated by liquor—
Not by love,
Voices waft out to me,
Voices of anger, recrimination, regret,
Unlike the soft, soothing sounds he hums to me,
His cherished garden.

I watch and wonder,
Watching him planting seeds of disco tent,
Seeing his lack of affection,
Hearing his expressions of rejection,
Wondering what weeds he has allowed,
Strangling root systems develop,
Weakening his relationships on a daily basis,

Killing his wife.
Under his scorching words, she wilts.
She is dying
Like an untended garden.

My gardener
Worshipping nature
By nurturing me.
At the same time,
Destroying the sanctity of their marriage,
Neglecting to protect,
Caring not for the sacred covenant.
Observing him tenderly caring
For my plants
Each and every day,
I can't help but wonder—
What would their lives be,
What would grow,
If he nurtured his relationships
With the same loving attention
The same tender touch
The same devotion that he does me
His garden?

Galveston Bay Breakfast

Caroline Derbes

Instructor: Dr. Richard Louth

Course: English 620

Genre: Poetry

Preying on tiny fish
in the Galveston Bay estuary,
a snowy egret,
patiently and silently,
peers into his thigh-deep waters.
He wanders through the reeds
as gentle, rippling waves wash the shore.

Under the sun, two pelicans' shadows
Glide over sandaled toes.
Wild grasses and beautiful red-orange wildflowers,
aptly named Indian-blankets bob in the breeze.
Another pelican perches atop a channel marker.
Spotting a school of fish, he dives,
his whole upper body going beneath the surface.
Using his webbed feet, he swims,
while stretching his unique bill
to swallow a morsel.
Abruptly, he's gone
flying to other hunting grounds.

Reddish-egrets
Mother, keeping an eye on her baby,
herds that errant youth

back to camouflaging water grasses.
She prances in nearby open water.
Chasing a swiftly moving fish,
she lifts her legs
in that backward shorebird bend.
Almost dancing, she flaps her wings,
Successfully spearing green water.
Circling overhead,
magnificent frigate birds,
Beautifully unique wing-shape
black against blue summer skies.
Lovely black and white tern
flaps against the wind,
searching the waters below.
His head moves up and down
as if he were text-messaging on the highway.
Noisy seagulls disturb morning tranquility—leaving
behind earthbound mortals.
Gracefully landing,
a great blue heron
stalks the point's shoreline.
Such a quick fisherman!
Easy to miss his darting movement.
A fish now firmly held in his beak,
he lifts off to consume his meal elsewhere.
Just as suddenly
he's back,
wading one step at a time,
long neck arched,
searching for seconds.

Broken Heart, Broken Family

Priyanka Mehta

Instructor: Dr. Jayetta Slawson

Course: English 770

Genre: Creative Non-fiction

Author's Note. Arranged marriage is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a marriage planned and agreed to by the families or guardians of the bride and groom, who have little or no say in the matter themselves.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore, Ma. How many times do I have to say I'm more interested in a career than getting married," I said as I continued to peruse the manuscript for the second time.

"I'm not saying you have to get married right away. We're just looking right now. If the right guy comes along the way, all the better for us. You aren't getting younger, you know," she said as she continued to fold the laundry.

"I'm twenty-five. That's hardly old."

Mom sighed and said, "Marriages don't happen in a day. It'll take time, that's why this is the right age."

I didn't want to say anything further. Mom had been talking about marriage for the past year saying it doesn't hurt to look around. I wanted to be mad at my mother for pushing the issue, but how could I be mad when I know she only wants the best for me. She grew up in India. Everyone she knows married that way. She married that way. And I don't see it turning out very well for her.

The next day, I left for work and classes. The hour-long drive and an open highway allowed my mind to wander. The

possibility that my mother could find someone for me to consider was scary. I wouldn't have an excuse to keep saying no if it turned out be the right person. But how would I know? How does anyone know?

Americans have it easy. At least dating allows the option to give up. Find a guy you like, go on dates, spend time with each other, fight, make up, fight, break up. So easy. Divorce is complicated. End of dating means broken heart, end of marriage means broken family. How can I ignore my own broken family? My parents' marriage wasn't the best example, wasn't something I wanted to repeat in my own life.

My parents were essentially two strangers who shared a house and two children. They were more comfortable apart from each other than in the same room. To be honest, it was better that way for me and my sister. I preferred the uncomfortable silence to the constant bickering. I had a hard time dealing with tension so thick, you could cut it with a knife; I didn't want to repeat it with another stranger.

At eight o'clock, I walked into work and clocked in. Ms. Bell was already hidden behind a stack of files. Ari, my friend and co-worker, was there as well. The conversation stopped after the greeting as everyone settled in for the day ahead.

"So, Ms. Bell, how was your date night?" Ari asked

"Oh, it was fine. After twenty years, Mr. Tim still manages to surprise me. Sometimes I think that man would have never asked me on a date if I hadn't practically forced him. And I'm glad I made the move or I might have missed him," Ms. Bell said as she laughed the way only a contented person could.

I smiled and said, "You still have date nights with your husband after twenty years of marriage?"

"Of course, honey, sometimes you have to make time for your marriage after work and kids, so we still do it every now

and then. It makes life bearable.”

It wasn't so much the fact that she still had date nights with her husband after three kids. Secretly I thought it was romantic. I couldn't imagine my parents on date. It'd be like... nope... can't imagine it. It's just not possible.

“David and I had a disagreement over the weekend,” Ari said of her own relationship with her boyfriend. “He wanted to hang out with some of his guy friends and practically told them that I was the one telling him he couldn't go. Let me tell you, my friends, I am not that kind of girlfriend. It annoyed me so much that I ended up cancelling our plans to go to the movies.”

“Aw, hon, men are clueless sometimes. It's a fact,” Ms. Bell said to lighten Ari's mood.

We laughed, but I thought at least there is someone important enough to argue. The status quo in their relationship allowed for expression of multiple opinions, whereas, my father thought his is the only opinion that mattered. Everything else was just a waste.

“What about you, Riya? Any change in the relationship status? Did you finally decide dating a white boy is the best way to go?” Ari asked, as she raised both her eyebrows and grinned.

“You know I have no problem going on a date with a white guy. I just can't marry one. My mother would disown me, even if he did decide he could be a vegetarian for me. And I can't take the chance of him deciding meat is after all something he just can't live without. Nope, it won't work,” I said.

“Girl, you don't have to spend the rest of your life with him. Go on a few dates. Get a free meal out of it. That's what my mom says,” she said, as she laughed.

“My mom's crazy. Seriously, you know what surprises me?” Ari continued, “How are you still very traditional even though you're extremely liberal? I would have thought after liv-

ing in America for over a decade, you'd want something different."

"Well, being in America doesn't mean I have to forget or dismiss what my mom teaches me about my culture, how I lived in India. Plus, I like to think that being part of two cultures means I can pick and choose the things I want to be. Your people are still confusing me though."

There was a truth there, but the bigger part that I couldn't bring myself to confess to my friends was that being part of two cultures was extremely confusing. I have a foothold in both worlds but fit in neither one. I'm not American enough for the Americans, and not Indian enough for the Indians. I can't choose one over the other. That would be like choosing one half of my body over the other. It's not possible. I wouldn't be whole.

"Okay, if you can't date, how do you get married?" Ms. Bell asked.

"Arranged marriage." I let that sink in and waited for their reaction.

"Arranged marriage? You aren't seriously considering that, are you?"

The outrage on Ari's face made me chuckle. I loved watching the reaction from my American friends every time I tried to explain why dating wasn't a big part of the Indian culture.

"What's wrong with arranged marriage? It's just like being set up on a blind date, right? The only difference is that both parties know what each one wants," I said as I put away a stack of files after making sure each one was entered in the database, while Ari seemed to mull over her claim.

"I don't know how I feel about being set up by my parents. They'd probably end up selecting someone perfect on the surface, but secretly has drug problems. They just wouldn't get

it right.”

“I’m not saying the girls don’t get a choice or that they have to marry the person the parents choose, although in some families, I think it still works that way. Thank god my mom is more modern than that,” I said as I pushed my glasses up that had slid down my nose.

“Again, you live in America. Shouldn’t you want something different?” Ari said as she pointed her pen at me.

“Well, sure it’s different. It’s harder to find Indian guys, especially in New Orleans because the community is smaller than places like New York and New Jersey.”

Ari rolled her eyes and said, “I don’t mean that. I mean, don’t you wanna date and find a guy to fall in love with and be proposed. Arranged marriage sounds so, I don’t know, like something that happened in the fifteenth century.”

“Does it? I don’t know. It doesn’t seem such a strange idea to me. Then again, I’ve heard stories about how a lot of couples got married. It’s mostly looking and deciding on both parts, without getting to know one another. Seems shallow, yes, because you have nothing except appearance and education background to go on, but most of them seem to work out fine.”

“Does that mean you’ll go to India to find the guy?” Ms. Bell asked with curiosity.

“God no. He’d be too Indian for me. I know I can’t make that work. He’d have to be someone who has been in America for a few years. He can’t have grown up here either because then he’d be different. He has to be part of both worlds, like me. There’s just something different about people who have been in one place their entire lives.” Ari and Ms. Bell just shook their heads. I knew they wouldn’t completely understand. It’s not something that can be explained. Marriage and society are intertwined for us. Marriage is about one’s duty—parents’ duty

toward their children, a daughter's duty to lighten her parents' responsibility, a son's duty to keep the family name going. Marriages have nothing to do with wanting to share a life of joy and sorrow with someone. At least not arranged marriage. Not that I've seen anyway.

I've only been to an American wedding once. The memory of that day was as sharp as the day it had happened. The church was beautifully decorated, with white, pink, and yellow flowers. The bride wore an elegant white, satin gown, and the groom was dressed in a black-and-white tuxedo. The most wondrous moment was of the bride walking slowly down the aisle and I saw the groom's face light up. In that moment, I knew that he knew he was the luckiest man on earth because of her. When the nervous bride looked across the room, and saw the man patiently waiting for her, the nervousness left her because she knew that at the end of the aisle was a man who wanted to make her his world, with whom she wanted to share her life. They make promises to each other in front of people to love and cherish one another. After hearing the vows out loud, it's easier to imagine for someone like me that the love they share will still be there fifty years later. Deeper. Stronger. Unbreakable.

Indian weddings are complicated. Most of the time, it's a union between a man and a woman who haven't known each other a long time, but the families have deemed them right for each other and they've consented. There was a time when their wedding day was the first time they saw each other, but things have changed. So there they are, on their wedding day, performing rituals they don't understand. The message is clear though. They're bonded for life. their lives are knotted with each other as the dupattas were during the ceremony. The promises they make are silent—to compromise, to accept, to learn, to teach, and maybe if they are really lucky, to find that the person they love is the person they married.

Oral History as Service Learning

Oral history is a pedagogical method for integrating writing and history that qualifies as service-learning. It unites people, academics, and methods in Teacher Education. It also provides an authentic experience by learning history from a primary source. Candidates participate in Writing Workshop to write the oral histories, a process that promotes student writing at all levels. And instead of discarding papers at year's end, stories are archived in the library. The ten years of this project have featured stories of women on the home front during World War II, war veterans, teachers, and civil rights activists. The following oral histories are examples of this work.

Cheryl Edwards, Ph.D.

A Year in the Merchant Marines

Hilarie Lognion

Instructor: Dr. Cheryl Edwards

Course: Education 415

Genre: Oral History

John Allen Turcich served in the Merchant Marines in World War II from 1943 to 1944. Nineteen years old and newly married, the young man left his new wife and baby to live aboard a ship that carried ammunition for the weapons used in the war. On board, John was a ship carpenter and cabinet-maker. The skills he learned on board would spark a lifelong interest in carpentry for the now ninety-one year old veteran.

Eager to join the Navy like his brother, John joined the services because he knew he would be drafted anyway. When he went to enlist in the Navy, though, he faced unfortunate news: the Navy had met its quota and was unable to accept any new enlistments. After John's family recommended that he join the Army, he said he refused and instead enlisted in the Merchant Marines, an auxiliary to the Navy that delivers troops and supplies for the military. After making sure he had packed his mother's veil for good luck, John embarked on his journey. His enlistment in the Merchant Marines would place John away from his family for a year while he traveled the world learning carpentry aboard a ship serving the United States of America.

John's wife, Marguerite, had just given birth to their first child, Diane. While he missed them terribly, John knew he had no choice but to serve his country. He kept in touch with his family in New Orleans, Louisiana, through letters and occasional phone calls. At ninety-one years old, John recalls his time serving in the Merchant Marines as a "wasted life" because he

“missed life while he was on the boat.” When asked what he was fighting for, John said he does not really know what he and his fellow servicemen were fighting for. “All I knew was that I was ordered to do things and did not want to disobey and get in trouble,” he stated.

Although his time away from home caused John to miss an important year with his family, John developed a passion for carpentry while at sea. He would spend his days working as a cabinetmaker and his free time constructing model sailboats from leftover wood from pallets. Once discharged from duty, John would go on to spend the rest of his life enjoying the skills he learned at sea by building everything from doors to cabinets to benches. If it could be made out of wood, John built it.

John encountered many hardships while he was serving in the Merchant Marines. He had to cope with feelings of missing his new wife and daughter while at sea. He also received word that his brother had died while stationed in Hawaii and serving in the Navy. John’s brother brought pleasure to servicemen through music by taking part in an all-male singing group. While headed to a gig to perform, he was involved in a bus accident that resulted in him losing his life.

However, the year John spent at sea did not serve him with only sadness. During that year, he was given the opportunity to travel all over the world—from Florida to North Carolina to England, Scotland, and New Guinea. While docked in Scotland one night, John took part in conversation with a man from Canada. The Canadian man told him he had no reason to fear for his life while at sea because the Canadians were tracking his ship because of the precious cargo aboard; the Canadians did not want the Germans to get near John’s boat because of the amount of ammunition on board. This conversation reassured John of his safety, as did his mother’s veil, which he carried with him at all times.

His mother’s veil must have been full of good luck for

John. He remembers being in his room one night when something inside told him to go to the deck of the ship. While on deck, he noticed a magnetic mine floating in the water near his ship. He heard his captain call, "All clear!" but knew they were not clear. John hurried to make the captain aware of what he spotted from the deck. Only a short distance away, a magnetic mine, which is activated by the proximity of a ship or tank, was floating atop the dark water. The captain ordered the ship on which John lived to turn around and go away from the mine. Once a safe distance away, a Navy seaman on board, Jacques, took a gun and shot at the mine until it exploded. Shortly after, an Australian plane flew over and waved their wings at John's ship. They had been tracking the mine and wanted to get rid of it. If not for John's obedience to his inner spirit, he and his fellow crewmen would have lost their lives that night.

When not saving his fellow Merchant Marines from magnetic mines, John found leisure (and dinner) at sea by throwing a line overboard. Once in the North Sea, he recalls a time when he caught a nearly frozen fish. Near the Panama Canal was another "big, green" catch. While fishing off a huge ship proved to be exciting, John's hobby also provided him and his crewmates dinner when food became scarce.

After missing his new wife and newborn baby, losing his brother, traveling the world and creating lifetime memories, John declared, "Amen!" when his dad picked him up from the train station on Carrollton Avenue in New Orleans in 1944. Home for good, the young man traded an opportunity to go to Florida to teach Merchant Marines to be home with his family. As for his experience in World War II, John said he did his work, enjoyed himself, and went home when he was done!

Vietnam: The Forgotten War

Jessica Darby

Instructor: Dr. Cheryl Edwards

Course: Education 415

Genre: Oral History

Terry Joseph Charrier was born on September 9, 1946, at Baptist Hospital in New Orleans. He was raised on the South Shore of Lake Pontchartrain, in Harahan, and has lived there most of his life. He grew into a well-rounded young man, joined the Navy, and earned the rank of Petty Officer (PO) Charrier. As a child, he had three sisters and quickly became well accustomed to living in a household of mostly women. He graduated from East Jefferson High School in Metairie, and was a member of the last class to do so before the new school, Riverdale High School, was built. PO Charrier enlisted in the military just out of high school and married his high school sweetheart shortly after. He lived in California for a while and after leaving the military, moved to Ocean Springs, Mississippi, where he lived for 15 years. Today, he resides in Covington, Louisiana, where he is an active member in many veteran military societies. The Vietnam War has affected him greatly and every day he relives memories of his service in the military during the Vietnam War.

When PO Charrier was a student at East Jefferson High School, he knew he wanted to join the military. He did not waste any time getting his career off to a start and enlisted in the Navy just after graduation. What PO Charrier didn't know was that while he was in boot camp in San Diego, California, the United States would enter war. The United States' role in this war was to assist the Vietnamese against communists since they wanted

a democracy. This war was called the Vietnam War. Remembering feelings he had before the start of the war, PO Charrier stated he was “foolish about the dangers” and was “anxious to go out into the field just like all young men at that time.” Boot camp prepared him for war with extensive training. One exercise PO Charrier knew well was learning how to do a special dive from 50–60 feet high into the water. This form, with the legs crossed and arms held tight across the chest, was important for men in the Navy to master in order to minimize injuries should an emergency arise and they would need to abandon ship. PO Charrier remembered well the fear and anxiety of standing high above the water and having to jump without a second’s thought.

After completing boot camp, PO Charrier was transferred to Electrical Technician (ET) School at Treasure Island in San Francisco, California. There, he furthered his education and received training on the repair and maintenance of hardware and equipment on naval ships. He worked hard to earn the honor of being rated First Increment, meaning he was promoted early to 2nd Class PO. Since this promotion usually takes one year, it was a great achievement for PO Charrier to accomplish in several months. In addition, there was a large need for ETs overseas and this promotion allowed him to be deployed early. When PO Charrier completed his training at ET School, he was stationed on the USS Kearsarge at Long Beach Naval Ship Yard for one year before being deployed overseas in July 1966.

The USS Kearsarge headed overseas with 2nd Class PO Charrier and 3,500 seamen. The main purpose of the USS Kearsarge was to keep Russian ships away from the United States carrier fleets. One mission PO Charrier recalled as being “like a Western, where the horses circle the carriage.” During this mission, the USS Kearsarge was called to assist the Japanese in keeping the Russians away from their fishing vessels. Apparent-

ly, the Russians were confiscating the Japanese fishing vessels and they wanted the United States to make a show of force. PO Charrier remembered all the U.S. ships forming a circle around the Russian ships to intimidate them into leaving the Japanese vessels alone. During this mission, PO Charrier overheard the captain calling for the lifeboats to be ready on the sides, just in case they were needed.

There were many other missions like the show of force that impacted PO Charrier during his service. There was one in particular where he volunteered to go on an off-ship mission. PO Charrier boarded a helicopter and, shortly after take-off, it was having engine trouble and had to land on a neighboring ship, the USS Oriskany. He was then transferred to another gunship before making it back to his ship. By this time, it was getting very foggy on the water and it was difficult to see. PO Charrier had to use a drop line to get down to his ship, which was a frightening experience. But that was not the worst of it. As he was being lowered down to the ship, he suddenly felt himself being pulled back up into the helicopter as it began to fly away. Unaware of what was happening, PO Charrier was being blown around and was swinging in the breeze while being hoisted back up to the moving helicopter. Once back in the craft, he was terrified to find out that it was not his ship, after all. He was being lowered right into the hands of the enemy, a Russian ship. The helicopter had to fly around for a while before finally locating the USS Kearsarge and returning PO Charrier back to the safety of his own ship.

On another mission, PO Charrier was high-lined between two ships for the first time. The experience of high lining can be exhilarating and frightening for anyone. High lining is when a cord is attached to each ship and is angled so that the sailor can attach himself to the cord and move from one ship to the other.

During this mission, PO Charrier joined the crew of a gunner helicopter to rescue a downed pilot over land. When he got on board, the pilot told him, "hold on and strap in and I'll do all the work." They made two attempts to rescue the pilot, but both were unsuccessful. Fortunately, there was another helicopter that was able to complete the mission and rescue the pilot. After the rescue attempt, the helicopter high-lined PO Charrier to a fuel liner where he was again high-lined to the USS Kearsarge. This mission took more than 24 hours just for him to get back to his own ship. PO Charrier recalled high-lining to be a scary experience for him, especially when he was dipped into the water.

The USS Kearsarge also had the honor of transporting President Lyndon B. Johnson's helicopter to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The helicopter was brought aboard the USS Kearsarge with its own Marine detail and it remained covered and guarded the entire time. On the voyage back to the United States, the ship made a slight detour across the equator. Whenever a ship crosses the equator, a ritual is performed. The people who have never crossed the equator were called "shellbacks" and the people who have were called "pollywogs." There were only about 40 to 50 pollywogs aboard the ship so they had their work cut out for them. The shellbacks would be required to do things similar to what would be expected in a fraternity initiation. Like all other shellbacks, PO Charrier was required to participate in this ceremony. The ritual included an egg hair wash, kissing the belly of the "royal baby" (a pollywog dressed as a baby), and even being sprayed with a fire hose, just to name a few. He recalled it not being much fun, but it was an honor to cross the equator and earn the title of pollywog.

In addition to his missions, PO Charrier had to deal with the terror of firebugs aboard the ships. People who like to play with fire are called firebugs. These people are very dangerous

on a ship because of the many flammable materials, as well as the isolation of the ship when out to sea. There was an incident in which a firebug had caused several small fires on the deck and in the torpedo shop while at sea. One of the fires caused the oxygen and nitrogen tanks on the ship to explode causing a fair amount of damage. Luckily, no one was injured and the firebug was apprehended. The ship had to anchor at the nearest safe harbor for repairs. The USS Kearsarge tied along "Pier E" or "Pier Echo" in Long Beach, California. The damage had to be repaired quickly as the USS Kearsarge was the only carrier able to launch an A-4 aircraft which was ready and available for duty, so it was important in the war. There was another ship, however, that was not so fortunate. Aboard the USS Oriskany there were some men who were playing pitch and catch with a flare. Instead of throwing the flare overboard, they threw it on the deck and caused a large fire, resulting in many injuries and 44 deaths aboard. PO Charrier recalled coming to the aid of the ship and seeing dozens of body bags being unloaded. He remembered this being a major point in his life where "reality set in" and he was "slapped in the face." For the first time ever, PO Charrier "realized the vulnerability" of his position.

While PO Charrier was overseas, he maintained regular contact with this girlfriend back in Louisiana. When he was 19 years old, he returned home on leave and proposed to his high school sweetheart. They were married shortly thereafter and moved into an apartment in Palace Verdes Heights in Long Beach, California. When she became pregnant, however, PO Charrier sent her back home to Louisiana to be with her family while he was deployed overseas. As the due date for the baby approached, he began to get very nervous about the well being of his family and birth of his new child. It was September 30, the due date for his daughter, and he had no clue what was hap-

pening back home. That day PO Charrier received a cablegram from his family that his beautiful baby girl was born on September 27. He was worrying about his family and his wife when, in all actuality, his daughter was already born. It simply took the Red Cross three days to get the cablegram to him in Vietnam.

PO Charrier was relieved that all was well, but at the same time, he was upset that he was unable to be with his family during that wonderful moment. He did not get a chance to meet or hold his daughter until the day before Christmas Eve when his daughter was three months old. In order to be with his family, PO Charrier requested early leave from the military.

PO Charrier is an honorable man who has risked his life for his country and his belief in freedom. He followed in his father's footsteps who had also served in the Navy in World War II. PO Charrier is proud of his father's service and was honored to learn, after his passing, that he received a Silver Star Medal for his service. This medal is the third highest military decoration that can be awarded to a member of the United States Armed Forces. PO Charrier's time serving in the Vietnam War has greatly impacted his life and he still suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and nightmares that wake him up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night. He is a model citizen and is active in several organizations such as Veterans of Foreign Wars, Forty & Eight, and the American Legion. He earned many medals and honors during and after his service in the Navy, including Blue Jacket of the Year. PO Charrier referred to Vietnam as "the forgotten war." He is grateful for the acknowledgement he receives today for his service, yet it still pains him to think of the hostility he received from people during the war. It is amazing to think that men and women in the military do so much for the freedom of this great country, yet they get little recognition for all they do. It is people like PO Charrier who help others ap-

preciate and understand the true meaning of loyalty, freedom, honor, and courage. These amazing war veterans can give us a new appreciation of what it truly means to be “proud to be an American” if we would just stop and listen.

**The
War Within:
J. J.
Witmeyer**

Tanya Mair Culpepper

Instructor: Dr. Cheryl Edwards

Course: Education 415

Genre: Oral History

The National World War II Museum, located in the heart of the New Orleans Warehouse and Arts District, holds one of the largest collections of WW II memorabilia in the nation. It brings to life the actions and reactions of a world in political turmoil and informatively chronicles this significant struggle in history. In this atmosphere of reverence and pride for the American experience during WW II is where I met J.J. Witmeyer, Jr. A veteran of WW II, Witmeyer serves as a National Historian Emeritus volunteer for the museum, a position he has held for seventeen years. At ninety years old, this well-dressed and handsome man still demands respect just by being in his presence. His suit is pristine and his shirt and tie are well pressed and coordinated. Witmeyer is a perfect gentleman throughout our conversation, but ever the soldier, he is also on duty. He pauses several times during our conversation to direct people, “up the stairs and to the right, folks,” as they enter the museum.

Witmeyer was born on April 10, 1921, in New Orleans, Louisiana. He grew up in the eighth ward, which is a few blocks from Elysian Fields Boulevard. He was the only boy of three children. He and his sisters lived their whole childhood in the same house in which he was born. Witmeyer describes himself as “pretty much a street kid [who] liked the girls.” He even jokes about being in sixth grade for four years because he was “a goof-off in school.” Still, Witmeyer attended public school until

he was eighteen. That same year his life changed forever.

Witmeyer recalls, "I went into the service at eighteen and was killing Germans by twenty." As the son of a World War I veteran, Witmeyer always wanted to join the service. First, he tried the Marines but was rejected due to astigmatism in his eye. When the United States entered the war, Witmeyer was at the U.S. Naval Station in New Orleans and attempted to join the Navy. Witmeyer went to his commanding officer with the telegram but was told, "Get your butt in the barracks! You're in the Army now!" Witmeyer likes to joke about having served in both branches of the military. His self-proclaimed "wise guy attitude" shines through at moments during our conversation.

In fact, Witmeyer recalls the first time he got into trouble in the Army was during basic training. It was a Sunday, at breakfast; he was sitting down to eat biscuits in the mess hall. He broke his biscuit in half and right in the middle was an extremely large roach. At this sight, he immediately threw it across the mess hall. This was problematic because, "you don't do that in the Army...you eat the biscuit and the roach too." This insolent act caused him to get kitchen patrol for a month. Every day at five o'clock, he reported to the kitchen to scrape stoves, peel potatoes, and clean the meat grinder. He remembers how horrible it was, especially cleaning that meat grinder. From then on he decided to do the right thing. This event was a motivating factor for Witmeyer. Since then, he did whatever it took to move up ranks as quickly as possible. He says it was "all an inspiration from that meat [he] had to grind."

Witmeyer started his service overseas in 1942 as a Tech Sergeant with Company "G" of the 314th Infantry, 79th Infantry Division. Later, he became a Staff Sergeant. Shortly after D-Day, in July 1944, Witmeyer was battlefield commissioned by General Patton as a 2nd Lieutenant. After that, he became a Platoon

Leader and eventually was promoted to a Captain. Witmeyer has held every enlisted grade in the Army.

He was part of the first United States Army assault unit to cross the Seine River, as well as the first into Belgium and six other countries. Witmeyer says, "I always like being first and I still do." His unit stormed Utah Beach aboard a Higgins landing craft that was built in his hometown. The boat had a front ramp that dropped, allowing troops to pile out. When they did, they were greeted by German fire. Witmeyer remembers, "When the ramp went down, you were going through the gates of hell. You didn't know how deep the water was, where the beach was, and they were firing at you. "

Witmeyer saw many casualties among his own men; however, his most powerful memories come from the children he saw killed during the war. He saw two young boys tied with barbed wire who had been shot in the head and another dead child whose face was completely covered black with flies. Witmeyer's recollection of "how ugly war is" continues with a memory from his time in France. As his unit was coming up to a farmyard, a woman came out of the house yelling at him and beating on his chest. She brought out a young girl, only a couple of years old, who was killed during an air raid. He directly didn't cause this child's death, but he was being blamed for it. Witmeyer pauses before saying, "I get a chill even right now talking to you about it because war is hell."

During his time overseas, Witmeyer was wounded twice. He got his first Purple Heart when he was hit with a bayonet to the back during patrol one night. Once healed, he was sent back to the lines. Later, during the Battle of the Bulge, he got frostbite in both of his feet. Again, he recovered and was sent back to combat. His second Purple Heart came in December 1944, when he was on the Siegfried Line where he "left a piece of his

leg in France.” While in a military hospital, Witmeyer, as the only company commander, was put in charge of determining if soldiers were fit to return to combat. Although it was his duty, this was a task that was not easy for him. Witmeyer notes, “You didn’t ask me to tell you this, but I am responsible for sending several people to their deaths and it haunts me.” That year, Witmeyer ordered six hundred thirty-two replacements to combat.

When the war ended in 1945, Witmeyer explains, “it was not like the movies with people throwing confetti.” Witmeyer’s individual reaction was to just lie down on the ground and thank God the fighting was over. However, the end of the war did not mean his return to the States. The outcome was still unsure since they heard conflicting stories. Witmeyer’s unit went into Army occupation because someone had to claim the war-torn towns. Witmeyer served as acting military governor in Dortmund, Germany. His duties were to find living arrangements for the soldiers and to put people in jail whom he himself, tried.

At this time, the Germans had a group called the “were-wolves.” They were a post-war resistance unit that tried to continue the war after Germany surrendered. They had food and ammunition stockpiles all over the terrain. One day, Witmeyer discovered a man who had a message in his pocket. The words on the paper were typed, but when held up to the sun, there was a pinpricked message written in code. He began to question the man in French, Russian, German, and English, but the man acted as if he didn’t understand. Witmeyer knew he was involved with the resistance somehow because he had a pistol and an automobile while others did not, but he didn’t know for sure who the man was. Witmeyer took him into the woods where he “beat the hell out of him [and] broke his nose.” He even broke his own hand on the man’s face. That particular German operative was eventually turned over to Counter Intelligence Corps, but not

all of them made it out of the woods. This was now the type of assignment Witmeyer carried out. Witmeyer brings to mind that the “only thing [he] learned to do in the military was a dozen ways to kill people.” He was told to “go get the animal,” but as Witmeyer dredges up, “I was good at my job, and that was my job. “

This way of thinking continued to affect Witmeyer’s life even when he returned to the states after the war. When Witmeyer was twenty-one, right before going into battle, he married a woman named Thais. Witmeyer explains that when he returned home to her, they had four boys in “pretty short order.” There were times when Witmeyer had to go out and sit in his car by himself ,because “I didn’t trust myself [and] I didn’t want to put my hands on my children. “ Although Witmeyer never beat his wife or his children, he struggled with his inner demons that came from a life at war. As Witmeyer describes, “I’ve killed a dozen to fifteen people, as close as you are, some with my bare hands. Then, I had to come back home and live with my wife and begin having children.”

Witmeyer’s unruly attitude lasted a long time after the war. He wanted to continue being a bully because of the things he learned to do, but he had to realize that not everyone was an enemy. He turned to alcohol for a while and his wife was made to tolerate it. She was a strong woman, however, and helped him see his way thorough. With admiration in his voice he notes, “If it wasn’t for my wife I would have probably been a bum.” Witmeyer and his wife remained married for sixty-two years until her death in 2006.

To this day, Witmeyer has frequent flashbacks about the war. He tells me that he woke up seven or eight times just during the previous night. He remembers a time six months ago when he fell in the shower and blacked out. While he was passed out,

he was sent back to the night of D-Day where he spent it lying in the snow in a foxhole staring at the shaking bushes because he thought they were Germans crawling up towards him. The last time he was wounded, it was also snowing. He was at that moment in a combat situation, but when he came to, he realized he was only in his bathroom. This is something Witmeyer deals with on a day-to-day basis.

I have PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] up to my eyes. Don't be ashamed if you have it. What I tell people is, if they can go through my part of the war, if they can run a bayonet through a guy's neck and stand there and look at him, if they can do those things . . . then they are gonna come out with memories.

Although Witmeyer had many harrowing experiences in his life because of the war, not everything that resulted was so grave. The military also taught him determination in the face of adversity. When he returned to work after the war, he got involved with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). He quickly rose from a general cashier to the Vice President of Labor Representatives, albeit having only one year of college. Witmeyer reveals, "You can do anything if you have the determination and someone gives you a chance." Witmeyer's sons were also influenced by their father's fortitude. Two of them are currently very successful attorneys, one being the head of his Wall Street multi-million dollar firm. Three of them also went into the service and became officers (two colonels and a captain), while the other is an agent in the CIA.

Furthermore, Witmeyer came out of the military as a highly decorated soldier. In 2009, he was knighted by the King

of France. He was given France's Legion of Honor medal, their highest award, for being part of the Allied invasion force that liberated seventy-five large towns and one hundred smaller ones in France. He has four Bronze Stars, two Presidential Unit citations, a European Campaign medal, a Combat Infantryman's badge, and two Purple Hearts. Even still, Witmeyer is the most proud of his men, as two of them received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Witmeyer is a true American hero whose immense existence is neatly packaged in a well-groomed, modest gentleman. Sitting next to him, I am humbled by the sacrifices he has made in his life for my freedom. I came to interview a veteran for a simple school assignment, but I left a forever changed individual from meeting an unassuming man with an astounding life story. It is men like J.J. Witmeyer, Jr. who remind me why I am proud to be an American.

A Different Perspective on Life

Samantha Fiddling

Instructor: Dr. Cheryl Edwards

Course: Education 415

Genre: Oral History

I wanted to get a different perspective on the significant events of the past century. Who better to call than a person from a continent on the opposite side of the world? On October 17, 2011, I called my grandmother who was born and raised in Sydney, Australia. I made the phone call at 5:30 Monday evening, which is 9:30 in the morning on Tuesday, the following day in Australia. As I listened to the sound of the phone ring, I didn't know what to expect. I only knew that my seventy-three year-old grandmother had lived a long, eventful life.

Barbara Fiddling, christened Barbara Anne Whaddups, was born on September 22, 1938. Her parents, Joan and Stanley Whaddups, were proud to announce the arrival of twins Barbara and Lawrence at Crowns Street. Women's Hospital located in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Barbara was born into an average, lower-class family typical of the 1930s era. Along with her twin brother, Lawrence, Barbara had a younger sister named Faye. Barbara says it was hard to imagine new life being born into such utter travesty that was present at the time. However, her parents often referred to Barbara as their "little blessing."

Being parents of three was tough during that time. Everyday life was a constant struggle, as Barbara entered the world in possibly one of the most trying times of Australian history. The world was in utter chaos. Australia, along with other

prominent countries, was submerged in the Great Depression and was unknowingly on the brink of a devastating war. World War II would soon make its arrival before Barbara's first birthday. Even though she was very young, Barbara knew the impact the depression and the war had on the lives of her family and common Australians. The devastation lasted long into Barbara's early childhood.

The Great Depression of the 1930s was a period of extreme hardship for the people of Australia. Although she was too young to remember, Barbara's parents often told stories about the depression and the war. She said her family "didn't have two coins to rub together." However, this was not uncommon during this time. Every family was suffering in a similar fashion. The shortage of jobs and income resulted in the scarcity of food and shelter. When World War II began, regular food became even scarcer. The ordinary commodity of butter soon became nonexistent. Barbara remembers eating bread with salt and dripping, which Barbara explained as "the fat people used to cook with. To give food a bit of flavor, you'd add dripping to it." About the taste, she laughingly said, "You got used to it after a while." Poverty and desperation lasted for a few years until the beginning of World War II eclipsed it.

Australia entered World War II when Barbara was not even a year old. Luckily, her father was not enlisted. However, Barbara proudly stated that her grandfather served in World War I. Barbara recalled that many Australians were proud of the war. Everybody was eager to help in the war effort and be a part of the war. Her future husband, Donald Fiddling, would tragically lose three brothers in the war, little did Barbara know at the time. Luckily for Barbara, Donald was much too young to even be considered for the war. Things at home began to improve for Australians. They were united and had something to hope for.

Barbara's mother started to work on the home front, supporting her beloved troops. Wartime in Australia also produced a sense of fear and uncertainty. She said, "It also changed your priorities. You didn't care about the things that were once so important. Even food. You didn't care." Barbara's parents were deeply affected by the war. She remarked, "They believed in the war. It affected everyone. Even after it was over, people still talked." Horror struck Australia when the Japanese attacked and supposedly tried to invade northern Australia. Fear spread like wildfire in the streets. The war had reached their doorstep. Fear of Japanese invasion struck very deep into the hearts of every Australian. This caused fierce and fervent support of the war. After the attack, the government took measures into their own hands. The people of Australia became frustrated with the new strict government rules imposed on their everyday life. She said, "I remember my parents telling me about it. The government told you what to do and when to do it. They had complete control." People started wondering if the war would ever end. When the war finally did end, Barbara summed up the thoughts and attitudes of every Australian with one word: relief.

After the war, Barbara's childhood was still filled with ups and downs. Her family never truly recovered from the Great Depression. As a child, Barbara never had the luxury or the stability that came from a consistent home. Her family was constantly on the move from one house to another. At one time during the Depression, Barbara and her family were living with her grandmother. However, a dramatic fight between her father and grandmother resulted in the family being kicked out on the streets. Barbara jokingly said, "Don't write this down!" Searching for shelter, the family moved from rental house to rental house, until they were finally placed into a housing settlement in Fern Bay, outside of Sydney. Barbara explained that the hous-

ing settlement was like government-assisted living. Barbara described the financial status of her family as “dirt poor.”

Barbara went to school until she was 15 years old. After leaving school, Barbara entered the workforce, working as a secretary in an office. However, this was only temporary. She then worked as a secretary for a large insurance company called NRMA. It was during this time that she met her future husband, twenty-four year-old Donald Howard Fiddling. In 1958, twenty-year-old Barbara married Donald after a brief courting period. Barbara nostalgically described this time as “some of the best days of my life.”

Consequentially, Barbara was forced to quit her job after her marriage because of a company policy stating that married women could not be under their employ. Afterwards, Barbara began working at the Repatriation Department, which was where “sick and wounded soldiers got to see doctors.” Barbara was responsible for scheduling medical help for veterans and current military personnel. Barbara had the opportunity to meet countless soldiers during her work at the department. “They always had some kind of story,” she said.

After several years of work at the Repatriation Department, Barbara settled down and started a family. Barbara had four children: Gregory, Donna, Jeffrey, and Wayne. Her children would experience a childhood similar to Barbara’s. Although the country was not in the middle of depression and war, the family was still poor. Donald was a printmaker, but still struggled to make ends meet. Little did the family know that another war of a different kind was fast approaching.

There was a different feeling in Australia concerning the Vietnam War. Unlike World War I and World War II, there was no anticipation or excitement about the Vietnam War. Men were not racing off to leave their families and fight in a war they didn’t

believe in. To Barbara the war was the longest and most controversial war of Australia's history. She even went so far as to say, "The war lasted so long, it was almost like we forgot about it." Barbara said the Vietnam War "didn't affect us as much. It just sorta happened." Australia still sent troops to fight in Vietnam, although the consequences of war in everyday life were not as heavily felt as they were during World War I and World War II. Barbara explained, "People just lived. I wasn't really affected. I mean I didn't like the war, nobody did." She said this was a statement that rang true in the hearts of every Australian.

Nobody liked the Vietnam War. Many thought it was pointless and a waste of time. Barbara said that people were better off during this war. There were no financial struggles like her family had during World War II. Most people didn't feel the effects at all. The most powerful effect Australians felt was what they saw on television. Barbara didn't know anyone who served in the Vietnam War. It was almost as though the war didn't exist, if it wasn't for the protests. "There were more protests than I can ever remember," Barbara says. Protests about conscription and the immorality of the war plagued the Australian streets. People had had enough of war. Anti-war groups were an ever-present part of society at the time. The thing Barbara remembers most about the Vietnam War is the troops returning home after the war. "It was horrible," she said. "Absolutely horrible. They [the protesters] would shout things like 'murderers' and 'rapists' and baby killers.'" Barbara felt badly for the soldiers. She also said that the Australian government didn't acknowledge the soldiers. "The government turned their backs on them," Barbara remembers. Some soldiers even returned to Australia in the dead of night. "They didn't want to make a big deal of them," Barbara said. However, the Australian government acknowledged the soldiers several years later and issued a formal

apology.

Long after the war, in the spring of 1981, is a time that Barbara will never forget. This was when her husband, Donald, first started to get sick. To try to help make ends meet, Barbara started working as a tray maid for a local hospital. "This was dirty work," she describes. After five torturous years of sitting and waiting, Donald died of Aspergillosis, a rare fungal infection. The family was devastated. Barbara, now a widow, had to care and provide for four children all by herself. "I was terrified," she simply stated, "How do you move on from that?" But somehow Barbara managed. After surviving depressions and wars, this was what ultimately brought her down. The loss of her husband was something Barbara could never truly recover from.

The twists and turns of Barbara's life helped mold her into the outspoken, tough-skinned woman she is today. Speaking with her gave me the sense of a woman lost in the past. Even today, Barbara constantly talks of her husband and the times of old. Her eventful life gives credit to the tough and trying times of the twentieth century. Her trials and tribulations, as well as her triumphs and joys, have helped shape her into a woman who has never given up. Barbara's resilient spirit is evident in her actions and the way she lives her life. Barbara currently resides in Telopea, a small town unnoticed by the rest of the world nestled in the heart of Sydney, Australia.

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