

FAMILY IN THREE STORIES  
AND AN EXAMINATION OF INFLUENCES

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## CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

### Family in Three Stories and an Examination of Influences

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The motivation for this Capstone in Creative Fiction is two-fold: first, my goal is to expand my understanding of the fiction mechanism by working in the medium; second, my goal is to delve into my own experience with creative works to find what sources have influenced my writing. Under the guidance of Professor Grodstein, I was able to turn my research into introspection that answered two questions: why I chose to write fiction and why this is important. Additionally, family is an unquestionable root for later life choices and motivations, and for this reason I based my stories on both a strict and a loose definition of “family,” with each story hoping to untangle the threads of human experience within that web. Because the stories are relatively brief, they allow for quicker plot acceleration and a more narrowed focus on individual moments or scenes, thus exposing in each story what defines family and its respective weight to the plot. Through my research and inner examination, I learned that in order to write fiction, one must read and experience creative works constantly, as it would rarely be possible to write something without being in some way influenced by other art. As noted by Professor Grodstein, there is rarely a direct translation from works read to works written in style or content; but reading and viewing widely (some, but not all of my influences are listed in this Capstone examination) allow the writer to sense the nuances in texts for internal

rhythms, clear descriptions, and precise prose. Through fiction, the hope is that realities about the non-fiction world in which we live can be explored, clarified, and beautified. Just as poetry allows writers to deal with difficult emotions and emerge whole, so does fiction allow writers to explore situations that demand further clarification and emerge intact. My consistent access to the best of the written word has been a privilege I do not take for granted, and this Capstone is an exploration of that privilege as well as a culmination of years of dedication to my work.

## Dedication

To my family, who have loved me without condition.

1: Wally's the Name of the Bike Man Who Sold Me My Raleigh

In the October fog, the thick mist was whipping away at my face as my bicycle sped down the curved, winding path intended for pedestrians. The puddles along the side of the road from yesterday's rain did not allow sufficient room for the narrow tires of an antique road bike. And anyway, I was a senior now, and very good at convincing younger students that I was more important and to kindly get out of my way, since I probably had some important seminar to attend or conference to which to present my research. I didn't get a chance to test the validity of this theory because no one was on the path as I sped through it. No one was on the path and no one was on the street. The occasional car would pass by the entrance to the main road off campus, but residents of this sleepy town were so somnambulent that they hardly cared whether students came or went, so long as they didn't try to intersect the main street's traffic. I felt totally and utterly with myself; I wouldn't say, though, that I was necessarily lonely. The bright oranges of the trees contrasted with the lime greens of the short bushes, off of which fell several gleaming drops of dew. I felt strange calling it "autumn" as I used to, since with everything falling off of boughs forty feet high or more, it seemed to be more natural to call it simply "fall."

Fall. From trees, in love, and eventually off my bike after hitting a sharp turn. I had been trying to maintain my balance while carrying a load of book sale books that came in a paper bag wrapped in a thin plastic one. I thought by putting the bag on my left handle, then gripping extra tightly on my right handle, I'd have a better shot of balancing all the way back to my residence hall, but eventually this experiment failed, and I tumbled. I stepped off the overturned bicycle and picked up the few books that had

fallen out of the bag and onto the pavement. Other than a few wet blades of grass stuck to the hard covers, the books were unharmed, and so I carefully wiped them with the sleeve of my red waffle weave shirt, and then wiped the sleeve onto my jeans from high school I'd brought with me my first year. I picked up the bike, put the bag back on the handlebars, and walked again through the cool mist.

A sense of the grandeur of the campus always overwhelmed me at this point in my walk. Typically I'd have someone with me to offer up banter or witty quips about other students we both knew, which would undercut the absolute breath-halting nature of looking around at where I was. But everyone was gone now. To my right were two large buildings with gentle slopes formed in great Gothic style and flanked by stone engravings with the titles of each building: Founders Hall, Green Hall, Clapp Library, and so on. I eventually passed the spot where my friend once slipped on the ice next to me and fell akimbo onto the frozen pavement. She was wearing green lo-top converse with no traction and jeans, and I remembered trying to help her up by offering her my hand, but the undertaking was too dangerous with the ice; and anyway she had just decided to lay there with her arms outstretched to the sides and assured me after such humiliation it was “just best if I accept my fate as delineated by the universe.” It took her nearly two minutes to actually get up, which I don't think she would have done, a) because of her rebellious spirit that went on for days, and b) because unless a campus tour group hadn't been traveling that particular stretch of walkway at that particular moment, there might have been no neutral good Samaritan to offer up their humility. This is how things often went with my friend, who after living with her for nearly three years, had become like family to me; she would speak with candor and bravado only befitting an entitled white

male, and I, eager to hear what she would say next, would measure out my own statements of purpose. If, for some reason, she felt I had outdone her in some manner, she would simply remain silent, and if I'd look at her, I could see the inner wheels working as to what she could possibly say next, but was too uncertain of herself to attempt.

My friend, well, sister, really, would regularly dye her hair crazy colors and even bought a blue wig in the shape of a 60s bob that she frequently wore. Sometimes, if it had been days since I'd seen her around campus, I'd find her simply by locating a blue dot in a sea of ladies' heads walking toward the student center.

Now on the matter of carrying these books back to my dorm: I was nearly there when I found myself walking up the hill that led to the front door entrance, which, through tunnels and staircases, would eventually lead me to my room. The books had been an acquisition through the town library, which took donations all year, then quarterly put on a book sale to all the town's residents, including its students. I first discovered the book sale with another friend, who we'll also call a sister of mine, and we were overwhelmed with the generosity of the library system of the town: for five dollars, one could haul away an entire paper grocery bag full of books of all kinds, from collectible, to hardcover, to paperback. I remember the looks of effulgent joy teeming from our faces as we carried with maximum effort two or three bags between the two of us and walked them the mile or so it took to get back to campus. "Books!" She'd say, placing them on my dorm floor and beginning to sort through them all. Ironically, she's the only one of my sisters on campus to have dropped out and never finished her degree. In my mind I resolved that one can love books but not be technically educated, or that

one can be educated but not need the esteem bolster of a degree from an upper-tier, elite school. One can, in fact, leave the alabaster halls and polished concrete stairs not through effort and thirty-two courses, but rather through innovation and the independent spirit that says “Yes I can live in New York City without graduating from college,” and “No, you're not going to stop me!” At least this was how I reconciled her leaving in my mind. She never told me how she really felt about it, only seemed much happier when she'd come visit afterwards and bring a car I assumed she bought or expensive liquors her new lifestyle in the big city afforded her. What a trip.

I couldn't see her more than twice in a semester because huge questions of insecurity arose in me about whether it was right for me to stay in college, since she had done so well outside of it. It wasn't until meeting the third member of my family away from home that I realized staying in school was a good decision. This friend said to me, when I was contemplating leaving, “You can get much better jobs.” Just like that, one sentence, but with the weight and impact of a wrecking ball. A wrecking ball of reality. Reality was difficult to grasp at several years into the college mix and the only person capable of handing me that reality in a manner that was meaningful yet palatable was this one sister.

So I found a middle ground: I left, took a sabbatical, then came back. Everything was still there when I came back, including my old self, and the pathway winding through the trees and around the lake; then back to the dorms. Everything was there except my family that I had built, that had by then graduated, and probably had low opinions of me for leaving in the first place. I never really asked, just sort of noticed who cared to catch up after my academic hiatus and who didn't. I learned a hard lesson then:

that of out of sight meant out of mind. I had left my home, made home somewhere else, then expected to come back and for my family to still be there waiting for me. Instead I had to make new friends, friends I didn't consider family, friends who frequently isolated or betrayed me. Not very good friends at all.

I went into my dorm with the bottoms of the backs of my jeans wet and tattered and my boots soaked. My face felt moist and cool from the fall wind. I resolved to myself that getting books, even if alone, was still a good thing, that if a family really is a family, they don't just stop caring because you're not there anymore, and that family created through circumstances foreseen or unforeseen might not have the same absolute value as the one with whom we grow up as children and young adults. And yet I had to rectify to myself all the emotions I was feeling, the sadness and the missing of my friends, the intensity and vivid high definition of my memories with them, and the fact that they weren't around to support me anymore. A campus can feel like a womb, nurturing and soft, but it can also feel like a prison, high walls guarded from anything on the outside: even friends, even family.

I began putting the books in the now-damp paper bag onto my bookshelf. They were in no particular order, nor was there much rhyme or reason to why I picked what I picked: *Fertility Handbook*, *Guidebook to Common Insects of the Northeast*, a Latin-English dictionary, and a book about Wellesley edited by a Wellesley alumnae. The latter would probably make a nice relic after I graduated. I closed the window, which I had left cracked open before biking into town, by winding the small metal crank at its base until it was sealed. A surge of warmth from the radiator filled the room and left a fog on each small windowpane. I had grown quite accustomed to being on my own. With

no one left to love, no friends left to call family, and two semester's worth of senior seminars, I had my work cut out for me. The chair I sat in, which must have been modeled by some kind of mid-century modern torture artist, never quite rocked back, except for about two inches, at which point it stopped and rocked forward two inches again. My speakers for my laptop were on and also filled the room with bass and warmth. How did this room filled with modernity compete with the centuries old architecture and pathways and testaments to times now gone? It baffled me, but I didn't think about it too much. Sometimes you live somewhere and certain contradictions simply coexist. Mine were both within and without. After all, who needs a resource like a town library when you've got an all-expenses-paid academic one in your backyard?

I biked there anyway.

2: Dawn

Every morning I'd barge into my sister's room to wake her up—my parents always let her sleep in, but I usually wanted something she'd taken from me the day before. Today it was my new over-ear headphones that she had hooked up to her iPod. When I woke up this morning, things were different. The window was left open and the warm spring air was filtering through a tunnel of light speckled by dust, playing with the corners of her newspaper that had been left open on the table at the foot of the bed. Her covers were splayed across the bed, unmade, and a glass of water from the night before sat on her bedside table. When I went into the kitchen, I expected to see Dawn, but she wasn't there. Mom and dad were at the table, and mom had been crying, like there'd been a fight.

“You're sister's gone. She tried to leave me this note, but I caught her before she could get out,” Dad said. I grabbed the letter from the table, and tried to piece together everything that had happened. It read:

*Dear Mom and Dad (and Seth),*

*I tried to think of how I would tell you this so as to not hurt your feelings, but all I could come up with was the truth. That I'm leaving. I already talked about this with Mom—I know she doesn't approve. Seth, I wanted to say that you're a good brother and to be good to Mom and Dad while I'm gone. All the fights, you know? They don't matter. I love you. Mom, Dad: I wish you would understand, but I know that it is hard to do that right now. I just wanted to get out and learn about myself a little more, and I'm having trouble doing that knowing that college is my only path and an after-school*

*job at Mack's Hardware is the back-up plan. I can't tell you where I'm going, just know that I will be safe and looked after.*

*I love you.*

*Dawn*

She had taken my headphones.

My sister had run away before, but not like this, with what we assumed was a firm intention to not come back. The first time the cops brought her back—she'd gone to see her friends at their beach house in the middle of the night, at about fourteen. Now she was older, so I guess these things sounded more permanent. At least no one was going to bring back an eighteen-year-old to her parents, legally speaking.

Mom's head was in her hands and her eyes and cheeks were red, indicating she'd been crying. Dad was silently searching for the words to say. I knew then not to speak. I just stood there in the room, absorbing its atmosphere until it began to dissipate, which wasn't until several minutes later. I walked into the kitchen.

In the fridge were several Tupperware containers labeled "Dawn." These were my sister's dinners for her after-school job at Mack's. I didn't dare open one. Maybe she'd come back.

"Don't touch it," Dad mouthed from the kitchen table. He'd caught me off guard.

"I'm not. I was just looking in the fridge." I said. I grabbed a yogurt from the bottom shelf and began to pour myself some orange juice from the bottle.

Mom began to cry again, and I watched as Dad went over to her and comforted her in her anguish. She had been like this for a week, ever since Dawn had told her that

she was moving overseas with her deadbeat boyfriend, Lars. When Mom asked her how she could afford that on the allowance his parents gave him, she responded by saying she had been saving up her Mack's money to go on the trip.

*"But what about college? You start in the fall, and we took out a second mortgage. You need that money to get there and support yourself!" said Mom, shocked and infuriated.*

*"I'm not going to college. We're eloping."*

It was like my sister to be bold and surprising with her behaviors. Usually she wouldn't get in much trouble, though. When she was eleven she got caught during school hours rolling a joint with some older kids in the shed at the edge of the football field. I don't think either of us even knew what a joint was, even though she was older. When she came home early that day, my parents had both left work to meet with the Principal and had big frowns on their faces for the inconvenience. When I got home, she didn't say anything to anyone, just locked herself in her bedroom with the music playing loudly.

*"TURN IT DOWN," Mom yelled, walking past her door, scrambling to accomplish at home the work tasks she couldn't complete in her office due to her daughter's fuck-up. I don't really even remember her getting punished much that time. That was the day she got her stereo.*

*"You realize you just got out early and got a present for smoking a joint at school, don't you?" I said to my sister, peeking my head in her room, my eyes wide and angry.*

*"Yeah, and you didn't," she'd say. "So get out!" She got up and slammed the door in my face, turning the music louder again.*

*“TURN IT DOWN,” said Dad, walking past her room. He saw me standing there with my arms crossed, and changed his tone. He put his arm around my shoulders, entreating me to talk.*

*“It's just not fair! She should be in so much trouble!”*

*“Now. Let's just have a nice glass of juice in the kitchen, and we'll feel much better about this.” Dad said in a patronizing tone. He was always solving problems with a glass of juice, like I was still four. At the time I was nine and I didn't understand that my growing discomfort with this was me gradually reaching for adolescence.*

*“Fine.” I said, complying but not entirely convinced that my sister couldn't get away with anything if they'd let her. In one gulp, I drank the juice.*

Now, though, she was gone. Didn't even stay to graduate high school. Didn't ever say goodbye. I guess her goodbye was telling mom she was leaving a week before and not making her bed, leaving all of her stuff behind.

“Everything we've worked for,” I heard mom mumble at the table, as Dad left the room momentarily. I felt the timing was right to try to comfort her, but I didn't know how, being shaken up by everything. “What about all of her clothes, and sheets? She didn't even think about that...”

Just before I could approach her, the doorbell rang. Mom looked at me and, understanding, I went to get it. It was Joe from next door. The interruption caught me off guard, even though Joe sometimes got up early before school to come over and say hi or eat some breakfast cereal (didn't he have his own kitchen?).

“Hey, what's up? Can I come in?” He had a smile on his face. Under his arm was the new pigskin his dad had bought him for his last birthday, the same one we'd

played with on the front lawn the last few times, when Dawn was laying on a pool chair with sunglasses and a bikini top, getting some sun.

*“You guys know you're going to throw that at me, right?” She'd said, condescendingly, then put on her headphones and listened to Sonic Youth at full, eardrum blasting volume.*

“No, thanks, man. Dawn just left. My parents are really shaken up. I can't talk right now, dude. Sorry,” and I softly closed the door. Joe stood there with a questioning look on his face, but I watched his silhouette turn and disappear from behind the glass-pane door within a couple of seconds.

I turned to face mom again, but she had gotten up and began busying herself about the kitchen. She seemed to be comparing the nutrition facts of two different types of grains, bulgur and quinoa. Mom didn't really know why she bought this stuff, just that she'd heard somewhere it was good for you, and was trying it out. Her eyes still looked bloodshot, but she'd stopped crying.

I put my hand on her shoulder, wondering if she would feel like my mom or if she would feel like some kind of vulnerable lamb who would crumble under the weight of the past few days. She turned to me and began to gently cry. “Oh!” she said, looking at me, and hugging me closely to her. I held her, too. In her voice was the sound of our loss, but also the realization that I was still there, that I still needed her. I was grateful.

“Well, one out of two ain't half bad, is it?” She said, kissing my forehead and brushing my hair out of my face. I began to tear up thinking of the selflessness of what she was saying, and of all the love Dawn was now going to be missing.

“She'll come back, Mom. She'll realize nothing out there is as good as home, and she'll come back.” I didn't really know if she would. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Dad walk out of the back bedroom, holding the newspaper. He looked at us and said,

“She circled this apartment listing. 444 Frank Street. Do you realize what this means? I don't think she's taking a plane anywhere at all—she's right downtown.” Mom and I looked at Dad, and then at each other, then we all ran for our coats at the front of the house. It was then I realized that all the times she'd gotten away with doing something bad were just manifestations of my parents' love for her. They showed they loved her by always taking her back. Dad looked at Mom as he grabbed the keys from the catchall and said to her words I'll always remember:

“We're getting our little girl back. We never lost her at all, not really.”

### 3: That Thing Couples Talk About When They Talk About The Future

Happiness is fresh cut roses from the garden, she thought, as she snipped away at a few. She was gathering a dozen near the back of the house for the vase in the kitchen window. Dan, she could see from the rear of the house, was unpacking Christmas decorations and laying them all out in a neat little row on the living room sectional.

“It will be an all-American Christmas,” she told him, coming in from the brisk winter chill, which was just enough to jumpstart her heart into speedy action with the roses, snipping off their lower stems as she ran them under lukewarm water. All-American repatriation was the kind of Christmas Shana and Dan were looking for after years working between Europe and Canada.

“Parisians don’t make large mugs of hot cocoa, only tiny cups for sips of coffee and espresso,” Dan would say. It’s not that they didn’t love Paris—they did, while they were there. But years spent idling between this cafe and that museum made them feel uncharacteristically cultured and nearly un-American—nice if you’re on vacation and that’s what you’re looking for, terrible if you are years into homesickness and just want a short-stack at IHOP with a side of “old fashioned” maple syrup.

Dan had finished laying out the Christmas decorations. “Is there any particular place you’d like these two sets of lights?” He was pointing to the 50 artisan light bulbs that Shana had splurged on a few years back, which they’d managed to take with them to Toronto when they first left the U.S.

“Oh, those!” She thought about it for a moment, and then replied, “How about over the front door?” He nodded in agreement and grabbed a hammer and nails from the kitchen toolbox. While he worked on the lights, Shana stepped back and glanced pensively at the bouquet she had just set on the kitchen windowsill.

“More white than pink,” she pondered, and wondered if the previous owners of the house had the same results in previous growing seasons. She guessed she could call them up to ask, but she decided against it. There seemed to be an unspoken rule about new homeowners calling up previous homeowners. As soon as the title was signed and the keys handed over, it was as though they no longer existed, or were only ghosts of memories pitter patter down the hallway and silently running the washing machine.

“That’s all for the doorway,” considered Dan, walking past Shana in the kitchen to return the hammer and spare nails to the toolbox. He swooped past her and held her around the waist, gazing lovingly into her eyes. “How about a nice cup of American coffee? Starbucks sound good?”

“Well it’s probably from Guatemala, but I think the extra whipped cream and pumps of flavoring will just set us past the mark,” she responded jokingly.

When they arrived at the coffee shop, a small queue had formed from the register and wrapped around the side of the counter. The inside of the Starbucks smelled like blends of exotic coffees both grinding and brewing, and there was a minty sweetness in the air that more than hinted at the upcoming holidays.

“I’ll have your largest—a venti, that’s it—of the peppermint mocha,” said Dan to the barista. She was a young girl of about eighteen and had braids in her hair, plus a Starbucks logo green hat with lots of flair.

“And I’ll have a nitro cold brew...a grande,” Shana chimed in.

They moved over to the waiting counter and looked around. Several baristas were busying themselves about the cafe, reheating Danishes, grinding coffee beans, and taking orders at the drive-through window at a breakneck pace. They looked at each other

knowingly, remembering their last visit to Chez Nous, the Parisian cafe in Montmartre where service was friendly, but slow. Their drinks were ready in an instant. “America doesn’t understand slow food.”

The two of them sat down at a corner table. Shana was watching people come and go. Dan was periodically eyeing her and taking huge gulps of his peppermint mocha, which left a foam mustache around his top lip. Shana didn’t notice, and he quickly wiped his mouth to avoid the jokes that might otherwise naturally follow. She was looking off into the distance, right past Dan, when she said to him what caught him by surprise:

“I think I’m ready for a baby.”

Dan nearly spit out his coffee; then looked at her suspiciously, with one eyebrow raised.

“I just think,” she continued, “now would be a good time for us. We’re home again, we’ve got visas if we want to go back to Paris or Toronto, our baby could live an international life, you know...”

“I don’t know what to say! I’m speechless. Where would we even begin, raising a child?”

“Well the first step would be to have the thing and then make the plans and read the books as we go along. It’s something we could do as we go along. It’s not like there’s a manual somewhere.”

“Oh well what about those books? You know, the ‘What to Expect When You’re Expecting’ books. Don’t those exist for newborns and toddlers too?”

“So you’re on board with this?” She said, looking him directly in the eye, just to

make sure there was no wavering or shifting.

“I mean, yeah, if you want to do it, I think now is a great time. One of us can stay home and—“

“Your job. You’d never leave your job. I’d stay home. I’d end up leaving mine.”

“Well if we had to, if you were making more by then, I could stay at home with a baby. That’s not a problem.”

“I guess...” she trailed off and wondered about this. She knew in her heart it wouldn’t be possible to leave all the rearing and changing and feeding during the day to him. Practically speaking, it just wouldn’t work. Take breastfeeding, for instance—how much would she have to pump just to get through enough bottles for a week? No. She’d have to be the one to take leave.

In Shana’s heart was this deep, conflicted sadness gradually awakened—a longing for a child, for the coming to fruition of this relationship, for a completeness to her femininity—maternity and everything lovely that went with it. There was also the realization that she would have to be taken from a job that she loved. She had earned her stripes in the writing world, publishing two books and several academic papers; with so much momentum, it would be career folly to roll to a complete stop. Her eyes began to well up as she looked down at her hands placed on the table. The gems in her wedding ring glistened under the soft, recessed lighting.

“What’s wrong?” Dan said to her matter-of-factly. He could see the tears in her eyes.

“It’ll have to be me, won’t it?” She replied, wide-eyed. “The one to stay home, to

quit her job, to sacrifice everything. This whole relationship was about equality—a partnership, 50/50, you and me. Everything we’ve done in this relationship we’ve done together, but not this. I am on my own.”

“You are not *on your own*,” he interrupted. “I am here with you, every step of the way. If we do this, we do it together.”

“You’re not the one who’ll have to carry the thing around for nine months, or feel awful, or stay home, waiting on a baby day and night!”

“I told you—I would stay home if you want to keep working.”

“And breastfeed?”

“Well, no. Not that, obviously...”

“I just want to be a mother. I want to know what it’s like. I feel like it’s important for me.”

“Important for you? Am I a part of this decision at all? You know, I wouldn’t just be one of those dads. I wouldn’t just be a sperm donor then stop caring or disappear. I’m not going anywhere, Shanny.”

He grabbed her two hands in his, looking into her eyes. He was trying to bring her back down to earth with him. Trying to show her that the paranoia was irrational. He was trying to remind her who they were, and how much they loved each other.

“Remember, I’d go anywhere you go. Anywhere you go, I follow. To the moon and back, beebies.”

Shana looked at the man she has married eleven years ago. They were younger then, and only their work really seemed to matter to each of them. Maybe it was time for a shift, she thought. Maybe the point of it all was not endless drive, but the division of

life into chapters. She smiled at him and thought, *maybe this can be my new chapter. Motherhood could become me. After all, I may find some time to write. If it's meant to be, it will be.*

The baristas continued to call out people's names in rapid succession, all the while the coffee grinding, the milk steaming, the old café aromas dissipating alongside memories of Paris and freedom.

...

An Examination of Influences

## Introduction

In the words of the prolific writer Maya Angelou, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” Writers soak up words and experiences like sponges and, if disciplined enough, release the output into personal or published works. Indeed, the task of every writer is not just to “write what you know, (and what do you know better than your own secrets?)” (Carver) but also to keep writing, even when it seems like the answers are not yet within reach. For many, creative writing is a process of getting to the meaty bits, the heart of the matter at hand, which may satisfy a personal curiosity, mark a developmental milestone, or answer questions which have yet to be answered. Like hoarders sifting through the dust of an old room full of boxes of junk, writers clear clutter from the “rooms” within, and in the surrounding world. Many are influenced by the events retold in the daily news, personal experiences within (or removed from) society, or even by the depths of their imaginations. This particular capstone relies on various inspirations and influences that culminated over the years in a project on the dynamics within families, both traditional and nontraditional; for within families are some of the most intricate, nuanced, and dramatic encounters that one can experience. Through creative fiction, a writer can accomplish more in the area of self-discovery than they might through the social sciences, natural and biological sciences, psychological science, or even creative nonfiction. Bishop and Starkey state:

The rise of creative nonfiction—which began in the late 1960s with the New Journalism and became a seemingly unstoppable force in the 1990s—threatens to preempt fiction as the sexiest—that is, the most marketable—literary genre. Yet fiction remains the backbone of the creative writing industry. While the popularity of other genres waxes and wanes, fiction is the economic engine that keeps the business running...Every budding writer has a favorite novel that has nursed him through hard times as an adolescent. Fiction offers students an opportunity not just to tell their (life) stories, but to embellish them as well. (Bishop 89-90)

Within this history and definition of creative fiction lies the great advantage of creative fiction in the life of the writer: the ability to recreate, reinvent, and rearrange the elements of one's personal life into a newly digestible format. Embellishments are within fiction, like within music, perceived and embraced. Newly created characters and the trajectory of their narratives create the rising and falling action of a story's arc. The concepts of home and family expand with adulthood to embrace the places where one develops experience through the uniquely unfamiliar, the atypical, and overall, beauty. In this paper, I will trace the influences that paved a creative path for me, led to the establishment of personal creative norms, and entered into my subconscious through the power of setting and experience.

At my beginning there were the poets, the illustrated children's tales, the silly, the unlikely and the colorful. A reader from an early age, I cherished the Shel Silverstein book of poems I was first given, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*; the fiction that seemed referential to a love of gardening and cats, *Almira's Violets*; and the adventures of a maid taking instructions too literally called *Amelia Bedelia*. These books contained clever turns of phrase, ridiculous rhyming and characterization, and featured an interaction of human, animal, and other worldly creatures that opened my sensibilities up to the nonsensical, the atypical, and the lighthearted. Children gravitate toward these aspects of creative writing, with their "strong sense of the ludicrous," (Lawrence 508). It was this love for silly poetry, liberal with its use of language and mastery of invention that captivated and still captivates me. The ease of use of the so-called "ludicrous" is something with which I struggle and find myself reaching for like some reach for the innocence of childhood. Searching for thrill through the world of fiction, I became

fascinated with horror as a child, though it was only that which was palatable to a young mind: Schwartz's short story collections, the *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* series, and the collection of *Goosebumps* books by R.L. Stine such as *Monster Blood I-IV*, *How I Got My Shrunk Head*, and *Ghost Camp*. I knew when I was reading these books that it was the fictional element of what I was reading that kept me feeling "safe" despite the depths to which my child's imagination could carry me. In the case of horror, it was the idea of characters, plots, and settings being fictional that allowed me to explore freely the dream landscapes created by both Stine and Schwartz. Tangentially, with my early childhood encounter of Crockett Johnson's *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, the children's tale of a boy who literally creates his world and adventures with a crayon, I truly began to "use literature as a means of cultivating an attitude towards life" (*Ibid.* 509)—that our living worlds are self-created, and are thus only limited by the spans of our creativity. As an adult, this notion formed into an idea that, with increasing responsibilities, one avenue where this creation would continue to be possible would be in the sphere of creative writing, and specifically that of fiction. The limitless freshness of a child's perspective is how I seek to infuse my writing, though with the weights and responsibilities of an adult life, the nostalgic task can seem herculean.

### Change of Setting, Perspective and Adaptive Mechanisms

Were it not for my childhood, and the desire of my family to maintain stability despite several big moves across the country, I would not have been able to seek out release through the written word. By the time I was an adolescent, I had moved towns or changed schools six times. Journaling, then, became not only a creative tool, but also a survival tool in maintaining my sense of self and my sanity, though it would be years before I discovered my personal voice through philosophical and feminist literature. Virginia Woolf once famously stated that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction,” (*A Room of One’s Own* 4). It was through a close reading of Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* that the importance of the written word to the personal liberty of women first struck me, though the work is one of Woolf’s pieces of nonfiction. Though Woolf’s life ended tragically (“Virginia Woolf”), her message of independence and free thought sticks with me:

The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness. There must be freedom and there must be peace. Not a wheel must grate, not a light glimmer. (Gupta 127)

In my first two years of Catholic prep school in honors English, I encountered works like Homer’s *The Odyssey*, poems by Emily Dickinson, Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, Jane Austen’s *Emma* (in a comparative study with the film *Clueless*), *Antigone* by Sophocles, *Cold Sassy Tree*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, and Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*. It was this basis in classics that allowed me to appreciate the breadth of classical works and the joys of the narrative experience; and drama through dialogue and setting.

Through my experience as an autodidact in my final two years of high school, I was able to read philosophy greats that inspired my critical thinking, though in retrospect were rather bleak and lacking in overall resolution. On the one hand, Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* was a visitation of the horror books I'd read as a child, with overarching philosophical questions of identity and confrontation with the absurd that led to a greater interest in philosophy. I delved into Jean-Paul Sartre's one act play *No Exit*, in which several unlikely characters are caught in a trap room and have to find a means of escape or survival despite their obvious differences and dialogue-driven conflicts. One story in my collection, *Dawn*, uses dialogue to drive a family drama from expectation to loss, and finally to the hope of reunion. The only philosophy contained therein is that a family's dynamic can boast drama, which may later be minimized by greater conflict that ultimately unifies and creates cohesion. I continued to read existentialist literature: Camus' *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, which both elucidated an element of the hopeless and dire, and, as in *The Stranger*, ended in a macabre self-identification and glorification of solitude. As a self-guided learner in this stage of my life, I found hope in characters whose solitude was transformed into life-affirming personal philosophies.

Philosophically driven screenplays inspired me, such as Richard Linklater's *Waking Life*, in which the lead character drifts between life and lucid dreaming to become totally self-aware. Being a Texas native, I found that I identified with the renegade spirit of this Austin, Texan filmmaker. The film *Waking Life* then inspired me to seek out the introspective poetry of Rumi, the philosophies of Buddhism and the religious philosophies that found common links between several major world religions. Having been temporarily detached from the Catholic faith, I found comfort in the Buddhist *Four*

*Noble Truths*, which speak of suffering and the path to its end. In a manner of speaking, philosophy caused me to question my own experiences with existentialist and religious works and led me back on a path to my own faith, which allowed me to pursue my writing with much more intensity and vigor.

### Wellesley Years

Of the undergraduate schools to which I applied, four of my top choice liberal arts colleges accepted me. I wrote my college admissions essay on an experience I had returning to a childhood neighborhood park of mine in which I remembered what it felt like to play. Along with my grades and my own initiative in my education, teaching myself advanced mathematics, English, languages, and history through literature, my admissions essay inspired confidence in my abilities as an undergraduate. In Lisa Rodensky's introduction to writing class, Critical Interpretation, I read and closely analyzed Shakespeare's sonnets, Sylvia Plath, William Carlos Williams, William Blake, Shelley, Keats, Yeats, and countless other writers who have influenced the canon of English poetry. I learned early that a good, analytical sentence, essay, or paper consists of a balance of necessary information, detail, and concision. William Carlos Williams taught me, through his poem *The Red Wheelbarrow*, that less is more when it comes to imagery, and that much can be inferred from a simple sentence according to indentation, rhythm and simplicity:

so much depends  
upon  
  
a red wheel  
barrow  
  
glazed with rain  
water  
  
beside the white  
chickens. (Williams)

Sparse and visually provoking, I took my cues in essay writing from Williams' poetic style. Leaving out what need not be said became a practice to be cultivated.

Additionally, around this time I was registered for Introduction to Cinema and Media Studies, thinking I was going to major in film studies. My love for film was supplemented by the visual texts of this course: Méliès' *Trip to the Moon*, *American Beauty*, *Natural Born Killers*, *The Third Man*, *Apocalypse Now* and many others opened the world of high art up to me. I learned that visual (and literary) consent can be manufactured in excerpts from Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*, which deconstructed my entire idea of absorbing news from the media and political biases. By my sophomore year at Wellesley, I had registered for comparative literature courses: "Madness in Russian Literature" with Olga Partan was the most memorable. In this course, I read Russian literature in translation that dealt with the concept of madness (of which there were surprisingly many examples): Gogol's *The Nose*, *The Overcoat*, *The Cloak*, *Dead Souls*, *Diary of a Madman*, and Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. Gogol's language was thrifty, but descriptive, and these were some of the first short stories from which I took something memorable: his characters, absurd and utterly lost became molded into my heart, and I developed a soft spot for that which defies neat definition and societal norms. Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* was of particular interest because the protagonist, also lost and absurd, appears to be Christ-like and self-sacrificing, leading to his own metaphorical martyrdom. These are not styles that I have since mimicked, but the contents of both the short stories and the texts led me to appreciate non-narrative structures and non-sequiturs. That same semester, I took a course on Film in the 1960s, which further aided in my appreciation of non-narrative screenplays of the European New Wave. Films such as *Bande à part*, *Cleo from 5 to 7*, *Breathless*, *Persona* and *8 ½* all shaped my view of film writing and, for their effectiveness as films, impacted my college

experience with the intensity of being hit by a mac truck. These films were a wake-up call to me, a clarion call to create, and at the time, to surround myself with other creatives who shared a similar world vision. I credit my film courses and professors with their overwhelming inspiration, open-mindedness, and passion. This passion sparked my own passion, and I continued to seek out like-minded individuals whose goals were both determined, workhorse, and creative. I built my network of trusted friends at this time, and we provided a system of checks and balances to form each other's creative characters in a gradual fashion. Most of us worked on the radio station, WZLY, where we were able to exercise creative muscles on the air in what we spun and in how we communicated our banter for all within earshot to hear. Fellini's quote to 'Never lose your childish innocence. It is the most important thing,' rang true and influenced all aspects of my life and creativity then and ever since.

I participated in 2D design courses in the art department, sculpture courses, and computer science and computer music courses, which further expanded my mind along with my language courses. Studio Art and its computerized counterparts broadened my perspective to see the world from new and interesting angles, and most importantly, to generate and maintain my interest. My foray into foreign languages, long begun before Wellesley, was nurtured and expanded by taking courses in Spanish and Russian. Spanish Language and Literature was my major, and therein I read books in original Spanish by Cervantes, the anonymous Castilian epic poetic work *El Cantar del Mio Cid*, many short stories by Cisneros, Agostín, and in my spare time, books by Isabel Allende. I was floored by the magical realism of Allende and the beauty of her language, and had many fever dreams related to the plots of *The House of Spirits*. I also watched films

about the Spanish Civil War, La Guerra Civil, Generalissimo Francisco Franco, and wrote several papers and research projects on the connections between Franco, Lorca, and Picasso. A deep interest in history fostered this connection for me, and led me to understand more fully WWII and all wars falling thereafter based on dictatorship. In my introduction to Russian intensive, I learned, through the perspective of a new language and alphabet, the importance of Russian communication and its inherent intrigue. Watching only short films for children learning the language, like *Cheburashka*, we were able to perceive in a short period how to communicate best in Russian. I try to incorporate my understanding of texts from other cultures to inform my perspectives on characters in my stories.

In my senior year was a seminar on Cervantes, in which we read the book in its entirety and held small discussions on the themes of the book. A heavy read, though lighthearted, I found Cervantes to be at times complex and jovial, and would struggle today to write a character as memorable as the man of La Mancha.

Years later, I see *Don Quixote* performed live by the Houston Ballet. The character even rides in on a live horse on stage at one point, and gets in a fight with a windmill (which my husband missed by leaving to go to the bathroom at just this point—they wouldn't let him in until the horse-featuring act was over). I couldn't help feeling my life had come full circle. Sure, I'd read books by Cervantes and new graphic novel iterations of *Don Quixote* since graduating Wellesleyland. But this was the Houston Ballet, it was live action, and I was watching with my significant other. I couldn't help but be flooded back with memories of that giant playground called Wellesley and the people, places, films and books, that had helped form my identity. I sat there quietly and

remembered Cervantes' quote that, "There were no embraces, because where there is great love there is often little display of it." I could not for lack of insanity run up to the stage and hug the performers. I could only gently grasp the hand of my husband (now let in since the second act) and hope that he would understand the meaning behind my grin: a love for the written word, for all my privileges and opportunities to date, and how everything, even the trace elements of books, comes full circle and imbues my life with meaning and creative purpose.

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