



LIGHTHOUSE

WRITERS WORKSHOP

Craft Seminar Speculative Nonfiction

Facilitator: Harrison Candelaria Fletcher, MFA

Time: November 9, 2024

9 a.m. to 11 a.m.

Email: Harifletch@gmail.com

Description: Essayists, memoirists, and writers of hybrid nonfiction have long navigated the line between emotional truth and factual truth in search of meaning. In this hands-on, discussion-driven craft seminar, we'll clarify the distinction between invention, lying, and the use of imagination and speculation as instruments of discovery. We'll explore practical strategies for making our work deeper and more complex through "perhapsing" and other techniques.

Activities: During the next two hours, we'll explore practical strategies for making our work deeper and more complex by the use of "perhapsing" and other techniques. PLEASE bring something to write with and prepare to practice a few prompts.

Readings: These are intended as starting points for discussions and prompts (attached). Some we'll discuss in class. Others you'll read at your leisure. Before class, please read those with asterisks. And please bring questions so I don't put you to sleep with my yammering.

- "Blainsong" by Ander Monson*
- "Each of Us a Portal," by heidi andrea restrepo Rhodes*
- "My Bullet, He's Come Home," by Georgie Fehringer *
- "Advice to an Honorable Man" by Gerald Walker (if there's time)

Writing Prompts: These are intended to supplement our readings and discussions and give us a chance to try some of the approaches we've studied. Hopefully, these in-class writing prompts will spark ideas, approaches, and material for future work. More than anything, I hope they'll be fun. We'll be using a few of the readings below as imitations to get us going. Please read at your leisure.

- "Who" and "In-Half" by Judith Kitchen
- "This Old Watch" by Dinah Lenney

Materials: NOTE: Please bring the following for the seminar:

- For the "Who" and "In-Half" prompt, please bring an old photo or snapshot, preferably a family photo, that haunts you in some way – that charged with emotional resonance, but for which you have little information
- For the "This Old Watch" prompt, please bring an heirloom or object, preferably a family artifact, that haunts you in some way – that charged with emotional resonance, but for which you have little information

***OPTIONAL Pre-class readings:**

- Manifesto, by Robin Hemley and Leila Philip <https://www.speculativenonfiction.org/manifesto>
- Shifting Borders: Race, Class, and Speculative Placemaking by Rachel Toliver

SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES
(Subject to change as needed)

Introductions (9 a.m. to 9:05 a.m.)

Writing Prompt – (9:05 a.m. to 9:10 a.m.)

- “True Disclaimer”

Discussion – Speculative Nonfiction (9:10 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.)

- What is it?
- Why Do it?
- How Does it Work?

Reading Discussion – (9:30 a.m. to 9:55 a.m.)

- “Blainsong”
- “Each of Us a Portal”
- “My Bullet, He’s Come Home”
- “Advice to an Honorable Man” (if there’s time)

BREAK – (9:55 a.m. to 10:05 a.m.)

Writing Prompt (10:05 a.m. to 10:20 a.m.)

- “Shape in Scene”

Writing Prompt – (10:20 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.)

- Using Images:
- “Who” and “In Half” by Judith Kitchen

Writing Prompt – (10:30 a.m. to 10:40 a.m.)

- Using Objects
- “This Old Watch”

Writing Prompt – (10:40 a.m. to 10:55 a.m.)

- “What If..”

Debriefing – (10:55 a.m. to 11 a.m.)

Additional Readings (A very short list)

Speculative Nonfiction – literary journal

<https://www.speculativenonfiction.org>

Shifting Borders: Race, Class, and Speculative Placemaking

by Rachel Toliver

“The Limits of Perception: Trust Techniques in Nonfiction” by Tessa Fontaine

<https://www.assayjournal.com/tesa-fontaine-the-limits-of-perception-trust-techniques-in-nonfiction-61.html>

“Perhaps: The Use of Speculation in CNF” by Lisa Knopp

<https://brevitymag.com/craft-essays/perhapsing-the-use-of-speculation-in-creative-nonfiction/>

Rings of Saturn by W.G. Sebald

The Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston

Don't Come Back by Lina Maria Ferreria Cabeza Vanegas

Proxies by Brian Blanchfield

White Magic by Elissa Washuta

House of Houses by Pat Mora

Multiply/Divide: On the American Real and Surreal by Wendy S. Walter (Particularly “Norway”)

Seven Years to Zero by Amy Benson

The Terrible Unlikelihood of Our Being Here and ***Body Toxic*** by Susanne Paola Antonetta

Half in Shade by Judith Kitchen

BLAINSONG

October 22, 2018

by **Ander Monson**

Any first-person narration from someone other than the self is necessarily speculative. But I think too that even when we are narrating ourselves in essays, that's fiction too.



I want to punch a slack-jawed motherfucker out a chopper door and look down on him so he can admire my grin as he descends. I hope he keeps a memory of me—the little halo of my mouth—as he hits the fog and disappears. I wish it made a little poof like in cartoons. What he sees after only he can know. No one will remember him, not even me, not soon. Days I'm onscreen you'll remember me: you'll want me or want to be me, sometimes both at once. At least you'll want me on your side.

I'd like to blow myself all the way out of myself and see what's left without me there. I make Blain moves and think of Blain. Say the same Blain things I always say. Are they evidence of

***FOR THE PROMPTS**

he or me? Who knows? Who cares? Then I dream of air, and, after that, of nothing. Is there such a thing as nothing? Can you see it if there is?

I know how I'm seen, a sexual tyrannosaurus with my little arms and ridiculous mouth pumping into everything faster, just like the future. If you'd told me that ten years on from this I'd be telling deer hunters in Minnesota that it's cowardly to hunt at things that can't shoot back, that the only hunting worth respect is hunting men, and then getting elected governor, then after that hosting a television show entertaining conspiracy theories like the one about the Denver airport secretly being built atop a huge satanic nuclear bunker I'd have bled you in the jungle.

I am mostly pretty sure that I will never die. If I pay little enough attention to it I can stop time.

The wars I was built for have come and gone but I stay on camera where I belong and become a hymn I sing to man, a homophone for him. The idea of being one—a man, a body—I still think about it after all this time. I know that I'm alone out here, surrounded by these other men I cannot know, but when I see them look at me I'm full. They want to believe, and I do too, and so I do, and that's how we make the magic.

When night falls in the jungle and my memories of muzzle flash begin to fade, I start to see things differently. Here I'm far from where I began; I think of ham, hard lives, and then of God, an action film, my forever home. I say I don't believe in him but when I am stilled and the world is too and I have nothing else to do I find myself listening—what for if not for God?

I should know by now the song I sing is suicide. When I stop speaking I begin to feel myself, a sensation I do not like. And the more I feel the less I'm full, a fallow field, C4 without a detonator, a big unloaded gun. What am I to do? Remember? If I focus all of my energy on the past I can almost believe it's there beyond the lens. Maybe I knew them well, those fields, those folds of corn, that loneliness. How I feel must mean I came from it: a state with one I and a lot of sky.

I am lonely when I rest: I can't stand being second-best. When I finally find the time to bleed I find bleeding's all I do. All I was then was holding in, and now all I am is emission, exhalation, a sign of smoke, a scent of rain remembered from the plains where I am telling you I'm sure I must be from, I have to be from somewhere, a little hum coming from my mouth before I even notice what I'm singing and I see the alien fire bursting out of me, and only then do I begin to believe.

***FOR THE PROMPTS**

“Blainsong” occupies a space—for me—between fiction and nonfiction. I suppose it could be called a kind of fanfiction, if the fiction it aspired to was more interested in the stuff of fiction (or fanfiction). The project it comes from began as a poem about the 1987 movie Predator. Then it became a book. Then it became an essay. I think it is an essay, and it’s interested in the stuff of essay, and of nonfiction: cultural phenomena, politics, history, film, celebrity, masculinity. In the narrowest definitions of nonfiction it’s not, is it? It imagines Blain’s interiority and moves through it to Jesse Ventura’s, the actor’s. Any first-person narration from someone other than the self is necessarily speculative. But I think too that even when we are narrating ourselves in essays, that’s fiction too. We exaggerate; we tweak; we edit; we build characters of ourselves in sentences and in how and what we see and how we tell or think about what we see. How much of the I in an essay exists anyway before it sprawls out on the page? How much of a speculative leap is it to jump into another’s vehicle instead and speed off with it?

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Ander Monson is the author of eight books, including the forthcoming *I Will Take the Answer* and *The Gnome Stories* from Graywolf. Among other side hustles, he edits the magazine *DIAGRAM* <thediagram.com>, *Essay Daily* <essaydaily.org>, and he directs the MFA program at the University of Arizona.



***FOR THE PROMPTS**

Each of Us a Portal

Speculative Nonfiction

December 24, 2023

By heidi andrea restrepo Rhodes

AT ELEVEN YEARS OLD, at a sleepover, we tell stories of La Llorona and the Lady in White, the forlorn spirits whose grief drags them around the hills and along the rivers of our hometown. We wait up through the wee hours, peeking out from our sleeping bags to see if they will visit us where we left notes for them in the branches of the backyard pomegranate tree hanging over our heads. Conversations drift from Janet Jackson to playground dramas to crushes on boys. A game of Truth or Dare dwindles into a litany of timid voices choosing truth because nobody wants to get stuck in the pressure to stay alone in the dark bathroom saying Bloody Mary's name, or to eat ketchup blended with apples and eggs, or to run naked around the cul-de-sac one time for every letter of her name. Truths and half-truths and outright lies of pre-teen survival convert into gossip. *Somebody says so-and-so is a lesbian and kisses girls, and isn't that so gross?*

It sounds really nice, I think to myself. I cocoon into my sleeping bag. I drift, leaving the chatter, leaving my body, drift, drift, up into the pomegranate tree. There, I meet a ghost, a crying girl, La Lloronita. She has also left her body. She has been forced from her home. Banned from the fruits she once knew. Dispossessed, I'd years later learn to call it. There in the branches, we speak of separations. I read her my note to the forlorn spirits: a list of names, of lost grandmothers, never-more blossoming flowers, extinct species of fish. A keening of taxons, filamentous prayer. We peel the flesh of pomegranates, exchange the ruby gem seeds, taste the sweet juice and learn what it means, belonging: to be longing. If even for the briefest hour, we are tiny gestures of revolt, formless creatures knowing secret things, beholden to mystery. There nestled in the branches, we kiss. We are being-with and with and with. Each of us a portal to a world the other needs. She, a route of memory. I, a flesh of sadnesses through which laughter still enters the atmosphere. We are a weather of openings.

***FOR THE PROMPTS**

Later that week when I am forced by the nun to go to confession, I pretend I am singular, which is to say, human. I lie to the priest again about my sins, tell him there isn't much to report, really. I do not believe in hell and its fiery passage to which the damned are consigned, but I do, for years, feel like a blasphemous disappointment to the divine. All my yearnings, wretched; my senses kindled; nothing a biblical recitation can contain. I refuse repentance. Every amatory devotion calls up a series of ghosts, dispossessions. I become accustomed to the embrace of trees. Fruit at its ripest tastes each time of defiance.

Now, when you bring me oranges from your mother's garden, I hold you in my mouth. In the tree's confection, at your affection, the world comes alive. To know such sweetness, its knowledges, is to ask, "why should our bodies end at the skin?"¹

"As a queer, brown child, I often faced the suffocations of a racist, homophobic, misogynistic world that fears the sensual, and found breath and possibility and connection through my ancestrally-inherited sense of otherworldliness and aliveness all around me. We are all, human and more-than-human, potential portals to each other's survival and transformation."

heidi andrea restrepo rhodes (she/they) is a queer, sick/disabled, brown/Colombian, poet, scholar, educator, and cultural worker. She is author of *The Inheritance of Haunting* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2019). Their chapbook, *Ephemeral*, was the 2022 winner of the Lorca Latinx Poetry Prize and will be published by EcoTheo Collective in 2023. She was raised, in part, by ghosts, and wants to swim with you in the raucous and joyful possibilities of crip poetics and abolition dreams.

My bullet, He's Come Home

Speculative Nonfiction

December 24, 2023

By Georgie Fehringer

It's a level of bone-deep exhaustion running on fight or flight for half of your life. I go to the club and I dance. I drink and I dance and I sweat and I drink and I try not to think about how every bass hit is followed by a gunshot, and I repeat this until I no longer worry. This isn't an argument per se, I'm not laying the groundwork to change anyone's mind. I am drinking and dancing and bracing. My mind has already been rewired. I am an obsessive circle of thought; these are only a series of moments: I am dancing in the club or sitting in a classroom or sleeping on a couch and staring so long into the living room light I am no longer anything but the adrenaline running like the legs of a stray ant down my neck and arms and out through my fingertips.

When I was an undergrad someone threatened to shoot up my school and the mass evacuation led to the rewire and it led to other issues and this is a true story: I inch closer and closer to being the one teaching in those rooms. This is just one moment out of many moments that put together the things I try and forget, the snatches of memory that float behind the eyebrows I manicured this morning. I have many more bad just like anyone else. I have many more good too, I suppose.

What is an acceptable fear? Spiders, or darkness or drowning? Meeting new people, going new places, driving a car, pumping gas. Forgetting to turn off your oven, triple-quadruple checking the locks, ordering at a restaurant, public speaking, speaking. Being alone in your living room, shadows moving in half sleep states, getting pulled over, police, bullets piercing your back, dancing, not dancing, being seen too little or too much or out a window you don't know you're being seen through, walking a dog, making a phone call, the parking lots of places you've never been, car crashes, liars, loneliness, brain shocks, shocking scandalous hometown heroes turned neo-Nazi been neo-Nazi, Swastikas at the swap meet, getting stabbed on the corner of 4th and John, smoking outside, pick up trucks, falling in heels, cancer, swimming in lakes and getting a flesh eating bacteria, liver failure, losing your cell phone, school shootings, shootings, death threats— again, or ever, death and dying both state and process, mental and physical— pain, numbness, roofies, alcohol poisoning when the shakes set in, debt, failure, success, sticking your arm out the window in the car so you hand explodes on the metal posts you pass, running your car off the freeway—into the back of a semi, sunburns, racists, being forgotten, Florida, kidnapping, going outside, locking yourself out of the house and falling from heights.

***FOR THE PROMPTS**

I can make connections between fears. Between cars skidding on gravel and my cousin driving off a cliff. Between camping and hunters in the trees. Between hitting a hookah full of weed, walking barefoot through the woods, calling the fire department for sunstroke, and dying in a classroom full of kids. And I'm not a journalist anymore, never really was, but I might have been in a newsroom or two and I might have received a death threat or two and it might have taken two hours to evacuate if we hadn't driven the car straight through the grass. And I am tired of remembering: their sincerest wishes for all monkeys to hang — the way I remember valentines from elementary school. Sharp spots through a thick veil. I don't think I'd give it up in a redo; I'd just rather remember the champagne. But when my mother called and I told her I was receiving death threats, she didn't want to celebrate with me. Not the first time or the second. It's not the first time or the last.

I'm not a journalist but I know how to use the inverted pyramid, the hierarchy of information. I know all our places within it and how we must be paced. So if you asked me to try, though I'd rather not. If I was to try, only for your sake really, it might look something like: America winning war for right to be first thought on citizens' minds and within its rights to make mental adjustments to anyone who might forget; 28-year-old, five years in still triple checks doors from the inside of an empty house.

This piece is about living with the consequences of living. Of continuing to exist and dance in the shadows or under the spotlight.

“Speculation is a natural companion of anxiety and that is especially apparent as a writer who has anxiety and writes about it. In fact, I'd go as far as to say a significant portion of my anxiety disorder is based on speculation, what ifs, and unanswered questions, and reactions to unanswerable questions. There is a direct path from speculation to anxiety. Like, what possibilities does an unlocked door have? And how does that thought lead to the need to set traps around my house to catch this fully fictional intruder who now exists in my head? And how does that lead to a fear of windows? And how does that lead to an absurd few months where I can't cross my living room without a taser, because what if someone crawls through the window? It's never happened before but there always this moment and the next and the next. When I write about anxiety I like to use lists, stacking question after question to show the rapid and thick accumulation of anxious speculation, the physical manifestation of how things build, the walls and weight, and heaps of thoughts that can trap me under their collective pressure. There is a speed to a never-ending list and to anxiety that both feels too fast and too slow at the same time, like running with a weighted blanket on the ocean floor.”

Georgie Fehringer is an MFA candidate at the University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program, an Iowa Arts Fellow, and the 2022 Melbourne Emerging Writers Festival Writer-in-Residence. Their writing has appeared in Black Warrior Review, The Chicago Review of Books, The Rumpus, and TIMBER among others. They live in Iowa City with their (very) clumsy cat Mushu. You can contact them at GeorgieFehringer.com or on Twitter @Gigifehringer.

Advice to an Honorable Man

October 30, 2018

by Jerald Walker

As Robert Atwan notes . . . on the website Essay Daily, "The essayist is restricted by a criterion of truthfulness and verisimilitude that is not demanded of the more 'imaginative' writers. This criterion is relatively new; it did not apply to Addison and Steele—who invented an entire club of personalities and situations—or to Samuel Johnson and the many other periodical essayists of previous centuries."

You are on Amtrak's regional from New York to Boston editing a student's essay when your pencil slips from your hand, lands on the adjacent seat, and rolls under its passenger's right buttock. Only the eraser remains visible, and not all of it at that, just a millimeter or so, though that's enough, you think, to be pinched free. Give the consequences of a mishap serious consideration, however, for the passenger is female, and white no less. She's in her twenties, thin, blonde, and has large blue eyes, but you are speculating about her eyes because they are closed, as the woman is asleep. Her head rests on a bunched-up sweater pressed against the window, her body angled away from yours, which is why her ass is partially airborne and you are envisioning a scenario whereby it descends, suddenly, onto your forefinger and thumb.

In this scenario, the woman, upon feeling something beneath her, wakes to see you snatch back your hand, and screams. Passengers rise from their seats to look your way, including the three members of your family. Your first thought is if you'd sat with one of them this wouldn't be happening, but when you entered the car it was already crowded with only scattered seats remaining. Your fifteen-year-old is directly in front of you, your seventeen-year-old is directly in front of him, and your wife is further down the car. When she pinpoints the source of the scream she weaves through the dozen passengers now gathered in the aisle, reaching your side as the woman accuses you of groping her.

Swear you are no groper. Say you are an honorable man traveling with your wife and sons, and then, as evidence of your good character, mention you're returning from seeing three Broadway musicals in three days, but given the cost of Broadway musicals some passengers will be as skeptical of this as you were when your wife said the tickets were on sale. One of these skeptics calls for security, a member of which just happens to have entered the car, and who, like you, just happens to be black. Rather than take comfort in his race, however, be put-off by his comportment—his upturned chin, for instance, and his pompous sneer—and decide that in the olden days he would have been a house slave, the kind who despised his brethren in the field, where you undoubtedly would have been. After you explain to this Uncle Tom what happened, he lowers his chin and says, "So let me make sure I'm understanding you correctly. You *lost control* of your pencil, it *fell down*, and then landed *up under* this lady's rear end?"

***FOR THE PROMPTS**

Here your fifteen-year-old, who of late has made a habit of contradicting you, says, “Wouldn’t that defy the laws of gravity?”

The security guard nods at him. “So you see where I’m going with this?”

“My husband isn’t some pervert,” your wife interjects, at last rising to your defense. “He’s just a klutz and goofball.”

Your seventeen-year-old agrees and offers proof. “That’s why when we were in the airport last year,” he explains, “he went into the ladies’ restroom.”

Take issue with his choice of verb; *went* implies a deliberate act with forethought and, in this instance, malicious intent. He should have used *wandered*, which allows for someone to have been reading a text instead of the bathroom’s gender designation. By the time you looked up, you were standing alone before a row of stalls with nary a urinal in sight, but instead of recognizing this clue for what it was and abruptly turning on your heels, you proceeded to do your business, rejoicing at the thought that finally someone had designed a men’s room with an eye toward discretion. Having a full bladder, in your estimation, is insufficient reason for men to hold their penises in public spaces mere inches from other men holding their penises without a substantial partition between them, especially since, should one of these men wink at you while stepping back from the urinal, there would be an unobstructed view of a penis in service of something other than a bladder. The man who did this to you, you’d wager, had not arrived at the urinal next to yours by wandering.

“I *wandered* into the ladies’ restroom,” you say, “while looking down at my phone.”

“At yet,” your fifteen-year-old responds, “you stayed, even though there were no urinals.”

“But there were no women either,” counters your seventeen-year-old. “Not like there were that time last month in the ladies’ restroom at his college.”

Technically speaking, there were no *women* there either, but rather a *woman*, a close friend of yours, thank goodness, for who knows what would have happened had a stranger exited a stall to see you at the sink washing your hands. After saying hello, your friend strolled to the sink next to yours and turned on the faucet. “You do realize,” she said, pumping the soap dispenser, “that this restroom is for women?”

“So I’ve gathered,” you replied.

“Then why, if you don’t mind my asking, are you in here?”

***FOR THE PROMPTS**

“I’ve obviously made a mistake.”

“To be honest,” she said, “it’s not very obvious. Because assuming you didn’t see the image of the woman on the door, in a skirt—”

“—And I didn’t---”

“—okay, assuming you didn’t, it would be difficult for someone not to notice, once inside, that the room only has stalls.”

“Which was all I was looking for,” you said, resting a hand on your belly. “Bad sushi last night.”

Later that day, when you told your family what happened, your fifteen-year-old noted that he’d eaten the same sushi and felt fine, as he notes now in your imagined scenario. You would have done as well to say a group of women pulled you inside the restroom and held you captive, since that would have been just as unbelievable, even though something like that actually happened to you when you were nine. While zigzagging through the halls of your elementary school, your attention on the blue and white floor tiles as you pretended to be a human checker, you looked up to see a half-dozen teenaged girls bearing down on you. Two of them suddenly grabbed your arms and another cupped your mouth, their actions swift and coordinated enough to suggest the plan was long in the making, though you understood it not to have been after they’d ushered you into the girls’ bathroom and one of them said, “Now what?” No one had an answer. So they thought the matter through while grooming themselves in the mirror and smoking cigarettes. Meanwhile, you stood against the far wall trying not to cry, which made your wails all the more powerful when they finally erupted. Your captors rushed to your side, each taking turns giving you a hug and telling you that everything was okay, but you knew otherwise because if there were a greater evil than a boy being in a girls’ bathroom it had not been made known to you. And then it was made known to you; one of the girls, after escorting you to the door, kissed your cheek.

Perhaps it is the nature of fifteen-year-old boys in general, and not yours specifically, to challenge your view of things, for when you informed your older brother of that age what happened he told you to count your blessings. After that you felt less tormented by the incident. Indeed, when you reached puberty, you longed for its reenactment, though no amount of time spent loitering near the girls’ bathroom could bring it forth. So you settled for its memory, which often brought a smile to your face and occasionally, four-plus long decades later, still does. But you are not smiling now on the train because it has just occurred to you that perhaps, on some subconscious level, your recent excursions into the wrong bathrooms are linked to that incident. Maybe you are more than just a klutz and a goofball. Which would mean, by logical extension, that your pencil slipping from your hand to land where it landed was no accident. Do you see where you’re going with this?

***FOR THE PROMPTS**

You do. And you don't like it. Get out of your head. Retrieve your pencil, as any honorable man would do, and continue editing your student's essay. But first, as a matter of prudence, check to see if the woman is still asleep. She is, thankfully, and she remains so until your fingers are an inch from the eraser, which is to say an inch from her right buttock. Her eyes, as you'd speculated, are blue and large. As they grow larger, stammer, "I, um, I dropped my...um." Point to the thing you are trying to say. The woman glances down, sees and picks up the pencil, then smiles as she hands it to you. Thank her. Now stare at your student's paper but only pretend to be reading it because you are back inside your head again, imagining a scenario whereby your train has arrived in Boston. As you make your way through the car, a half-dozen women approach from the opposite direction. There is no one else in the car, only you and these women, and midway between them and you is a ladies' room. Turn abruptly on your heels. Walk away. And do not, under any circumstances, look back.

I gave an interview once in which I spoke of my overactive imagination and how I must constantly guard against it lest I violate the conventions of the essay—conventions, ironically, that fall outside the genre's long tradition. As Robert Atwan notes in a brilliant article recently published on the website Essay Daily, "The essayist is restricted by a criterion of truthfulness and verisimilitude that is not demanded of the more 'imaginative' writers. This criterion is relatively new; it did not apply to Addison and Steele—who invented an entire club of personalities and situations—or to Samuel Johnson and the many other periodical essayists of previous centuries." And so when Leila and Robin contacted me about their new venture I welcomed the chance to let my imagination have its say (which, not surprisingly, was quite a bit) in the manner of the forbearers. Half of what occurs in this piece does not occur outside of my mind, and yet an argument could be made—I am, in fact, making it—that no part of this essay is more true or real than another.

Jerald Walker is the author of *The World in Flames: A Black Boyhood in a White Supremacist Doomsday Cult* and *Street Shadows: A Memoir of Race, Rebellion, and Redemption*, recipient of the 2011 PEN New England Award for Nonfiction. He has published in magazines such as *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Harvard Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *River Teeth*, *Mother Jones*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Oxford American*, and he has been widely anthologized, including four times in *The Best American Essays*. His next book, *Once More the Ghetto and Other Essays*, will be published in 2019. He teaches creative writing at Emerson College in Boston.



Who

OH MY GOD, who is she? I want her for my own. I want her affinity with all those chickens, her lopsided leaning, her house all atilt. I want that tipping chimney and the angle of her neck as she lets one hen push its way into her heart, another pose as a hat. I want that practical dress and the long black stockings, even the sensible shoes. The light that fattens itself on late-afternoon windows, and the shadows that lengthen the yard. The chickens that peck at their shadows, whittling away at their lives. Look at the way light catches each shingle, each brick, each clapboard lining the side of the house. Look at it fasten itself to the folds of her skirt.

This was a moment—the day of the chickens. But all days were chickens, scattering feed, and gathering eggs. Off lens: the henhouse with its strange, musty odors. Off lens: the rustle of worry at the doorway, the nattering fuss as her fingers sift through straw. Chore after chore. The lifetime that added more, and then more.

I want this moment, but not what it stands for. Want one minute of overlapping shadow, one slapdash second of light. Quick, while she has a perch on pleasure. Quick, before her tiny breasts grow bigger, before she lifts up her hand to lift down that feathery weight.

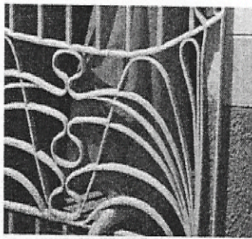


IN THE UPPER-HALF version of the black-and-white, she almost looks as though she were trapped. This moment: my aunt Margaret braces for morning. In Kodachrome,



her bright red nightgown blazes, and the white gate streams with sunlight. Somewhere in Central America, she is a throb of color. The lower half is filigree. Her bare foot

steps through time as she insinuates herself into the street, enters its pulse of sound. In the larger world, war has ground to a halt in Europe, and somewhere her future



husband is gearing up to spend his time in occupied Japan. For this moment, though, she stares past me as though she could face down a fate that will find her soon enough.

This Old Watch

by Dinah Lenney

This old watch isn't really that old, not in the sense of family heirlooms. It isn't a watch at all, in fact. It's only the casing, the exterior, the glass rimmed in gold, smooth but for the notch where it would have clicked onto its back, and engraved: *Tiffany*, in tiny letters, and *D. L. M.* in bigger ones—my married initials—my middle name lost to me with the gift of the watch itself. And what happened, I wonder, to its back, to the face and the mechanism in between, to the soul of the watch, a white oval with Arabic numerals, and that little knob on the side—or wait, there wasn't a knob, no, the watch worked on a battery. A second hand? I think not. Still, I can hear it. The heart of it, excised and removed, ticks in my head like a phantom limb. And somehow, for some reason, I have kept this piece of gold-rimmed glass on a ruined leather band—not the original, no, the band was replaced over and over: this is the last of them, and on its last legs to boot, its tongue curling, its seams worn to no color at all.

This old casing, from that old watch, was one of a pair: one for me, one for my husband (his, a circle, was larger—just as elegant but less delicate), wedding gifts from my Grandpa Charlie, my mother's father. Charlie—enormous and bald—built like a stacking toy with limbs, thick and brown as a pair of trunks, and the skin on his shins scaly, shiny, stretched tight as though about to split and tear. With no neck to speak of, my grandpa's freckled head balanced atop his immense middle like a ball—sometimes mustached, always bespectacled—his eyes huge behind tortoise shell rims. Charlie of the smoke-cured laugh; Charlie of the wet, wet kisses; Charlie tanned to leather, mottled and scarred from the removal of various growths. Charlie on Weight Watchers, Charlie with a drink in his hand, Charlie, poolside, but only occasionally, watching me swim the whole length underwater. Charlie in a condo in Florida—for as long as I remember, that's where I went to see my grandfather, in Miami, where he lived with his second wife (a sunbaked woman in fluorescent linen shifts), where everything smelled of heat and cigarettes and air conditioning and *Bain de Soleil*.

Charlie, I'm told, was a genius. Invented, says Leah, my mother, those windowed envelopes, the ones that come with bills, no need to address the return. Fold it in half and face it the right way, stamp and send, just that simple. And though he never went to college, never had a music lesson in his life—Charlie played the piano like a pro, could play anything by ear, he only needed to hear it once, whatever it was, so goes the myth. Except: *Grandpa*, I'd ask, *can you play this? Can you play that?* Turned out he was fluent, yes, in the standards of the '30s, '40s, and '50s. Charlie could play straight through all of Rodgers and Hammerstein, no slouch he, with Hart or Gershwin or Kern.

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But Elvis, Chuck Berry, the Beatles? He couldn't hear them—couldn't speak in those rhythms or chords.

Ruth, the second wife, died. And Charlie lived alone in the condo in Miami. But once I was in high school, my parents—my mother and stepfather—stopped flying us down for tropical vacations. Though my sister was a toddler, my brothers and I were, by that time, obligated to various clubs and teams. Could be, while I was in college, my siblings (all from the second marriage) went back to Florida—maybe so—but I'm almost certain I didn't see Charlie between my high school and college graduations. Still, he and I were good correspondents, although my letters were full of mistakes—cross outs, arrows, words penned between the lines—whereas Grandpa's were clean and signed with a flourish. From college, what did I write to him about? Classes, mostly. Roommates, boyfriends, the weather. After I moved into the city, I waxed self-important about acting, singing, studying voice. And Charlie encouraged me; as long as I kept up with my music, he wrote, I would never be lonely. But now when I saw him, on the rare occasions when he came north, and asked him to sit down at the piano, it was, I supposed, for his sake, not mine. At twenty-something, I'd outgrown him, I thought: I knew my repertoire and my keys, and he wasn't easy in any of them, didn't know how to use rubato. *You play, Grandpa*, I'd demur. *I just want to hear you*. He'd oblige, and if he missed me on the vocals, unwilling as I was to switch octaves in order to get through "Climb Every Mountain" or "Some Enchanted Evening," he didn't let on. I've only recently wondered—too vexed at the time (also vaguely ashamed of myself for letting him down)—if Charlie wasn't actually relieved. Never occurred to me then that he'd been indulging me for years; he didn't need some amateur straining for the high notes, sullyng his glissandos, wavering sharp or flat and insulting his perfect ear.

As expected, he entertained at our wedding. Just after the ceremony and before the band arrived, Charlie took off his jacket, sat himself down, the sweat running from his crown and into his ears, and banged out "When the Saints," "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered," and "Almost Like Being in Love" to as many guests as could squeeze into the room. In one of the photos, I'm standing behind him in backless white jacquard, hands clasped behind me. But I wouldn't have been wearing the watch, not with my shimmering dress and my new gold ring. So when did I first put it on? Later in the evening, maybe. Although it might have been days before, since it was Leah who delivered the watches in narrow blue Tiffany boxes before Charlie arrived. "From Grandpa," she said. He'd decided to give them to us, his and hers, and my mother had been dispatched to the Fifth Avenue store to choose them, to have them wrapped and ready. I'd never owned anything so fine and meant expressly for me—not at all like inheriting a piece of old jewelry—this was different: a new Tiffany watch, a grown-up present, meant for everyday wear. And I wore it every day for a decade at least, as did my husband, who lost his first.

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And that's part of the story. How do you hold on to something that has so little to do with who you really are? Our lives were hardly Tiffany. We hadn't meant to move west, not for any length of time. We'd grown up in the east, had respectable gigs in New York, and friends and family, and separate apartments on the Upper East Side. But two weeks into our vacation-slash-reconnaissance mission, I was cast in a play. Just like that, we were living together. The work was in L.A. for both of us, no pretending otherwise. For me: auditions, rehearsals, occasional shoots; for Fred: screenwriting—on an IBM selectric in a walk-in closet off our empty breakfast nook where we didn't have a table. We dined, therefore, side by side on the living room sofa—out of cartons more often than not, since, six nights a week, Fred delivered Chinese food. And I—I hosted in a trendy restaurant frequented by movie stars. Our *day* jobs, we called them, though we went off to work in the late afternoons. No surprise, we didn't hold on to those jobs, though we did hold on to the watches. And somehow I believed that mine defined me. The watch—not the beat-up wagon, not the tiny apartment, not the mismatched china, not that sofa—upholstered in cardboard—certainly not the bed we bought cheap in a strip mall on Pico Boulevard, which I subsequently dressed in linens we couldn't afford, horrified as I was by the way the mattress reflected the afternoon light when we got it up onto its boxsprings. As if a high-thread count could redeem us. As if we needed to be redeemed. I assured myself that we did not, though we lived in a marginal neighborhood, though we survived on tips, though we wouldn't have predicted and couldn't have accepted that we'd never know a moment of security in our whole adult lives, I (not we) imagined that I (hence, we) deserved Tiffany watches.

It isn't even that I resolved to rise to the occasion. I was in that moment, I told myself, just the sort of person to be pushing my way through the heavy doors and crossing the carpet (so thick, so plush) at Tiffany's (the store on Wilshire Boulevard near the Beverly Hills Hotel), to ask once a year for customer service, please, since once a year the watch needed maintenance or repair. Never mind those women behind the glass cases, wearing good leather pumps and their mothers' pearls, I actually enjoyed the idea that they thought me bohemian (as if they were thinking about me at all). The thing was, I didn't need to be convinced that I was absolutely the kind of girl to wake up in the morning and put on that watch. I was my grandfather's granddaughter, wasn't I? His first and his favorite? No need to prove myself, but if there were, I'd have told you it was only a matter of *time*.

But. One day I put the watch in the pocket of my jeans (to wash the dishes? To water my kitchen garden?) and my jeans in the washing machine with a nice, full load. Later, I transferred the darks to the dryer, cleaned the lint from the mesh, and let the machine run for an hour or so on the extra-dry setting. And when I pulled the clothes from the drum and into my wicker basket, there was my watch, my wedding gift from Charlie

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(who'd been dead for years), shrunken and shriveled and separated from its heart. And here is the frame, a piece of glass on a band, as if time itself had been washed away, time and history and all my notions about the person I was. See here, I've put it on, strapped the twisted old band around my wrist: half past a freckle, quarter to a hair.

There is more about Charlie. There is the night before the wedding when, straight from La Guardia airport, he walked into the living room to find my grandmother, his first wife, doing the crossword puzzle with an unlit cigarette balanced between her lips, and how she said, "Well, hello Grandpa," and he said, "Well, hello Grandma," as if they'd seen each other yesterday, as if it hadn't been over fifteen years. Then there is the moment after the wedding—a limo at the curb, waiting to whisk us away like in the movies—when Charlie rose to his full six-foot-three-inch height and gripped my skinny groom above the elbow with one of his gargantuan, spotted hands. "You take care of our baby," he said. And Freddy told him, "I will, sir," as if they'd not just read the same script but rehearsed it too.

And we chuckled in the back of the car afterwards. Nervously. *Like anybody's taking care of anybody*, we said. And, *we'll take care of each other*, we said. We were wearing our watches by then, both of us—as if to mark the start of the thing—though it's not like I need one now to remind me how long it's been since all that transpired, or to wonder what happened to the time.