EVERYDAY:
The Exquisite Intricate

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Suppose I begin with the facts? A boy leaves his childhood home. He is to journey to a new land. A new existence is to be made in this foreign place.

There is nothing remarkable in these facts. It is an oft-told tale of immigrant life that is the stuff of everyday occurrence. So, for now, I will set this aside.

In this essay I attend to the art of relaying the factual. I explore the techniques and trends of the genre of Creative Nonfiction by relying on the best resource at hand: fellow writers who are exponents of this genre. What follows are excerpts from email conversations with my community of writer-friends, conducted in June 2018. In these exchanges, I deliberate with essayists, memoirists, and cultural critics on the subject of writing about real life – the everyday, if you will. I wanted to get a sense of how and why they write in a form that I describe as fact rendered in imaginative expression.

Stephanie Abraham, a Los Angeles-based writer who contributes to various print and online publications, in addition to serving as a cultural and film critic, shared with me the definition of CNF that she finds most useful. She relays the description of the genre by Lee Gutkind, founding editor of the magazine *Creative Nonfiction*. Gutkind says that his magazine

> defines the genre simply, succinctly, and accurately as "true stories well told" … In some ways, creative fiction is like jazz – it's a rich mix of flavors, ideas, and techniques, some of which are newly invented and others as old as writing itself … The word "creative" refers to the use of literary craft, the techniques fiction writers, playwrights, and poets employ to present nonfiction – factually accurate prose about real

> people and events – in a compelling, vivid, dramatic manner … "Creative" doesn't mean inventing what didn't happen … It doesn't mean that the writer has a license to lie. The cardinal rule is clear – and cannot be violated. This is the pledge the writer makes to the reader…

Indeed, what Gutkind lays out is the way in which a nonfictionist is held by the truth. They might take liberties with the stylistic manner in which they deliver fact, but there is no altering the truth itself.

That truth is what I refer to as the exquisite intricate – the beauty in the details. Where others might see the everyday as something that simply happens, the writer of nonfiction grasps the intricate details and re-represents them for all that is exquisite about them.

Take this moment in Stephanie Abraham's essay "No Longer Just American," which appears in the book *Nobody Passes* (2006):

> In 2002, I went back to Detroit with my dad to visit relatives. We went to a family restaurant called Ike's, and indulged in a spread of Arabic dishes. As I dipped my pita bread into a bowl of kibbeh naye (raw meat ground as fine as smooth peanut butter), I realized that I had been eating kibbeh naye my whole life without realizing it, but in an assimilated, passing kind of way. When I was a little girl, if my dad was hungry and wanted a quick snack he would go to the fridge, grab a hot dog, put it in pita bread, and dig in. I didn't know anyone else who ate raw all-beef hot dogs. When my mother fixed hot dogs, she cooked them in boiling water and served them in a bun with ketchup, which I loved. My mom thought my dad's concoction was gross. I thought it was kind of weird, but once I tried it I was hooked. He was happy to share his indulgence with another person in the house; it was our special treat. (129)

In this vignette, Abraham takes the most common of daily tasks – the eating of food – and unravels its elements, comparing how her mother prepares that very American dish of hotdogs to how her father prefers to consume this item of food. But in spelling out the performance of commensality, Abraham uses food as a metaphor for identity, where even an American dish, because of the way in which it is consumed, can become a stand-in for Arabness.

"Cultures are not static," Abraham writes (130). "They adapt and shift in order to survive. People do, too" (130). In this analysis, Abraham makes exquisite the intricate details that would otherwise go unnoticed. Where someone else may just think, "Oh, it's a man eating a raw hotdog from the fridge," Abraham not only draws a connection between this simple act and Arab culture, but also underscores the intimacy between parent and child.

Abraham's essay goes on to reveal how although she passes for being white because she is of mixed-race origins, her desire to actively reclaim her Arab identity was, for her, a political act. When I ask her about her craft, Abraham tells me,

> I started writing in creative nonfiction before I knew it was a genre. Honestly, I think it's from coming of age during third wave feminism wherein multiple narratives became valued over *the* Narrative (as in the white supremacist, heteronormative patriarchy). I read lots of anthologies of personal essays. I loved and continue to love that this genre exemplifies where the personal and the political intersect, how we do not exist in bubbles as individuals, that there's nothing wrong with me or my people. Almost all the problems and challenges we have are a result of societal problems, such as systemic oppressions like racism, classism, and sexism. This genre helps me be a force in the world for positive change.

In so saying, Abraham intimates the possibilities of the genre as a tool for social and political education.

Near the end of her essay, Abraham reflects on how "[i]n spite of three generations of whitewashing, I have not forgotten my people's past and identity as Arab American … Even if this doesn't make a difference in anyone else's life, it does in mine…" (135). Nonetheless, in recovering her own Arab Americanness, Abraham actually ends up influencing her father's sense of self. She recalls how "[her] dad recently told his brother, 'I didn't know I was Arab American until I met my daughter.' He explained that he had always thought of himself only as American" (135). There's a reversal here of that earlier moment when a young girl sought to emulate her father by eating a raw hotdog in the way he did. Now it is the father's turn to learn from his child who has come into her own as a woman and a self-aware individual.

It's been a while since I mentioned the facts I opened with. To remind you of the routine events, we had a boy leaving home to journey to new beginnings. What if I told you that this was not the first time the boy had left home? That in leaving home again, he was actually rehearsing the journeys his father had taken three decades before this moment? What if I told you that the boy's mother too, had also left the only home she had known thirty years prior? Might you wonder why the boy's grandparents too had left their homeland for other shores? What if you knew that the boy, his parents, and his grandparents, had each crossed one of three different continents? In a time before planes became commonplace, his grandparents had boarded a ship and traversed an ocean. His mother had done the same, but in the opposite direction some forty years after her parents.

But enough of this for now.

Kevin Wood, a writer from New York, asserts that

> [a]s a writer of nonfiction, which is to say, I tell true stories – the term "creative nonfiction" seems a bit redundant. Its existence suggests that not all nonfiction is inherently creative. Or worse, it suggests that the reader can tack that label onto a piece of writing. But if the terms means anything at all, it's definitively not about the reader.

And this is an important detail. What Wood emphasizes is that although the author may write something for a reading audience, what is shared is still personal – the facts are, usually, about the writer themselves.

Wood continues:

> I know what people are getting at with the term "creative nonfiction" – using typically fictional and descriptive elements you may not find in, say, an academic journal. Crafting dialogue with "realistic," conversational pacing. *Mise en scène*. Flashbacks and flash forwards. But stylistic elements do not a classification make.

In other words, Wood suggests that the writing techniques we conventionally associate with the crafting of fiction do not solely belong in that domain. Wood refers to a book by Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story* (2001) in which the author

> brilliantly sketches out – in two sections, one on the essay, the other on memoir – that, simply, we all live through

> many situations in life. But to tell about something in our life – our own nonfiction, if you will – requires something more. What is unique, what only the individual writer can describe, is their place in that situation. In some sense, the writer *is* the story.

In emphasizing the connection of the writer to their truth-telling, Wood reminds us that the intricacies of nonfiction require not just the art of revelation but a personal coming to terms with what is revealed.

Wood does exactly this in his article "My Boyhood Brush with Breast Cancer" from *The Good Men Project*. Wood discloses:

> I was living in Texas, where being a man is non-negotiable. *How much can you bench press? How many beers can you chug?* and *How fast is your car?* were common questions. I was not the guy with impressive answers to any of these. I also wasn't on any sports teams – never had been. I was already teetering dangerously close to the edge of not being a *guy* at all.

That I might have breast cancer in this hyper-masculine world was highly ironic.

> … Months before my mammogram. I felt a growth above my right nipple. It slowly grew until I could see it … I didn't tell my parents at first … When they finally saw and felt it, it quickly became doctor-worthy. I never thought about breast cancer.

Reflecting back on this essay, Wood shares with me the process of writing it:

> When you tell the story of having breast surgery as a teenage boy to determine if a growing mass is breast cancer … it might take you a long time to find the actual story. There were many memorable (some funny) events that took place during that time, all of which, it turned out, were just the situation.

What Wood takes stock of here is how having something happen is not enough. Certainly, since breast cancer is a rare occurrence for men, this might, on the surface, seem like an interesting tale to relate. But just providing this information does not, by itself, give shape to an essay.

Wood continues:

> What I, the nonfiction writer, only came to realize in time, as I … wrote draft after draft, was that what I was leaving out was the story. The one most important thing about that experience – finding out the post-surgery biopsy came back benign – had (and still has) escaped my memory. As I told the many aspects of that admittedly bizarre situation, I was fixated on how emasculating it felt to be a teenage boy having breast surgery, and maybe breast cancer, of all things, while living in a hyper-masculine culture. To this day, that fixation blinds me to the bigger point – that I could have had cancer before finishing high school.

If you read Wood's essay, what you will also find is that the piece is not only an exploration of masculinity because of this particular medical experience, but also how surviving it made Wood more empathetic toward women. In addition to the trauma of the disease and possible fatality, that the cancer of this body part can relate to a woman's sense of self is closely linked to the gendering of the breast. Thereupon, in his essay, Wood contrasts the commonplaceness of this affliction in woman, versus its rarity in men, to reflect on how the gendering of the body is made unquestioningly quotidian.

Wood concludes his thoughts on creative nonfiction by stating that to him,

> [i]f a definition has to be given to "creative nonfiction," it wouldn't concern itself with the elements any reader could identify. Because it's about the writer, and not how the finished product comes across. A qualifying question might capture it – one we could ask any writer, indeed, any artist, who creates: Did you learn something, in the process of creating? Did you grow?
>
> If you can answer yes – then, dear nonfiction writer, you *and* your writing are "creative."

And in so saying, Wood puts the emphasis on the act of creation in the creative process, for it is not only about creating a piece, but also ourselves through writing.

"Creative nonfiction (memoir, essay, biography) is one of my favorite genres," Abeer Hoque declares to me. She is the author of a novel titled *The*

Lovers and the Leavers (2014) and the memoir *Olive Witch* (2016). Hoque notes of her affinity for CNF that it is because

> [i]t's definitely one of the most natural to me, after decades of journaling. There's something so warm and intimate about it. It's like talking or listening to someone, sharing our lives, and thoughts. I'm a people person, so it makes sense that reading personal stories in whatever form resonates so much with me. I also love how the other forms (fiction, poetry) can be part of nonfiction writing. Fictive techniques (such as character development and narrative arc, and tension) and poetic elements (such as language, rhythm, form, compression) are things I often think about when I write memoir and it can make the writing and process more complex and compelling.

Like Wood, Hoque recognizes the similarities between the genres of fiction and nonfiction, and adds how intimacy is part of the process of writing CNF. In Hoque's writing, this is apparent.

Take this excerpt from her essay "The Version we Remember: On the Truth and Fiction of Photography" which appears in the March 2018 issue of *Catapult*:

> By the time I get an SLR camera … my father has started to lose his memory to Alzheimer's Disease. We have long told the doctors his memory loss is no ordinary phenomenon, not an age-related forgetting as they claim.
>
> I soon have to abandon the project of recording my father's stories because it is too painful. He begins to repeat the same ones and the truth is inescapable now – he is forgetting who he was.

In giving us the details of her relationship with her father, Hoque crafts a narrative around memory and forgetting. The intimacy is doubled – it is in the telling of the personal and in the intimate act of committing the exquisite intricate to paper.

While Hoque's writing preserves her memory of her father even as his own deteriorates, it forces her to reckon with the inevitable: her father will never be the same. Authors of CNF negotiate the jagged terrain of vulnerability, the promise of the catharsis of writing not always given.

Yet, even as these are the stakes of Hoque's essay, it explores a much wider territory of what memory is, refusing to cast it merely as the foil to forgetting. Rather than simply take memory deterioration as the incumbent loss of aging and frailty, Hoque questions the processes by which memories are made and preserved in the first place.

Using the photograph as an example of what we accept as certain fact, she queries what these freeze-frames of time exclude. Hoque muses that

> [a] photograph isn't necessarily a moment of truth, but what the photographer wants you to see. This is not just photography's problem. It is a fundamental flaw of memory. We remember only a version of the story, and we tell only a fraction of that version. And sometimes, even that sliver will fail us.

In effect, Hoque's essay draws from family history in thinking about her father's dimming recollection, pivoting to a wider meditation on the tractability of memory – the sometimes deliberate/other times oblivious choice to hold back, forget, or remake our recall. As much as a photo reveals, it also conceals.

At the conclusion of her essay, Hoque relates an episode from a family road trip where her father asks her to take a photograph of a tree. "I don't know what about the tree is beautiful to him," she ponders as she captures the image by proxy for her father (Hoque). We may see only what the photographer wants us to, but know little of why. "This is something I could ask him, … but I don't … Perhaps it's enough that he saw something and wanted to share it" (Hoque). Question unasked, Hoque's attempt at an answer is imparted to her readers, an unsolved mystery that exposes the intricacies of something as everyday as taking a picture of a roadside tree.

I turn now to writer Jessica Faleiro's response to my question about CNF as her choice of form. She explains, "[It] allows me to integrate literary devices to improve narrative flow and appeal to a whole different audience without moving away from the factual accuracy of events that transpired." Like Gutkind, Faleiro too stresses the importance of staying true to the facts while relying upon the elements one would generally associate with fictional storytelling. For Faleiro, this cross-pollination of fact and creativity derives, on the one hand from the personal and, on the other, from her experience as a writer of fiction. Faleiro is the author of two novels, *Afterlife: Ghost Stories from Goa* (2012) and *The Delicate Balance of Little Lives* (2018).

As an example of how Faleiro portrays the factual in creative narrative, take this passage from "Arrival: Notes from a Migrant Goan" in *Asia Literary Review*:

> It is 1997 and I've landed at Heathrow airport's Terminal 3 from Goa, India, where my parents are from. The England I anticipate meeting is the clichéd version, with tweed-clad gentlemen standing by rose bushes in front of cosy thatched cottages. In my mind, the women sit daintily at tables in the back garden, smelling of Yardley talcum powder and pouring tea from their flowery tea sets. Children have picnics of ham sandwiches and fresh apples at the seaside on the clifftops, just as they do in Enid Blyton's books.

The facts are obvious: a migrant's landing on foreign soil, their baggage a set of expectations. The fictional embellishments are palpable, too, in the dashing of those presumptions: the gents in tweed suits are nowhere to be seen, nor the genteel women sipping tea, and certainly not the well-behaved children.

The essay goes on to employ another literary device – irony. Instead of finding the kinds of storybook English people she thought she would, Faleiro's fairytale image of London is shattered when she sees "eighteen-year-old British boys and girls chugging beer and then violently throwing up in the university student bar at 5 p.m. after winning a rugby game and trying to drown themselves in their body weight of beer." Despite this, Faleiro dives into life in London. She fills the reader in on how she takes the first job she can find and then "[rents] a cheap studio flat in East London which costs over half my monthly salary. After about nine months, it is broken into one Saturday while I'm out." With this, although providing us with fact, Faleiro builds dramatic tension,using yet another technique from fiction-writing.

Faleiro never fully recovers from the break-in. In fact, she never fully breaks into life in England. "I stay put, always hoping it will get easier somehow, that I'll be able to build something for myself. But I don't see signs of this happening. With every passing year, things only get harder" (Faleiro). Like Hoque, Faleiro divulges the intimate in this less than happy immigrant tale. But failure here is humanized, creating the potential for empathy rather than requiring that the narrator be pitied. Faleiro ends the essay by thinking about her own dislocation in relation to larger trends: "In a world where migration appears to be a way of life common to most, it is surprising how little one hears about the vulnerability migrants face."

Even as it springs from personal experience, the piece makes a larger point about the contemporary human condition. Faleiro's purpose, however, is not to be didactic. Her task as a writer is to narrate events – not simply as they occurred, but as she saw them after the fact. If what the reader then takes from it is some sense of the present-day world in the period of globalization which causes the movement of people from familiar circumstances to the unknown, it is because the recognition of how personal such writing is, in turn, invites introspection.

Once more, the facts.

A boy relives the journeys of his mother, his father, and his grandparents through his own displacement. When his mother made the journey with her father to their homeland, it was her first time there, but it would be her father's last. She had heard of this place but nothing she had been told matched what she saw as the ship docked on dry land. It was a beautiful sight – red hills and green palm fronds. She wished her mother had lived to accompany them. Though still young, her mother had died about a year before and the young woman's aging father knew that his own time was near. Deciding that he wanted to live out his days in the land where he was born, he had brought his youngest daughter back home with him.

The beach, not too far from where they lived, became one of her favorite spots in this new place. It was there that the man who would become her husband first set eyes on her. She wouldn't give him the time of day. When he found out that she was to begin typing school, he enrolled as well. As their secretarial skills progressed, so did their romance. She took him home one day, so her father could meet him and give them his blessing. The old man died before they married. But even before their union, there was a journey they had to take.

But more about this in a little bit.

To research his 2014 article for *The New Yorker*, Teju Cole, author of the novel *Open City* (2011), retraced James Baldwin's 1951 journey from Paris to Leukerbad. Titled "Black Body: Rereading James Baldwin's 'Strange in the Village,'" Cole's own work recounts Baldwin's essay from more than half a century ago. Cole declares of Baldwin's nonfiction that "[it] recounts the experience of being black in an all-white village." I reference this piece to reflect on its being creative nonfiction about creative nonfiction – a kind of metatextual and intertextual writing in which Cole thinks about Baldwin's expression and style. Cole interfaces with Baldwin as in this quote he presents

from the late writer: "From all available evidence no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came," and then Cole adds, "But the village has grown considerably since [Baldwin's] visits, more than sixty years ago. They've seen blacks now; I wasn't a remarkable sight…"

Still, Cole brings to our attention that there are glances every once in a while, and that these are similar to ones he has received in New York, Europe, and India – the ubiquity of otherness attached to black bodies a commonplace occurrence across multiple lands. One may even characterize this uniformity as transnational surveillance. Cole analyzes:

> To be a stranger is to be looked at, but to be black is to be looked at especially. Leukerbad has changed, but in which way? … Perhaps some of the older folks I saw in the streets were once the very children who had been so surprised by the sight of Baldwin … But now the children or grandchildren of those children are connected to the world in a different way. Maybe some xenophobia or racism are part of their lives, but part of their lives, too, are Beyoncé, Drake, and Meek Mill, the music I hear pulsing from Swiss clubs on Friday nights.

By tracking Baldwin literally – both in the sense of retracing his journey and then also through his writing – Cole uses the intricate details of the everyday to exquisite effect. A glance, kinds of music, and the names of places become markers of history and indices of the contemporary, a comparison between Baldwin's past and Cole's present. Like with Faleiro's writing, the personal here gives way to the global and the intersections between them. CNF is simultaneously his/herstory and story – creative narrative that records the minutiae of lives as the making of time.

I return to the facts I began with one last time.

When I left off, the grandfather was near death and his daughter was to marry a man she met in typing school. Together, the couple move to yet another country where they give birth to a girl and the boy who these facts are about.

That boy is me.

Twenty-five years ago, I came to the United States. My parents were married in Kuwait which was the birthplace of my sister and me. My mother was born in Kenya, British East Africa, which her mother and father came to from Portuguese Goa. When my mother journeyed to Goa with her father, she met

my dad and then moved to Kuwait with him. These are the intricate details of my family's journeys, which often find their way into my own creative nonfiction. To me, their exquisite quality is in the recalling of three generations of migrants making their way through the continents of Asia, Africa, Europe, and America.

Here is an excerpt from an essay of mine titled "The Difference between Deserts and Beaches: Sands of a Goan Childhood":

> My school holidays were spent either in Kuwait, or with my grandmother in Aldona. I completed high school in Goa in 1990, joining my family who, by then, had repatriated from Kuwait. Other than when they had been on vacation, this was their first time back as fulltime residents after leaving Goa in the sixties, shortly upon the transfer of power of the enclave from Portugal to India. The discovery of oil in the Middle East, during that same period, had led to a large demand for foreign labor to transform the various emirates into modern urban oases. Goans were among those who heeded the call in large numbers. About a year after my parents returned voluntarily, the Iraq invasion of Kuwait brought several people I had grown up with "back" to Goa.
>
> We were the lost generation: Goans our entire lives, suddenly plunged into a foreign place called home.
>
> For some, there was no getting over the culture shock. Like many other "Gulfie Goans" of my generation, I went abroad to continue my college education. My journey to California called for a change of planes in a country I thought I would never see again. My non-Kuwaiti blood having disbarred me from being a citizen, I was only permitted to view my birthplace from the airport. There was war damage that was still being repaired. In the window, looking out onto Kuwait, I caught a reflection of the t-shirt I had decided to wear for the trip. It said GOA. (Ferrão)

Let me return to the mundane facts. A boy leaves home like his parents before him, like his grandparents before them. Let me end with the only way I know how to make the journey back across these lives, these histories, these geographies – by allowing the factual to lend itself to the creative. As much as the task is one of rendering intimacy while using storytelling and drama, it is as importantly about standing in one's own truth. The everyday is intricate, writing makes it exquisite.

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