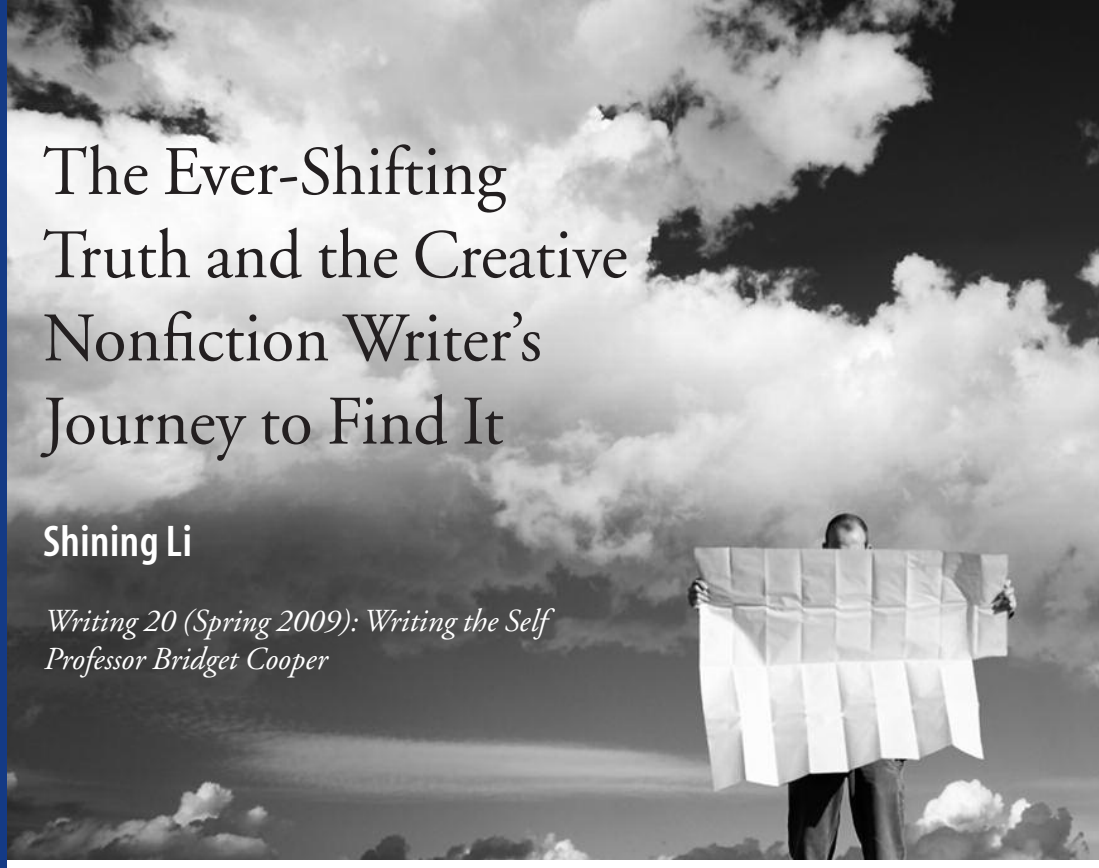


The Ever-Shifting Truth and the Creative Nonfiction Writer's Journey to Find It

Shining Li

Writing 20 (Spring 2009): Writing the Self
Professor Bridget Cooper

Creative nonfiction has often been denied a spot in the field of legitimate literature. Sometimes deemed as little more than the bastard child of fiction and nonfiction, creative nonfiction — in the form of memoirs, personal essays, and other works that draw upon actual experience — is admittedly a confusing and confused genre. When I enrolled in "Writing the Self" in the Spring of my freshman year, I was unfamiliar with the ethical quandaries that awaited me — questions unique to creative nonfiction's demand for both style and truth. A multitude of questions loomed among the genre's intellectual baggage: How committed must a creative nonfiction writer be to the facts? How much could be made up, left out, or molded into shape? What appropriate balance, if any, can be reached between disclosure and honesty? ►

Forced into learning more about each other, we soon discovered that I was a writer — with an insatiable desire to understand humanity, while he was a scientist — with a passion for the intricacies of computers.

Despite our differences, however, we were essential to each other in the way only first loves can be, and after the break-up I felt paralyzed by the complete cliché of my agony.

I met him through a mutual friend after our freshman year of high school. We were almost strangers at the beginning of July, but after a scorching summer of parking cars at a local tennis tournament and months of idle banter via the all-too-convenient venue of instant messenger, we became close and strangely solipsistic friends. We knew each other as either a stream of sloppily typed and poorly capitalized words on a computer screen or a sweaty, squinty-eyed companion skillfully dodging cars as they parked in not-so-neat lines on a patchy, yellow-brown lawn. When I wrote a fateful note of juvenile nature hinting at a romantic inclination at the beginning of sophomore year, neither of us knew what we were doing as we fell head-first or heels-first into a relationship.

Three years later, he broke up with me in a tortured phone conversation, the details of which I promptly banished from my memory. All in all, it had been a strong relationship, peppered with the requisite number of quibbles and quarrels. Forced into learning more about each other, we soon discovered that I was a writer — with an insatiable desire to understand humanity, while he was a scientist — with a passion for the intricacies of computers. We both matured during our relationship, eventually taking on familiar roles in arguments: me, pushy and brutally honest; him, reticent and frustratingly ambiguous.

Despite our differences, however, we were essential to each other in the way only first loves can be, and after the break-up I felt paralyzed by the complete cliché of my agony. In the weeks that followed, I clung on to the ideal of our relationship. Instead of eating or sleeping, I subsisted on the image I had constructed in my mind of our true love, now torn from me by circumstance and myopia. I convinced myself, with my writer's will, that I understood the inevitability of us, while he was temporarily scared, restless, and confused. But how could I see one reality, while he lived in another reality entirely? Who actually knew the truth?

During this period of anguish, it occurred to me that if I could trust nothing else, I could at least trust my words to help me understand the events that had just transpired in my life. If I could somehow document our story, it would be tamed into clarity, and I would be freed from the struggle of grasping at certainty. Within creative nonfiction lay the power of the truth, buried under commas and apostrophes. I could get at reality this way, through prose. With this hope in mind, I turned on my laptop, opened a new Word document, and started writing.

Since I was enrolled in a creative nonfiction course that semester, I had already familiarized myself with the ethics of the personal narrative and with the flexibility that a creative nonfiction writer had in creating a piece from real life. In class, we read scholars who claimed to know something about writing the truth. I understood, for instance, that most argument about truth in creative nonfiction is fixated on the obligation of the writer to the literal facts, to events and details as they occurred in real life. During the course, I was constantly reminded that any classification as "nonfiction" carried with it an obligation to stick to the facts. The critics I read debated in circles, squabbling about the nature and significance of lying. Some, such as William Bradley of "The Ethical Exhibitionist's Agenda: Honesty and Fairness in Creative Nonfiction," harp on the nonfiction writer's natural obligation to the truth because "truth is inherent to the essay's form" (204). Dogmatically, Robin Hemley leaves little room for invention, insisting in Turning Life into Fiction that "the only absolute defense … is that the facts stated must be *provably* true" (qtd. in Bloom 278).

To these critics who hold literal truth to be of primary importance, my moral obligations were clear. Even in my creative nonfiction class, I'd rarely been fascinated by whether dialogue needed to be verbatim from the past or whether minutiae had to be replicated exactly. I spent little time worrying about committing any heinous acts of misremembering, and the details I couldn't bring to perfect recollection seemed trivial in comparison to their larger context. What did the exact date of our duck-feeding at the lake matter, as long as I knew that we were perfectly happy that afternoon? What did it matter if I didn't actually cry for three hours straight, as long as my frustration was clear? I remembered enough of it, and I remembered it well enough to have remained fundamentally faithful to the literal reality, so these factual truths were simple.

Other scholars, however, couch the "truth" in more nebulous terms, and I identified more with their reasoning. In "Memoir? Fiction? Where's the Line?" Mimi Schwartz willingly sacrifices the less crucial literal truth in order to "[g]o for the emotional truth" (qtd. in Bradley 206). Likewise, Fern Kupfer writes in "Everything but the Truth?" that lying is acceptable if the "reconstructed version of the story does not deceive the reader in its search for the aesthetic truth" (22). Their consensus, it seems, is that factual truth is nice but dull, that real intrigue lies in the elusive aesthetic and emotional truth, which Philip Gerard terms the "larger Truth" (qtd. in Bloom 278). These voices, locked in battle with Hemley and his stuffy adherence to literal fact, were more inspiring in their ambiguity. I found in their disregard for hard facts a freedom to explore my own deeper actuality, and so I wrote with this larger Truth in mind.

As I struggled to shape my jumbled thoughts to fit a personal narrative, I momentarily felt the pull of emotional truth as though it were drawing me into my own story, heavy with the gravity of vivid memory. On some afternoons, I released myself to a rush of words and experienced the profundity of immense discovery, as though I had finally uncovered the elusive reality I originally knew to be buried within my sentences. But when I left my rambles to sit, adding to them day by day, I noticed a problem, impeding my journey to aesthetic truth. In my empty afternoons of pacing and sobbing, I had read my previous journal entries and pored over the emotions of my sophomore, junior, and senior selves. The factual truths were as I'd originally remembered them, chronicled painstakingly in my own handwriting, but I couldn't tell which literal truths were resonant and which were only incidental. I realized in surprise that the seemingly distinct reality of my pure love for him was simply not … *true*.

In my own notes about the past, I found cracks that I'd ignored before, insecurities about my emotions for him that I'd subsequently glossed over in my memory and judgments about his character that offended my present view of him as a nearly perfect being. Each day, I tried to change my writing to fit these new revelations, tweaking the story to emphasize certain details I'd originally left implicit, dismissing extremely vibrant recollections as emotional fallacy. I did all this, stretching and pulling at the material of my own past—I did this shifting, without approaching any ethical gray areas, without ever lying about the literal truth. But what of the emotional truth?

I realized, after several rewritings, that if personal writing serves the ultimate purpose of conveying what Joan Didion, in "On Keeping a Notebook," calls "*how it felt to be me,*" then I'd left a crucial question unanswered: how *did* it feel to be me (qtd. in Bloom 278)? Did I know? Did even *I* really know the emotional, aesthetic, larger Truth?

In my first few attempts at writing, he was my soul mate. He was the hackneyed only person in the world who could understand me,

As the semester progressed, I found it increasingly easy to ask questions and increasingly difficult to find answers. In class, we approached the issues from both the perspective of the writer and the reader—paging through David Sedaris before mimicking his wit in our own essays, admiring Virginia Woolf's eloquence before attempting similar mastery at our keyboards. Despite its murky ethics, I grew to love creative nonfiction because of the intimacy and honesty of the genre and because of the way I could step into someone else's life, if only for a few minutes.

Prior to taking this class, I would have hesitated to use personal experience to support broader claims, but "Writing the Self" taught me the power of individual knowledge. This appreciation of personal opinion is crucial, especially because young writers are frequently so intimidated by seemingly learned scholars that they fail to trust their own judgments at all. When I wrote my only research paper for the course, I used the details of my own writing experience as fodder for my analysis of the ethics of creative nonfiction writing. In effect, I sometimes wrote personally about writing personally. The result is an essay both personal and intellectual—both specific and (hopefully) universal—about the elusive nature of the truth in creative nonfiction.

But how could I see one reality, while he lived in another reality entirely?

the overused love of my life, the trite savior who added meaning to my otherwise unfulfilling existence. This was my first emotional truth.

In my subsequent attempts, he was foolish, mindless, crass, and malleable. I wrote of his indecision, of his unrelenting need to dominate my time, of his decaying selfhood and his bland charisma. Who was he but what I'd wanted him to be, painted over his true substance-less self? Who had he been all along but my puppet? I was glad to escape his boring, stifling love. This was my second emotional truth.

In my later attempts, I was weak and incapable of living without the power that my relationship afforded me. I could not bear to stand alone in my bottomless existential angst. I had rushed into the relationship, from the beginning controlling the situation in order to feel in command of my destiny. I was the villain, not he. I had forced him into my corner so I could possess him, so I could use him as a vessel in which to store my innermost secrets. This was my third emotional truth.

The more I wrote, the more chaotic everything became. I could no longer place convenient labels on anything, least of all what I *should* be writing. The once-comforting words of Schwartz and Kupfer—and even Didion's glib summary of personal writing—began to mock me. I knew that I wanted to write both the literal and the larger Truth with the enthusiasm of Lynn Bloom in "Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Nonfiction;" I wanted to write the "clarity, grace, and passion" she finds so crucial (288). I knew that was the entire point of it all, and that my "aesthetic fulfillment" would come through a "character and story that … provide[d] their own clear-eyed witness to the truth, that witness untainted by vindictiveness or special pleading" (288). But as a writer, I struggled with finding the correct truth, the one that would reveal my relationship as it really occurred and vindicate my experience.

Slowly, I began to doubt my own reasons for writing. Surely, I was not vindictive (a sigh of relief; I was still ethically sound, in some sense of the word), and I needed—desperately wanted—to create Art from my pain. But would this justify my unavoidable manipulation of my relationship? The very act of writing the story, it seemed, would necessitate a "selling out" of my past (Bradley 207). Bradley obscures this quandary by insisting that he is "savvy in the way that [he] write[s] about people who may not be presented in the best possible light" and excuses himself since "most of the people whose names inhabit [his] memoirs and essays tend to come across very well" (207).

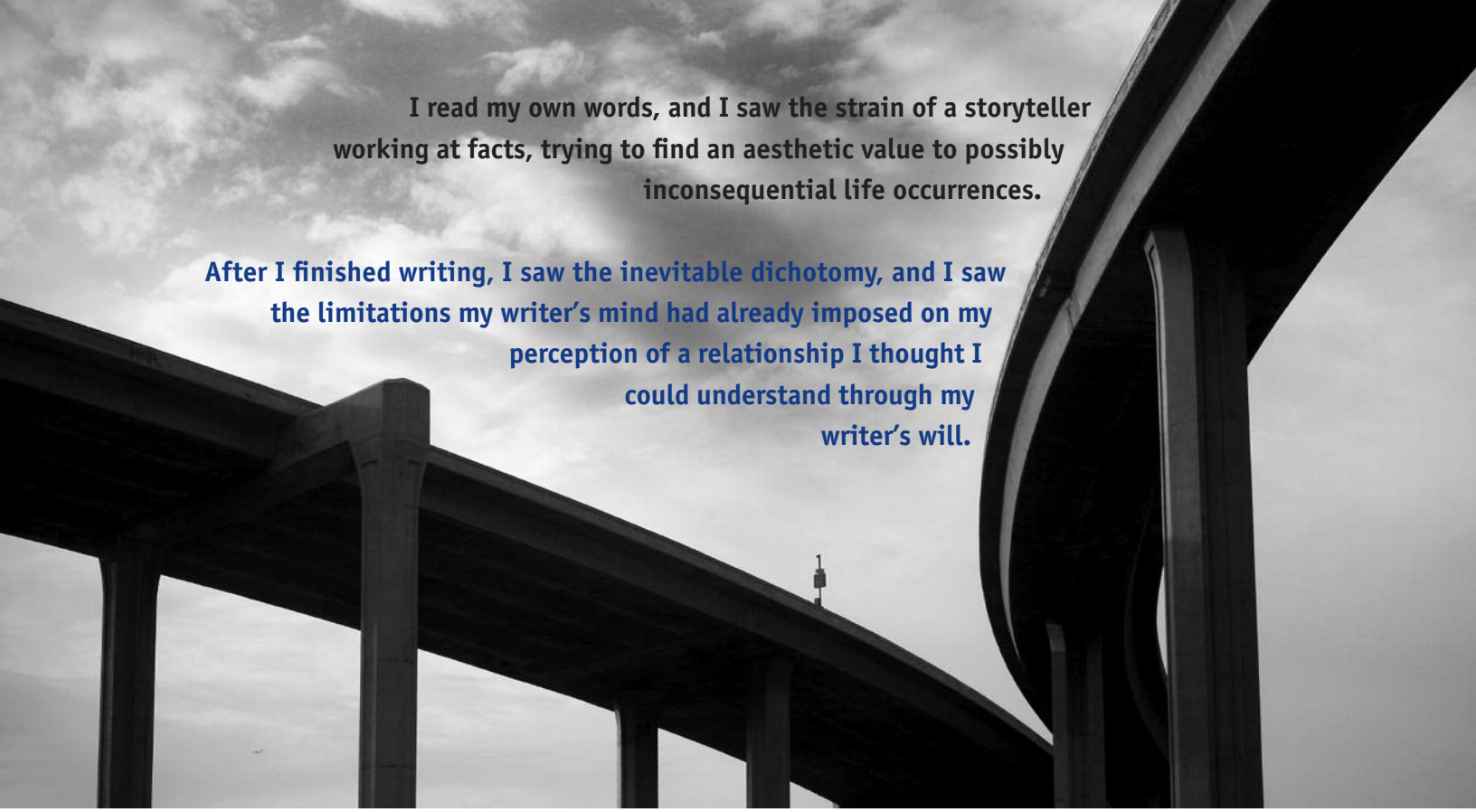
Yet Bradley doesn't understand the fundamental betrayal in the very act of committing the people in his life to text. I scrolled through my sentences, letting them melt together on the screen. The point was no longer *what* I did with my ex-boyfriend in my writing or *who* I described him to be: the point, now, was that I *could*. As Tara Ison emphasizes in "The Names Have been Changed to Protect the Innocent: A Fiction Writer Struggles with Nonfiction Tendencies," I could make "[w]hatever point [I chose], in a slash of permanent marker on the page" (110). And despite my weakening grasp of the larger Truth, I maintained the absolute power to create a written past suited to my interpretation. The story, though my ex-boyfriend was intricately and undeniably involved, became *my* story the instant I placed it in my own perspective, with my own thoughts.

Did I deserve this control? As Bronwyn Williams points out in "Never Let the Truth Stand in the Way of a Good Story: A Work of Three Voices," I was the writer who got to define the story "in print for an audience of strangers to see" (299). I was the tyrant who could—to use Paul John Eakin's terms—"merchandize" pain through "ventriloquizing" and exploiting my ex-boyfriend, shaping the emotional truth I expressed for my own purposes (qtd. in Bloom 282).

If I, as a writer, was by nature a thief as Ison says is true of all writers, then did I need to "steal, pilfer, rob" from the people in my life (109)? And when, exactly, did this inevitable robbery occur (Ison 112)? Looking back, I cringed at the times I'd already romanticized my relationship in my mind, in order to fit the plotline of the tale I thought we were going to weave. I remembered my lofty journal entries about our first date, our first kiss, our declarations of love. I read my own words, and I saw the strain of a storyteller working at facts, trying to find an aesthetic value to possibly inconsequential life occurrences. Is Ison right when she says that the betrayal occurs at the moment that "the fabric of another person's life, at the seam where it meets the writer's own, becomes *material*" (112)? Had I been as heartless as the writer whom William Faulkner claims would not hesitate to rob his mother, since "the 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' is worth any number of old ladies" (qtd. in Ison 114)? I had justified this theft by calling it Art. I had thought I could live and fabricate at the same time.

Now, however, I saw—at last!—the flaw in my original thinking, what neither Hemley nor Bradley nor any other critic had warned me about. In their talk of literal and larger Truths, they had ignored the inevitability that a truth must be told in creative nonfiction. This truth, despite the good intentions of the author, could never be fair to its inhabitants, those to whom the truth is supposed to have occurred. Creative nonfiction, despite its lofty aims, could only destroy its characters by laying them in two-dimensional portrayals onto a sheet of stark white paper. This depiction would be permanent—and ultimately inaccurate.

Williams, who admits to looking "for facts to fit the phrase or hook that would make [his] story more effective," probably understands this necessary narrowing of reality to fit a tale better than I do (293).



I read my own words, and I saw the strain of a storyteller working at facts, trying to find an aesthetic value to possibly inconsequential life occurrences.

After I finished writing, I saw the inevitable dichotomy, and I saw the limitations my writer's mind had already imposed on my perception of a relationship I thought I could understand through my writer's will.

The constraints of creative nonfiction are more rigid and yet more subtle than we realize, finding their way into our assumptions about and our approaches to the people in our lives. "You can't participate in a relationship you're mining," Ison cautions, and she speaks to the danger of attempting to make Art from life (112). Ison instinctively understands the primary contradiction in trying to see all reality as potential writing material: friends become specimens; actions become evidence for some grand analysis. In the end, writers must "[betray] the pact of mutual secrecy upon which relationships are based" (Ison 112)—by doing this, they must necessarily be cruel.

In discussing "truth" in creative nonfiction, critics tend to shy away from the real role of a writer. They tend toward uninspired ethics and irrelevant excuse-making, trying to save the writer from who she must be. Bradley, Hemley, Bloom, Kupfer, and a number of other critics believe that a writer can redeem herself by adhering to literal truth and claiming benevolence. Despite their surface bickering, they all make the same unspoken assumption that a writer can both respect her subjects and create a story worth telling, a work of aesthetic truth.

They are wrong. A writer—any writer, not just one of creative nonfiction—must express only one emotional truth, but in life there are always infinitely more emotional truths left out of the story. This is the nature of narrative: it is a slice of reality, true yet limited, beautiful yet inconsistent in its portrayal of humans beings who cannot be so easily described by fancy phrases and observable characteristics.

But this is the choice a creative nonfiction writer must make between being a participant and being an observer. After I finished writing, I saw the inevitable dichotomy, and I saw the limitations my writer's mind had already imposed on my perception of a relationship I thought I could understand through my writer's will. The Word document I produced out of this tumult is far messier than I would like it to be—such is life!—but if I could have formed it into Art, the last lines would read something like this:

The Truth is that we fell in love in high school and fell out of love in college. We are human beings, and this is what happened. There are explanations that could be made and stories that could be told and retold, but there is no crystalline reality, and perhaps these rationalizations are better left unvoiced. ■

Works Cited

Bloom, Lynn. "Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction." College English 65 (2003): 276-89.

Bradley, William. "The Ethical Exhibitionist's Agenda: Honesty and Fairness in Creative Nonfiction." College English 70 (2007): 202-15.

Ison, Tara. "The Names Have Been Changed to Protect the Innocent: A Fiction Writer Struggles with Nonfiction Tendencies." The Kenyon Review 23.3/4 (2001): 105-22.

Kupfer, Fern. "Everything But the Truth?" The Women's Review of Books 13.10/11 (1996): 22.

Williams, Bronwyn. "Never Let the Truth Stand in the Way of a Good Story." College English 65 (2003): 290-304.