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Honeymoon Hitchhikers: Archival Letters to Creative Nonfiction

Prologue

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This early in the spring, the water had a bite to it. Milly La Due, sporting a burgundy wool swimsuit, gingerly waded into the edge of the Mississippi River. “Wool may be itchy, but it does keep you warm,” she begrudgingly murmured. She warily looked upriver for Sid, as the water crept up her legs. He had been swimming in the deeper water, and was out of sight for the moment. The water now up to her middle, Milly paused and let the sun warm her shoulders while her toes played with the gritty sand. Laughing, she lightly splashed her open palm against the water. It felt *good* to be outside after the long winter – like each spring was a new adventure.

It was a quiet day, and she and Sid had Champlin’s riverfront park to themselves. As Milly gazed northward, she could see the beautiful arches of the Ferry Street Bridge in the distance. The new bridge connecting the cities of Champlin and Anoka was scheduled to open soon, and was billed as “the most elegant bridge ever built across the Mississippi.”

“Elegant, indeed . . .,” she whispered.

A muscular clamp enclosed her waist from behind, and Milly was whisked through the air. She tried to scream but water filled her mouth and ears. She choked and her limbs ached

from the shock of being fully immersed in the freezing water. The clamp dragged her back to the surface.

“Sidney Mead!” she hollered. A deep laugh was the only reply. She struggled against his arms, elbowing his ribs. When she finally got turned around, she clasped her hands together and slapped them against the water, sending a sharp splash up to Sid’s face. “That was mean!”

Sid shook his dark hair. “You like surprises,” he defended himself with a wink as he moved closer to her. Milly glowered at him and moved backward, cautiously trying to stay just out of reach. “Remember New Year’s, when we rang in 1929 by popping out of the closet and scaring your little brother? You loved that.”

Milly raised an eyebrow. “That was different,” she said sternly, but a smile played with the corners of her lips at the memory of Milton’s terrified expression.

“Different because you were the prankster.” Sid lunged at her. This time Milly was able to hold onto to him and they both tumbled underwater.

They surfaced laughing. “You win,” Milly conceded while trying in vain to move the nest of hair from her eyes. Chuckling, Sid gave her a hand.

“Marry me,” Sid suddenly interrupted.

“*What?*”

Rivulets of water streamed down his face. “Marry me,” he said earnestly, but added a grin. “It will be an adventure.”

Milly felt the slow start of a smile, not the kind that just touches your face, but the kind that begins somewhere in your middle and spills over to your lips. “Okay!”

She made a dash for the treelined riverbank. “But,” she blithely called over her shoulder. “Let’s not do anything traditional!” She reached for her towel and dropped to the sand, waiting for Sid to follow her. “No church wedding, no setting up house right away. Let’s be different!”

Sid rustled his towel over his head. “Different how?”

“Well, what is the most opposite thing you can think of to a traditional wedding?”

“One with clowns?”

Milly rolled her eyes. “Be serious.”

Sid sat beside her and wrapped them both in his towel. “What if we had Milton officiate the ceremony?”

Milly scrunched her nose in concentration. Why was it so terribly difficult to be original? Picking up a small broken branch, she studied the crooked paths the veins took through the budding leaves, hoping for some clue to their next step. Uninspired, she tossed it into the river and they watched the current rush it around the bend.

“What if we just sailed down the length of the Mississippi?” Sid suggested.

“Sure, we could get a canoe and camp whenever we got tired!”

“We’d be just like Huck Finn,” Sidney let out a rumbled laugh.

“You can’t fit much camping gear in a canoe, though. And if we tipped we’d probably lose everything in the current,” Milly reluctantly reasoned.

“How ’bout we hightail it to the territories?” Sid waggled his eyebrows.

“We could road trip in your Model T!”

“I don’t know,” Sid hesitated. “That jalopy is more of a nuisance than anything. I’ve had it in for repairs three times this month.”

Milly sighed and traced curvy designs in the sand with her finger tip. “I know! Do you remember the Nelson brothers? They used to get rides to and from college every day just by standing along the roadside and asking any passing motorist for a ride. They called it . . . hitchhiking!”

“We could sell the T for some start-up cash,” Sid said enthusiastically.

Milly flipped onto her knees so she could face him. “We could elope, head west, and,” she said with a devilish grin, “we wouldn’t tell anyone until the morning that we leave.”

Sid’s eyes twinkled in anticipation. “California, here we come!”

I.

“Boy,” Sid cheerfully tugged at his collar. “November third and it’s gotta be at least seventy degrees!”

“We’re not in Minnesota, that’s for sure.” Milly grinned as she adjusted the shoulder straps on her backpack.

Sid reached over and removed the pack, tossing it in the grass alongside the road. “Let’s rest up a minute. And,” he added as Milly plopped down beside their packs. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten what day it is.”

Milly playfully arched her brow.

“When we get into Oakland, we’re gonna head to the first drugstore we see and try out some of that new candy ice cream to celebrate your twentieth birthday.”

“Mmmm . . .,” Milly closed her eyes, “chocolate, marshmallow, and pecan . . .,” she said dreamily.

Sid interrupted her reverie with a quick peck on the tip of her nose.

“Sid!” Milly giggled. “Someone will see!”

“Ah, come on, we’re out in – ”

At the sound of a motor, Milly tossed her cocoa hair over her shoulder and watched a navy blue auto with its top down approach them. Sid shadowed his eyes with a hand.

“Cadillac.”

The driver slowed to a stop in front of them. “That’s quite a breezer, you’ve got there,” Sid said appreciatively.

The man waved a spindly arm, “Hop on in! We’re ten miles outta Oakland. I’ll take you that far.”

At Sid's nod, Milly scrambled over the front seat and let Sid grab the bags. When he had settled in beside her, their benefactor stepped on the gas.

"Where you from?" The man hollered over the wind and engine racket.

"Minnesota," Sid yelled back.

"That far, huh? I've been traveling a few days myself. Can't wait to get into Oakland, I heard tell that every Tom, Dick, and Harry who wants a job in the factories can get it," he said.

"Course that was before I left, four or five days ago by now. But, I can't imagine they've run outta jobs yet. You heard any word lately?"

"Nope," Sid said. "Been a while since we've seen a paper."

As the convertible headed west on the Lincoln Highway, Milly fought a losing battle trying to keep her hair away from her face. Compared to walking, it felt like they were going a hundred miles an hour. In no time the bustling port city came into view. As they pulled onto Foothill Road, which seemed to be the main route downtown, they were forced to a dead stop. People swarmed the street, nearly shoulder-to-shoulder. The driver honked his horn, but only got a couple of yells from the crowd in response.

Frowning, Sid tapped Milly's shoulder and jumped over the side of the automobile. "Hey Mack," he said turning to lift Milly out. "This is our stop, thanks for the ride."

The driver gave a brief nod as he carefully eased his Cadillac down the street. Instantly, Milly and Sid were absorbed in the mass. Sid kept his arm protectively around Milly, trying to keep her from getting jostled. The rough gabardine fabric of his top coat scratched her cheek and his chest limited her vision, but neither kept out the incessant buzz of angry voices.

Sid grabbed the forearm of a young teen trying to force his way past them. "What's going down?"

“The bank won’t give people their scratch,” he answered breathlessly. “’Cause everyone’s wanting to take it out all at once.”

The teen attempted to pull loose, but Sid held tight. “Why do they all want their money?”

The teen gave Sid an odd look. “Where ya been mister? After that grift job on Wall Street everyone wants to pull out, especially with the Durant Motors factory threatening to close.”

Sid released the boy, who rushed back into the crowd. Milly watched the tense group. Nobody was brawling – yet. But their stiff upper bodies and sullen eyes revealed an angered panic that said nothing was off the table. She looked up at her own husband’s tightened facial expression. “Sid,” she asked. “What are we going to do?”

II.

“Milly,” Sid trailed her cheek with his fingers tips. “Wake up, sweetheart.”

Milly stretched from her cramped position in a brick doorway. They, and dozens of others, had been living off the streets. Yawning, she forced her eyes to stay open and, judging by the sun’s location, decided it was still plenty early.

“I hocked my topcoat for five aces.”

“Five? It’s worth more than that,” Milly protested. She stood and straightened her wrinkled clothes. She needed a bath. And a hairbrush. Or, better yet, toothpaste.

“I know,” Sid said stiffly. “But we haven’t eaten in two days and there won’t be any jobs for who knows how long. I met a guy this morning who is heading north,” Sid explained. “We’re getting out of here. Now.”

The stranger brought them as far as a small diner in Walnut Creek. “Landsakes, honey!” cried a matronly woman when Milly and Sidney strolled through the door. “You look like something the cat dragged in.”

Wearing a pair of Sid’s overalls and a hat over her tangled hair, Milly blushed knowing they must look a fright.

“You come right on in and set your stuff down by the counter. Washroom’s around the corner to the left. I’ll have fried eggs and flapjacks for you after you’re all freshened up.” The friendly, if bossy, woman spun around and went back to her stove as if nothing unusual had happened.

Milly fought to hide a smile, but caught Sid’s eye. When he winked at her it was all she could do to get the washroom door shut behind her before she erupted in laughter.

Landsakes and flapjacks, Milly smiled at her mussed reflection in the mirror. *All we need is the bee's knees and we'll have ourselves a party!*

Feeling much improved after a quick splash of water on her face and a chance to tame her unruly hair, Milly sat down at the counter where she spotted a headline on the front page of the *Oakland Tribune*. "OAKLAND MAN FALLS TO DEATH, Real Estate Appraiser Drops Off Roof of Ten-Story Building." Milly skimmed down to the end of the article, where it was mentioned that the man had only 14 cents in his pocket. Trying not to let the news dishearten her, she turned to the section that listed "Help Wanted" ads. Not a minute later, she sat straight up. This was perfect – it had to be! "Sid!" She exclaimed as he came to lean on the counter. "Look, there's an ad in here asking for a couple to be caretakers of a place just a mile or two from here."

"Is that the Lohead place?" The woman interjected. "They sure are some nice people. They have a little boy and just bought a puppy – hope you don't mind pets – their place is awful pretty, too. They're doin' all kinds of fancy landscaping to spruce it up."

Sid glanced at the ad. "I'm game to check it out if you are."

An hour later, Sid checked the directions the woman at the diner had given them. "This should be it," he said as they walked up to a winding driveway leading through a yard filled with acacia and pecan trees.

Before they reached the large white house, a young boy about nine ran by with a finely groomed puppy chasing after him. "Tip! Come 'ere, boy!"

The lad came to a sudden halt when he saw Milly and Sid. "Hello there, kiddo," Milly called. "Is your mama home?"

He nodded and dashed up the porch steps. "Mother! Father!" He called as he disappeared through the screen door.

Milly and Sid approached the house more sedately and waited on the porch. Moments later a middle-aged man and woman came to greet them. "I'm Mr. Lohead," the man said offering his hand to Sid. "What can I do for you?"

"We heard you were looking for caretakers," Sid explained.

The man eagerly nodded his head. "Indeed we are. We make frequent trips into Frisco and need someone to look after the place. When we're here the couple would double as a handyman and cook."

"It only pays twenty dollars a month," the wife added. "But, you would be able to live in the cottage and use the pick-up to go into town."

Milly discreetly squeezed Sid's hand. Twenty dollars a month was like mining gold! After posing a few interview questions to them, Mr. Lohead asked if they were interested.

"Yes!" Milly and Sid answered in unison.

"I'll let my wife show you the cottage and I'll see to it that one of the gardeners shows you the grounds this afternoon." With a nod, Mr. Lohead excused himself.

Mrs. Lohead led the way around the side of the main house. "I'm so happy to have you," she said. "The cottage isn't much, but it is homey and I hope you'll like it. It is furnished and there are daffodils planted in the front."

"Oh, Sid," Milly breathed as the sweetest little cottage came into view. The outside was painted gray and it had extravagant French doors with crown glass windows. On the porch near the door stood a majestic reed set and there were red roses blooming on a trellis.

Mrs. Lothead continued indoors seemingly oblivious to the awe-struck wonder of her new employees. Inside the walls were a pale green and the floor had linoleum with a brick pattern in pink, green, and tan. The living room contained a library table, couch, chairs, and a floor lamp. “There is an electric radio in the armoire,” Mrs. Lothead said. “There is a full kitchen, but you will be making most meals in the main house, where we have a large Western Electric range. Oh, we also have a tennis court with flood lights. You are welcome to use it in the evenings at your leisure.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Lothead,” Milly gushed, still trying to take it all in. “This is all just wonderful.”

“Well, I will leave you be,” Mrs. Lothead excused herself. “One of the gardeners will be by shortly.”

Standing alone in the living room Milly snuggled up to Sid. Tossing her arms around his neck, she leaned her forehead against his. “We’re going to make it,” she grinned.

III.

Brushing dirt off her hands, Milly set the watering can on the steps of the cottage's porch. Sitting next to it in her sky blue dress-and-apron uniform, Milly took a moment to enjoy her surroundings. Winter had been extremely mild by Minnesota standards and spring was bringing its expected renewal. The daffodils that lined the front of the cottage were coming up in yellow splotches and the pecan trees in the main yard were in full bloom with their fragrant white blossoms. Still accustomed to long walks, Milly and Sid had taken to hiking in the woods. Milly preferred going in the late afternoons, before she started supper, because that was when the sun sifted through the redwoods in shafts of light and toyed with hidden shadows.

Milly glanced at her watch. If she was going to have supper on the table by the time the Locheads returned from their trip to Los Angeles, she had better get a wiggle on. Oh, and she also needed to feed the pets. Normally, that was little Jimmy's job; however, because he was not here, it fell to Milly. Not long after Milly and Sid's arrival, the Locheads had acquired a pedigreed albino squirrel. Before this Milly had never even heard of an albino squirrel, much less knew that it was a breed that could be pedigreed. And if a white squirrel wasn't strange enough, its eyes had a distinct reddish hue that made it look downright freaky.

Milly retrieved a cupful of dried corn and headed to the part of the yard where the squirrel was currently tethered to a leash. As she got closer she heard the sound of sharp barking. Picking up her pace, she hurried to rescue the squirrel. "Tip!" She called. "Bad boy!"

The growing puppy was jumping and clawing at the base of a tree. The poor squirrel was as high on the trunk as his leash would allow. Setting the cup down, she pulled the resistant pup away from the tree. "Get outta here! Shoo!"

Having finally convinced Tip to leave the vicinity, Milly cautiously approached the squirrel. “Come on, little fella,” she cooed. “Tip isn’t going to hurt you.”

She knelt at the base of the tree and scattered half of the corn. Gently stroking the agitated squirrel’s back she said, “It’s all right, come eat your supper.”

Without warning the squirrel bit the base of her thumb. Milly screamed and wrenched her hand away, the squirrel coming with it. The beast landed on her right shoulder. Still screaming, she jerked and tried to get the frightened squirrel off of her. Scrambling backward in a crab crawl, she managed to get out of range of the leash. The pressure from supporting her weight smeared dirt into her injured hand, causing pain to shoot up her elbow. Milly glared at the squirrel – or where she thought he would be if she could see through wood, for he had disappeared around the opposite side of the trunk. She quickly took inventory of her condition. She had several bites in the fleshy part of her thumb and on its first joint, one on her shoulder, and one on her knee. The thin fabric of her dress had slight tears in the latter two areas. Tears overwhelmed her eyelids. She thought of yelling for Sid, but she knew he was in a far part of the grounds and wouldn’t hear her anyway.

She took several deep breaths to steady herself. *Stupid squirrel.* Standing up, she straightened her back and held her head high as she marched toward the main house. There was nothing to do but wash her wounds and make dinner. She even knew where to find a pair of rubber gloves to keep the injuries on her hand clean. She could do this.

IV.

“What would you like to hear tonight?” Sid asked as he perused their growing book collection. He and Milly had made a habit of taking turns reading aloud in the evening.

“*Red Badge of Courage?*” Milly suggested. “No, how ’bout the Jack London one that you just got?”

Sid pulled *White Fang* from the shelves and lowered himself to a chair by the floor lamp. Milly retrieved her sewing and sat in the opposite chair. She was just finishing curtains for the cottage. The Locheads had brought two new Singer sewing machines back from their trip to Los Angeles. Milly had brought the portable one to the cottage and it was lightning fast. She whipped the curtains together like nothin’ doin.’ Now that her injuries had healed, she wanted to do the final detailing by hand.

Mrs. Lohead had been absolutely horrified when she saw what the squirrel had done to Milly. The Locheads paid for all of the doctor bills and sold the squirrel to the newly opened zoo in Frisco.

Sid had been reading for about half an hour and Milly was just getting drowsy listening to his deep voice when a knock disturbed them. They shared a surprised look, wondering who would be visiting at such a late hour.

“Mrs. Lohead,” Milly said as she answered the door. Before Milly could greet her further, the woman brushed past her and into the living room.

Sid stood to greet Mrs. Lohead and Milly stepped to his side. “Good evening,” he said with a nod.

Mrs. Lothead was clearly uncomfortable. She was fidgeting and not looking either of them in the eye. "I'm sorry," she began. "Mr. Lothead was supposed to speak with you, but he has been in San Francisco so much of late and I don't know when he'll be back."

Mrs. Lothead paused and fiddled with the cuffs of her dress. Milly gave Sid an uneasy glance, but said nothing.

"We're moving to Frisco," Mrs. Lothead blurted out. "We won't be out here except for the occasional weekend so we're cutting back on our staff." Tears welled up in the woman's eyes. "I'm so sorry to turn a young couple out in times like this, but we needed a couple who would be cook, caretaker, gardener, and handyman all in one, as they would be the only staff on the grounds."

Sid solemnly nodded. "We understand." He offered his hand, "It's been a pleasure working for you."

Mrs. Lothead meekly accepted his handshake. "And we've loved having you here. Really, Sidney, you have such an exceptional mind, you should go to college. It would be a waste if you didn't."

Sid, embarrassed by the compliment, merely nodded again and let Milly show their former employer to the door. "One more thing," Mrs. Lothead paused briefly in the doorway. "The new couple will be arriving to take possession of the cottage in a week."

Milly stared openmouthed at the closed door. "Of all the nerve!"

She spun around and stomped back into the living room. "To fire us without the least bit of warning and to already have someone moving into our home!" She flopped heavily onto the couch and crossed her arms. "It's just *rude!*"

Sid wistfully traced his hand along the spines of their book collection. “I’d have to agree,” he said grimly. “Maybe the neighbors will store some of our stuff for us, until we get settled again.”

“What do you have in mind?” Milly asked, her initial burst of anger waning.

“Well,” he said turning toward her. “If we can walk into California, I guess we can walk out of it.”

“Where will we go this time?”

“Anywhere,” he said with the old excitement building in his voice. “It’ll be an adventure!”

Author's Note

Questions bombard the study of creative nonfiction. Are there conventions? Or is it a prose equivalent to free verse? Who can write it? What place does it have in academia? What is it? The answer to all of these questions: yes. Maybe. There is yet to be a definitive answer to these and other questions, but I will attempt to address the most significant in relation to my project.

By definition, what is creative nonfiction? The loose definition is that it is nonfiction that reads like fiction. In theory it can be anything from a personal essay, like the “What I did this Summer” essays we wrote in third grade or the “Why I’d be a Good Fit” essays we have to write for college applications, to journal entries, letters, memoirs, anecdotal newspaper columns, travel essays, and on, and on. As writer and instructor Carol Bly wittily put it, “Nobody knows what creative nonfiction is, and therefore it can be nearly anything” (xvii). In his book *Creative Nonfiction*, Philip Gerard tries to narrow down the possibilities by explaining that the genre is made of “stories that carry both literal truthfulness and a larger Truth, told in a clear voice, with grace, and out of a passionate curiosity about the world,” (Bloom 278). On a surface level, that explanation seems to imbue creative nonfiction with a clear purpose, but in practice it brings up the complicated questions of ethics.

One of many practical issues that arise is how do you represent the people in your stories? Can you change names, like in journalism when you are protecting your sources? In her article, “Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction,” Lynn Bloom notes that it is impossible to tell your story without telling the story of others, “whether they like it or not” (Bloom 277). That being said, you have to handle your “characters” somehow. Editor Lee Gutkind regards name changing as a “slippery slope to fiction” (Bloom 273). But, Bloom

counters by asking if it is fair to put them in the spotlight where their neighbors might read something about them they would rather keep private; or, if they are dead, is it fair to smear them when they are unable to defend themselves from the grave (Bloom 279)? And what if you do not remember things exactly “right”? Joan Didion gives the example of discrepancies between memories of family members: It happened at Christmas – no – it was Easter – the party wasn’t for you, it was for your sister (Bloom 278). In an autobiography, there can be distinct differences between what the author remembers happening, and what actually happened.

However, because of the nature and purpose of this kind of writing, Didion is unconvinced that certain minor details really matter. Instead, she submits writers of creative nonfiction have a single ethical standard: To render faithfully “how it felt to me” (Bloom 278). From that perspective, it’s your story. Only you have the ability to tell it in the way that helps you understand the truth/Truth, and, ultimately, helps your reader gain from the experience.

From that, yet another ethical question bubbles up: what is the definition of truth? Or truth vs. Truth? When I began this project I immediately went to my favorite children’s series, *Little House on the Prairie*. If there is a prime example of creative nonfiction in practice, it’s Wilder’s work. Or is it? In *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Writer’s Life*, Pamela Smith Hill writes a biography that focuses on Wilder’s life as a writer and parallels Wilder’s actual life in comparison with what was written in the novels. Referring to the series, Hill uses the term “fiction” because the stories do not match up perfectly with reality. However, the changes between the stories and reality were mainly those of omission. In one quote from an interview, Wilder explains: “All I have told is the truth, but it is not the whole truth” (Hill 1). In an effort to create an effective narrative arc, Wilder made editorial decisions to leave out details that would have distracted from or undermined the themes of the book. For instance, the most obvious area of omission is

between the books *On the Banks of Plum Creek* and the *Shores of Silver Lake*. At the end of *Plum Creek*, the family has suffered two extreme crop failures but has rallied for a final Christmas scene that leaves the impression that the family will survive to see better days. When *Silver Lake* opens, the family (still living on Plum Creek) is recovering from severe illness (from which Mary loses her eyesight); Pa has gone ahead to Silver Lake; they have a new toddling sister, Grace; and, based on Laura's comparative ages, at least three years have passed. What Wilder left out was that a little brother was born during their time at Plum Creek, but he died shortly before the family, due to the crop failures, was forced to travel eastward to Iowa (Hill 26).

While in Iowa, the family worked for a hotel in the seedy town of Burr Oak and in her separate autobiography Wilder describes harsh incidences such as a neighboring storekeeper dragging his wife out of their house by the hair and then proceeding to light their bedroom on fire (Hill 27). The family did, in fact, return to Plum Creek before leaving for Silver Lake, so details about the move from Plum Creek to Silver Lake are accurate, but in the series Wilder completely left out any references to her brother or her time in Iowa. In a letter to her daughter, Wilder explains her omission as being a story in itself, but "it does not belong in the picture I am making of the family" (Hill 30). Certainly, it would have been a psychologically and emotionally trying period in the Ingalls' lives, and it would not have been easy for Wilder to write about. But, perhaps more importantly, as far as the stories are concerned, it would have drastically changed the tone of the books to have the family living in so seedy of an area, suffer a death, and return east. The series maintains a sense of optimism, wholesomeness, and, with the arguable exception of Pa building their house just over the boundary line into Indian Territory, the Ingalls family never retreats east. As Hill put it, "the fictional Ingalls family always looks forward, not back"

(Hill 30). To a certain extent, Wilder is simply being a good writer. She is being mindful of her child-based audience, editing for unnecessary information that detracts from the main story, and creating overarching themes that tie the books together as a series. With respect to creative writing, Wilder is not wrong. Not everything a person writes is worthy of being published and any creative writing teacher will tell you that the key to effective dialogue is leaving out the extra small talk in a conversation and only taking the meat of the discussion. Can that be done in creative nonfiction? Is it acceptable to leave out part of a conversation as long as you do not misrepresent the speaker, such as when you use a partial quotation in a research paper?

If omissions are straddling the line of accuracy, then what about additions? In my own project, Milly did not give a lot of information about the setting of Oakland when they arrived. It is straight from the letters that they hadn't eaten in over two days and they hocked Sid's coat, but that is all the information given. I had to research what it was like when the stock market crashed and make an educated guess as to how the people of Oakland may have reacted. In one of her scenes, Wilder did something similar. There is a particularly dramatic moment when two men essentially get into a fistfight at the claim office that Wilder describes as "fiction. Such things did happen in those days and I placed it there to emphasize the rush for land" (Hill 42). Repeatedly, Wilder has stressed that she was more concerned with placing her family in the larger pioneer experience, as it was the passing of an era (Hill 8). In her mind, it was more important to focus on the bigger picture of history than it was to present the minute details of her family's life.

Is that approach dangerously close to fiction? Are subtle changes, such as minor omissions, acceptable, while additions of entirely fictional events, though true to the times, push writers squarely out of creative nonfiction? And what does that mean for my project? *Can* I tell a story that is

not my own? As previously pointed out in regard to autobiographies, my narrative arc has gone through several filters: the actual events, how Milly described them to her mother in the letters, and how I interpreted them. I can't say with any real certainty that the way I framed the scenes is how the events truly came to pass. Does that mean my project is more accurately described as biographical fiction? What is the difference between biographical fiction and well researched historical fiction? Clearly, from a writer's point of view there is a tension between the accepted rules of composition/nonfiction and the rules of creative writing; and there is a struggle to meet in the middle. Resulting from that struggle is the parallel dispute of the place of creative nonfiction in English studies.

If there is a debate about how to write creative nonfiction, then there is certainly a debate about where it belongs. In his article, "The Place of Creative Nonfiction," Douglas Hesse addresses the tangential issue of which library and bookstore categories creative nonfiction works belong in as a genre in the grand scheme of written work. Hesse suggests that the problem of creative nonfiction being categorized in such chaotic and inconsistent ways rests in the conflict between form and content (238). To explain, he uses *Crime and Punishment* as an example. If novels were as haphazardly categorized as creative nonfiction, *Crime and Punishment* would probably fall under "Law" instead of under "Language and Literature" (Hesse 238). While deciding what categorical value should be given to a work of creative nonfiction may not be of immediate importance, Hesse is correct when he insists that it does matter because it pertains to the perception and respect that creative nonfiction receives. That perception is what gives creative nonfiction credibility to be taught the classroom and, as an author attempting to write creative nonfiction, it is what gives my project academic value.

Wendy Bishop gets to the pedagogical heart of the debate in her article “Suddenly Sexy: Creative Nonfiction Rear-ends Composition.” She discusses the push and shove between creative writing programs and composition programs, the struggle of fitting creative nonfiction into English, and how, because it is under-theorized, it is awkwardly shifted between creative writing studies and composition studies (Bishop 269). She critiques the line between what is considered “creative” and what is not, and the low standards set for first-year writing students, suggesting that creative nonfiction, particularly the personal essay, could be a tool to tap into students’ natural abilities and interests that, once discovered, can be honed into developed skills (Bishop 266). Interestingly, she notes that it is only in recent years that scholars are beginning to cease treating creative nonfiction like a pariah and, in the wake of the workshop-oriented composition classes, have given creative nonfiction a space to be “legitimately” practiced (Bishop 263). The fact that universities such as Northwestern and our neighbors across the river, Minnesota State, have added creative nonfiction as an emphasis in their creative writing undergraduate and graduate programs is a testament to that growing foothold.

But, practically speaking, Bishop addresses the real issue of the current lack of genre guidelines. As I saw in my own research, there tends to be more information about what creative nonfiction is *not* in comparison to information about what it *is*. As Bishop explains, current textbooks, if we can even call them that, tend not to include discussions of point of view or character development that are present in fiction studies, nor the rhetorical situation present in composition studies, or even the circulation and production of knowledge ideas that would be heard in a literary theory class (266). In essence, textbook writers have been leaving out the main components that would make the creative nonfiction credible as a discipline and that would be of most practical use to students. Instead, these textbooks, lacking a strong theoretical vocabulary for discussing the genre adequately, use vague sections about “putting yourself on the

line” or “the elusive truth” (Bishop 266). Unfortunately, Bishop is precisely right, and that is a crucial part of the ambiguity holding back the practice of creative nonfiction. That being said, Bishop is also right in that being able to construct effective narratives is a valuable skill that is widely applicable and just because something is ill-defined does not mean it is not worth exploring.

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