EXPANDING THE CREATIVE: A CALL TO BROADEN THE SPECTRUM OF CREATIVITY IN CREATIVE NONFICTION

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John Paul

has been approved on behalf of the

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Thesis Committee: *(signatures are on file)*

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Dr. Nicole Pfannenstiel - Research Advisor

_____

Dr. Caleb Corkery - Committee Member

_____

Michele Santamaria - Committee Member

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Date

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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By

John Paul

Millersville University, 2018

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Directed by Dr. Nicole Pfannenstiel

This thesis combines creative and research elements to analyze and discuss a debate within creative nonfiction regarding the genre's role and focus. The first chapter presents the major theorists related to creative nonfiction and discusses where they fall on a creative nonfiction spectrum. My own work of creative nonfiction, "Weight," is an example of creative nonfiction's push away from its journalistic roots toward experimenting with presenting truth in new and creative ways. In it, I ponder the suicide of Lester Martin, a fellow hunter and someone with whom I'd accidentally crossed paths only a few years prior to his final act. Using a combination of fact gleaned from research on Lester and my knowledge of Path Valley and its people, I strive to relay his final days and act. My goal for this composition was to explore creative nonfiction and experiment in composing a creative nonfiction work. My reflection on the topic highlights the challenges that exist in trying to satisfy both poles of creative nonfiction and discusses the importance of creative nonfiction in discussing and describing insular cultures. Similarly, it posits that holding creative nonfiction to the same demands of journalism detracts from the humanistic appeal of the creative nonfiction genre. In the third chapter, I examine Path Valley, a small, rural community in south central Pennsylvania and discuss my relationship with the

culture at length. In this section, I also examine the elements of Path Valley culture that complicated the creative nonfiction research and writing process. I discuss the additional hurdles posed by my role as an outsider to Path Valley culture. The final chapter comments on the issues prevalent in rural America and how creative nonfiction is important to launching discussions on these topics while also functioning as a meta-commentary on my own reflections and what was learned about creative nonfiction during this process. Lastly, it presents questions that creative nonfiction will seek to answer as it moves forward as a genre and continues to evolve.

CHAPTER 1: ISSUES IN CREATIVE NONFICTION

My interest in creative nonfiction emerged from Norman Maclean's "A River Runs Through It." I have been teaching the novella for nearly a decade, and I have come to intimately appreciate the craft and structure of his memoir—one of the many, and arguably most popular, branches under the umbrella of creative nonfiction. Perhaps more importantly, however, is how Maclean's story blends both the nonfiction and the interpersonal to weave a tale that in which readers explore the successes, failures, and tragedy of Norman's relationship with his brother alongside the narrator. In this first chapter, I discuss the tensions, as presented by some of its more prominent agents, present in the creative nonfiction genre. Maclean's novella is a perfect work from which to launch this discussion, as it exists simultaneously on both ends of the spectrum that creative nonfiction's prominent authors have forged—the opposed ends being the creative and the nonfiction. This chapter tours this spectrum by showcasing several of the major theorists and discussing the conflicts within the genre.

The second chapter presents a creative nonfiction work of my own. Largely inspired, stylistically and contextually, by Norman Maclean, my own work straddles the borders of creative nonfiction and like Maclean may violate what some on the far end of journalistic creative nonfiction consider core tenets of the genre. Despite this, however, "Weight" still aims to uphold creative nonfiction's goals.

Chapter three discusses the process by which I composed my work of nonfiction—why I chose the subject matter, what impact the various voices in creative nonfiction influenced the writing, and why I chose the process by which I wrote the tale. It will also walk through some of the theory that helped to guide my process. It not only analyzes these decisions, but it looks at how each side of the creative nonfiction spectrum might view my choices.

Lastly, chapter four proposes questions for the genre that I confronted both in writing my own creative nonfiction and also in researching the genre. It also ties my work into the greater spectrum of creative nonfiction and propose roles the genre should seek to fill in the context of modern society.

Maclean's tale echoes through its readership, and it becomes something greater than merely an account of his experiences, instead looking at a far more human tale of the prodigal son (or sibling) and the question of whether we ever truly can help those closest to us in the ways that they may need. Though Maclean wrote before the term "creative nonfiction" had even really become mainstream and well prior to the "memoir craze." Lee Gutkind—author of *Keep It Real* and chief editor of both the annually published *The Best Creative Nonfiction* and www.creativenonfiction.org--establishes the goal of creative nonfiction: "factually accurate prose about real people and events—in a compelling, vivid, dramatic manner. The goal is to make nonfiction stories read like fiction so that your readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy" ("What is Creative Nonfiction?"). Maclean's tale does not necessarily satisfy this decree as he openly takes liberties with material that is so personal to him, making massive alterations to the truth—Paul, for instance, did not die in Montana, but rather in Chicago. In an interview that Maclean did with Nick O'Connell for "The Writer's Workshop Review," the interviewer asks Maclean about this transition of real-world experience into "fictional" story, and Maclean responds,

> They changed long before I started writing them. I'm not sure that after a few years I could tell what happened from what I say happened, which is fortunate if you want to be a storyteller. I had a drenching of storytelling in all the years when I was in the Forest

> Service and logging camps, and so it's easier for me to tell a story about what happened than telling it exactly as it happened. They became stories long before I told them.

Likewise, Maclean admits to allowing himself "a literary latitude. Often things don't happen fast enough in life. Literature can condense them." Conversely, however, Maclean also points to a desire to the importance of getting every detail as correct as possible, "So I'm very, very careful. I don't want to be cheating; I want to get the design as exactly as I can, in itself, not from me." Ultimately, Maclean's responses reflect the spectrum that creative nonfiction should embody—one that is honest in its preservation of the core material and the important lessons therein while having the "literary latitude" to craft a more engaging work around that. Though Maclean was unaware of this work's relevance in pushing creative nonfiction boundaries, this concept of "literary latitude," though not attributed to him or labeled as such, has been vocally adopted by several authors in the creative nonfiction community. Most outspoken of these is John D'Agata, a professor at University of Iowa and author of *The Lifespan of a Fact* and *The Next American Essay*, who cuts a controversial figure and has been labeled an iconoclast and contrarian. D'Agata sees fact and truth as far too subjective and perception-oriented. Instead, he upholds the conceptual truth of the story itself as the ideal of creative nonfiction. Minor facts and details become irrelevant in the face of the story's greater truths—the patterns, as Maclean sees them, that transcend detail but tie humanity together. Philip Gerard, an outspoken preserver of truth and journalistic intent in creative nonfiction, and author of *Creative Nonfiction: Research and Crafting Stories of Real Life* and *The Art of Creative Research*, would balk at this definition. Gerard—and by extension *Atlantic* contributor William Deresewiecz—represent the inverse of D'Agata's perspective of creative nonfiction and would likely label Maclean's work a wonderfully written piece of fiction despite its origins in reality. The story is owed a thorough

and loyal commitment to precision in detail; creative nonfiction is more an evolution of journalism and as such should be held to the same standards. In fact, creative nonfiction owes a greater truth as it is not, like journalism, handicapped by the pressures of social media and 24-hour news cycles that demand promptness over fact-checking.

The source of this issue, as so many others have pointed out, is the term "nonfiction." John D'Agata points to the mentality among journalists that "If it's called 'nonfiction,' many colleagues insisted, then it needs to report the facts as accurately as the news." The danger, however, of the belief that "if a nonfiction text does not adhere to the rules of journalism then that test is nothing but a 'hoax'" is that it "swiftly render[s] everything that's huddled under that big umbrella term of 'nonfiction' as either 100 percent verifiable… or not nonfiction at all" (D'Agata 8). D'Agata, and creative nonfiction authors aligned with his perspective, feel that journalism adheres to fact at the cost of the story. Though New Journalism emphasizes the author's perspective in ways that traditional journalism—in which the author was to be a neutral observer only—doesn't, it is still insistent on complete and utter factuality. This is, however, a tough distinction to make in every case, and in fact, several New Journalists are lumped into the creative nonfiction field, what with the two genres having considerable overlap. As discussed in Chapter 3, factual representations of culture, and the cultural ties and connections of these facts become meaningful in a story. The relevance of the facts in terms of how what they reflect about the subject is as important as the impact of the facts on the author, and by extension, the reader. Perhaps the defining difference, and the determining element to what is the "core material" of a story is simply for the author to decide. For this, I return to Norman Maclean explanation of how he defines the necessary detail in his works: "It's very important whether the design or shape or form of a series of events is really in the thing or whether it's something that you, the artist, have

manufactured. It's important to me that there is a design and shape to quite a few things that we do in our life" (Maclean).

With the considerable breadth of this genre—memoir, travelogue, essay, etc.—and the reality that truth and the verifiability of fact is so rapidly crumbling in the modern sociopolitical climate, creative nonfiction appears to be held to a standard that even modern journalism so rarely achieves thanks to the ardent desire for timeliness and first-to-the-presses mentality. Modern journalism is forced to contend with the fact that

> The new media climate makes [fact-checking] exceedingly difficult. News cycles that once changed by the day, or maybe by the hour, now change by the minute or second. Cable news programs run 24 hours, greedy for content. And more and more stories have been broken on the Internet, in the middle of the night, when newspaper reporters and editors are tucked dreamily in their beds. The imperative to go live and to look live is stronger and stronger, creating the appearance that news is "up to the minute" or "up to the second." (Clark)

This need for expedience creates a relative truth when the incorrect is reported as fact and consequently reiterated countless times throughout the news cycle. Even in the event of a retraction or a clarifying statement, the public's focus has shifted or waned, and these inaccuracies have been consumed and accepted as truth. The demand that creative nonfiction abide by the demands of factuality and truth by which journalism abides is perhaps, therefore, a fallacy. The concept of truth in journalism or nonfiction is largely a nebulous one, with genres historically borrowing from across the thresholds that divide them. And, though lofty standards are expected of journalism, "Historical examples of nonfiction contain lots of made-up stuff. It appears as if, 50 years ago, many columnists, sports writers and crime reporters—to name the

obvious categories—were licensed to invent" (Clark). Even Gerard accepts that "In recent years, nearly all nonfiction, even some newspaper journalism, has moved away from a pretense of strict objectivity and acknowledged that any conscientious author always brings her own unique narrative intelligence to the work—which includes biases and personal convictions" (96). It is important to note that Gerard believes that it is this failing in journalism that creates a greater pressure on authors of creative nonfiction—specifically authors of memoir, creative nonfiction novels, and essayists—to adhere to fact. He believes that "In a time when too many leaders and other public figures seem to bear no allegiance to facts—relying on their own, self-serving 'alternative facts'—the role of the fact-based writer is more crucial than ever" (Gerard 3). Though this sentiment seems odd, it reflects the basis of his approach to creative nonfiction: "A good way to approach writing creative nonfiction, paradoxically, is to forget about the creative—the literary—part and concentrate on the nonfiction part" (Gerard 11). Since Maclean's discussion on creative liberties in his own memoirs and creative nonfiction stories, the discussion surrounding the genre has drifted significantly. I started with his example to specifically showcase opposition to Gerard's desire to stanch the creative or literary aspects of the genre. I agree with him that the idea is paradoxical. It is, in fact, absurd. Maclean's writings, and the writings of so many other prominent creative nonfiction authors—Vonnegut, Dillard, and Talese, just to name a few of the more major authors in the genre—emphasize the need for literary application in creative nonfiction. In fact, even these authors, whom Gerard regards as pillars of creative nonfiction, take literary liberties in much the same way as Maclean to craft stories that are both beautiful and true. Rachel Toor, a creative writing professor and author of *Write Your Own Way*, points out that: "Annie Dillard starts her Pulitzer Prize-winning book Pilgrim at Tinker Creek with the sentence, 'I used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who would jump

through the open window by my bed in the middle of the night and land on my chest.' Nice sentence. The problem is, Annie Dillard never had a cat." She further remarks, "Fact-checking has become a blood sport" (Toor). That statement encapsulates the misguided notion that fact is the highest standard of the genre. Especially in the case of a cat that plays no role in the greater scheme of the work, outcry directed at Dillard's work reflects the absurd obsession with fact that those on the extreme fringes of the creative nonfiction spectrum abide. It distracts from the far more valuable contributions creative nonfiction has to offer to literature, society, and writing. It is "literariness" that makes these works matter to as massive a readership as creative nonfiction reaches, and therefore gives a readable and popular platform to the sociocultural issues and human themes upon which creative fiction focuses. Placing the burden of fact at the feet of creative nonfiction, in part due to the failings of journalism and new media, is an unfair demand and flies in the face of the literary elements and underlying human themes that dictate the appeal of the genre. That the events in nonfiction occurred is imperative, yes, but "it is not the fiction that is the problem, but the deception" (Clark). The preservation of fact should still be the goal of the creative nonfiction writer, but it is loyalty to the story and the greater themes and meditations that should be held up as the ideal. In creative nonfiction, these should not be mutually exclusive desires, but there should be a greater leeway granted in terms of stretching fact or "filling in blanks" if it is not dishonest but instead serves to better tell the story and to capture the importance of the very real stories being presented.

Additionally, one of the great challenges of achieving the highest standards of fact and truth is the human element of creative nonfiction. As a genre that encompasses memoir, travelogue, essay, etc., it is almost always operating in the realm of human interaction and thus focuses on sharing very human stories. Creative nonfiction authors therefore apply many of the

same strategies as journalism, thus why the two genres so frequently overlap and at times blur together. Perhaps the greatest of these tools is interview. As with journalism and investigation, however, interview becomes complicated because the very nature of memory, the basis of memoir, testimony, and interview, is tenuous and flimsy in its capacity for total accuracy. As Gutkind puts it, "Human recollection is to a large extent a mystery. Combing through the shifting layers of time, we discover half ideas, fragmented scenes, and incomplete sentence. Details from significant life events are lost, while a kindergarten teacher's name is inscribed permanently in the mind" (*Keep It Real* 153). This inaccuracy and inconsistency, while troubling in the quest for pure fact, is often the crux of great story-telling. Presented truly and without fabrication, most fishing stories would be quite bland, after all. And often, it is these white lies or differences in perception that we've compounded into the oral traditions of our lives that crystalizes and becomes "reality" in our own minds. The subjectivity of memory and perspective makes the idea of raw fact and genuine truth a challenging principle. Even when subjects are quoted entirely correctly, a journalist may be unwittingly publishing a brand of fiction: "To make things more complicated, scholars have demonstrated the essential fictive nature of all memory. The way we remember things is not necessarily the way they were. This makes memoir, by definition, a problematic form in which reality and imagination blur… The problems of memory also infect journalism when reporters—in describing the memories of sources and witnesses—wind up lending authority to a kind of fiction" (Clark). Obviously, this challenge is not a new one, but the more recent pressures of punctuality and the over-emphasis on being first to the scoop have allowed more of this "fiction" to leak into the news cycle as fact.

This, however, should be where the creative nonfiction author can excel. Creative nonfiction can embrace Maclean's "literary latitude" and accept imagination and subtle

fabrication to hone the story without any greater cost to fact and truth than modern journalism. Likewise, it is the investigation of these inaccuracies and imperfect elements that can enhance the creative nonfiction. Perhaps, it is better to frame this not as an argument between fact and truth but rather a battle to maintain and prioritize the humanity of the tale within its culture. Creative nonfiction's obligation is to the human themes upon which the genre sheds light. The human element of these facts illuminate the culture in which the works are set and paint a more thorough and humanistic portrait. For instance, does it matter that *A River Runs Through It*'s Paul Maclean die in Montana rather than in Chicago, as the real world's Paul Maclean does? The story is ultimately one about Montana, brotherhood, and the sense of place and home; and in Norman's mind, Paul's death was as much related to his inability to abandon his Montana roots as it was anything else. Was Paul's final act of fishing truly the epic struggle depicted in the story? It's unclear, but at some point he did catch a massive fish and it was indeed a titanic struggle. Is the age and time at which it happened as important as the scene and its impact on Norman? Maclean's loyalty to the story, to its themes, and to its value beyond the author are why *A River Runs Through It* has become such a resonant work.

Alex Belth, in his introduction to Maclean's letters to Nick Lyons, summarizes the impact of the novella when he says, "It is about fathers, brothers, and the past, about nature, and, yes, fly fishing. I figure this book has got to be the best Father's Day present you could get any man—whether they have kids or not. I don't even like fly fishing. It's just that much of a pleasure to read." The last part of that quote summarizes the import of creative nonfiction. It has the ability to take something that is otherwise uninteresting or alien to readership and create value and interest from it. Maclean's own example works so well because he permits himself enough latitude to tell the story in an enjoyable and readable way while maintaining a steadfast

loyalty to the truth of his tale and the details therein. Chapters 3 and 4 examine my own use of Maclean's concept of literary latitude and offer justifications and an examination of its necessity. When the entire context of the creative nonfiction work, the implications of its research and impact on its subject and community, and the value of its message is considered, it becomes less a question of truth and fact but rather of preserving the humanity of the facts and telling a tale truly reflective of its subject.

CHAPTER 2: “WEIGHT”

The cancer was not eating him; it was not devouring from within. To Lester Martin, the tumor growing on his pancreas was an impossibly heavy absence. It had a terrible knack for reminding him of its presence in all things he did—the weight of it, gravity pulling ever downward against his bowels. Sharp reminders of its existence would impose themselves in moments of twisting, awful pain; his hand grasped at his side, his body frozen taut. His jaw clenched so severely that the pain would linger long after the throb of his tumor abated. Through this, his wife, Patricia, abided a simple and unspoken rule that these moments were to be met with intentional silence; she’d find some duty with which to busy herself until the moment had passed. In this way, something between them had atrophied with his sickness, a void like the one deep within him growing between the husband and wife. Lester was stubbornly pessimistic from the outset of the disease, and she could not change him. Lester Martin and his disease were intransigent. It was Tuesday morning, and he was coming out of the grips of one such painful moment. His hands spread wide on the top of their oak table, veins bulging from thin, sallow skin. Patricia maintained a rigid stare out the window as if admiring some bird or eyeballing the horizon while her husband gritted his teeth and furrowed his brow, grunting against the pain. They’d made this uneasy peace with the inevitability of his situation. Lester would die.

“What will you do today?” she asked at breakfast, his breathing leveling off and a slow sigh escaping his lips.

His face drooped, though she could not tell if it was from the sickness or from simple exhaustion. Lester’s cancer had stripped him of his ability to sleep—one more thing lost to the absence. The bulge of it pressed on his innards regardless his position. He’d given up and took to

the recliner in the hopes that his thrashing would not deprive Patricia of her rest as well. She found his absence far more disruptive than his restless nights and wished he'd return.

The white of his stubble had grown longer than he typically let it, and it accentuated the deep, well-worn lines of Lester's face. Hints of the noble foundation of his face still remained, subtle reminders of the strong and handsome man of his youth; the ridge of his cheeks were smooth and hard like burnished stone.

"I think I'd like to spend some time in the shop," Lester said suddenly. He peered toward the door to the two car garage which functioned as his woodshop.

"Oh, it's been some time. Are you sure you feel…"

"Yes," he snapped, though his voice rapidly softened with regret. "Today, it doesn't feel so bad. I was thinking it might be good for me to get outta this chair and do something."

"Well," Patricia replied, carefully studying her husband before giving him a gentle smile and a pat on his hand, "I'll just be in here. I'll pop my head in later in case you need anything."

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. Patricia had first noticed his eyes when they met sixty-three years ago. They were brown and simple, but sparkled with a cleverness that most people assumed Lester lacked. When she spoke, his eyes followed her lips as if he could see the words trickling out of her and feared he might miss one. Though he was often taciturn, Patricia had always appreciated that he was not a poor listener.

The shop smelled like sawdust and rough lumber. It was a large, open building that had once housed farming equipment and doubled as a repair bay. The machines were now in the hands of his sons, so he'd taken up woodworking and tinkering in his spare time and filled it with workbenches, power tools, lumber, and dust. Half-completed projects littered the workbenches. A partially built walnut clock, in particular, stood out. Lester was good at starting

things, but struggled to finish them. His mind would take a new fancy and he would dive into another project with the promise that he'd eventually return—a promise he most often kept, though the spaces of time in between yawned longer and longer as he aged. Even before his diagnosis, he'd grown too frail to trust himself with the larger power tools like his table saw and jointer, so he instead focused on carving forks, spoons, and other knickknacks.

Lester shuffled around the shop, rearranging offcuts, strips of wood, and bits of scrap with no particular mission in mind but rather a compulsion to bring order from chaos. The tumor lingered, bearing hard toward the earth in random, throbbing intervals as he puttered about the shop, and more than once did Lester have to lean himself against a work bench and catch his breath with short gasps. The saw dust, having lain dormant for so long, now coalesced in the air and he tasted it with each harsh inhalation. He moved wood from one stack to another and placed a spoon in need of sanding beside salad tongs he'd promised his granddaughter but never quite gotten around to finishing. He collected a small mound of offcuts that were to become a cutting board or coasters and neatly placed them, one at a time, in a simple arrangement on his workbench. He collected several frames, all made for photos he couldn't immediately recall, and leaned them neatly in one corner. Each twinge of pain was a whispered reminder that these too would be casualties of the weight inside of him.

At last, he stood before the walnut clock and pondered its suitable home. The clock mechanism, a simple battery-powered job he purchased through a catalogue, lay strewn beside it. When he last worked on it, the mechanism was broken down to its component parts so that he could collect the dimensions necessary to carve a recess into the wooden clock that would accept the mechanism. Lester scooped the pieces carefully and returned them to their packaging with the knowledge that he would never come back to remove them. He winced as some muscle deep

in his core irritated and awoke the anchor in his guts. He dropped the package on the table top, the long second hand clattering off the concrete floor of the shop. Lester began to crouch when he suddenly hissed, spittle flecks darkening the raw walnut where they landed. He tried to draw in slow breaths and steady himself, but a furious pressure bore downward on his pancreas. Lester shambled toward the door adjoining his shop and the kitchen, the clock watching each exasperated step. His hand glanced off the knob as he impotently leaned against the door. The collision made a dull thud and he grunted hard as his knees locked to keep him aloft. Horrible pain lanced outward from his tumor and he fell into violent coughing. The doorknob fought his grasp as Patricia tried to open it on the other side.

"Lester?" she cried out. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay. I'm okay," he gasped through the door, his forehead resting against it as he tried to collect himself. "I'm okay, Patty. Just give me a moment. I tripped is all. I'm fine."

"I heard some racket. Can you open the door please? I can help," she seemed to cut the syllable short as if knowing she'd breached some invisible line.

"I'm fine!" he barked, his voice sounding distant through the thick, fireproof door. "Just gimme a sec."

When he did open the door, he saw that Patricia had only retreated a few steps and was waiting anxiously. He looked small and dirty, the sawdust clinging to the loose flannel of his shirt. Content that he was in fact okay, Patricia shuffled away to retrieve his medication. He glanced over his shoulder and considered the shop with a cruel finality. One more thing had disappeared into the pitiless absence within him. His hands trembled impotently and he allowed his chin to rest on his chest as he wrinkled his heavy eyelids together. Warm but sparse tears ran into the crags of his face. He finished and collected himself before Patricia returned. Though she

had no cancer with which to contend, age made a walk to the powder room a time-consuming task. He forced a smile as she entered, her readers resting near the tip of her nose as she squinted at the labels of the various bottles.

"I just tripped, Patty. It wasn't anything, really. I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing," he said, resting a hand on her forearm.

"You should take something awhile, dear, before it comes back." She seemed lost in the labels as she spoke.

He nodded and she parsed a small dose of three different painkillers, which he swallowed down one at a time. Patricia kissed his forehead gently and rubbed the tops of his hands with her palms as she sat beside him. She was a woman in whom there was an endless font of affection not only for Lester but for all of her children and grandchildren. She was a great warmth, and in these tender moments he felt fleetingly whole. He relished this contact as if he were a newborn, and surrendered himself entirely to sensation, shutting his eyes and resting his forehead against her shoulder. She cupped his head with her left hand and with her right rubbed his shoulders.

"I love you," he whispered into her sweater.

"I love you too, dear," she replied.

He smiled and embraced her touch with an infantile eagerness, but tears crept into the lattice of wrinkles at the corners of eyes. Suddenly, a sharp tension knifed through his depths, the softball-sized lump of cells pressing some nerve or muscle fiber and causing a tremor of volatile pain. He hissed harshly and pulled her with enough force that she gave a quickened whimper of pain. Cursing himself, he tried to loosen his grip, but the pain remained like a claw grasped on his side, twisting his limp flesh with a fierce malice.

“It’s okay,” she whispered, the ache apparent in her voice. “It’s okay. Breathe, Lester. Deep breaths. Breathe. It’s okay, dear. It’s okay.”

Their children and grandchildren, fearing the burden of care was too great for Patricia alone, cooked and delivered meals, purchased groceries, and handled a lot of the day-to-day. Their charity pained Lester. He was self-sufficient. At first, the family had approached this with a sort of exuberance—the opportunity to get more in tune with and repay the parents that had raised them so well. But, he saw that the inertia was now waning along with his health. Charity became obligation; it was too difficult watching Lester’s visible decomposition. His wary exhaustion seemed to infect his visiting family, and he cursed himself and the waxing absence within for it.

It was a Saturday in November, a week or so prior to Thanksgiving. Slush had fallen through the night, but it was now a heavy rain as Lester sat restlessly in the recliner. Patricia had awakened early at his request and was shifting about the house collecting things, pausing intermittently to question if he truly felt up to hunting. He’d hunted all through his life, but hunting black bear was special to his family. He, his sons, and his grandsons, numerous as they were, would comb the mountains during annual bear drives, pushing the lumbering things into one another’s fields of fire. Though the annual bear drive had ended with his diagnosis, he decided that he would return to those mountains for one final hunt.

“I feel good, Patricia. Please don’t worry. I won’t stay long out there,” he reassured, as he painstakingly shook himself into each layer of hunting attire. The clothing hung awkwardly on his smaller frame. Lester had never been a big man, but the cancer had taken his hunger and his muscles had begun to shrivel in atrophic resignation. Now, his hunting attire, which had fit well a year ago, seemed cartoonishly large and hung off of his meager form.

“Just be careful, Lester. Don’t exert yourself too much. Can I please call some of the boys? You don’t think they’ll be upset to find out you went without them?”

“No, no. Don’t bother them. I’ll be fine. I need to get out there. I need to get in place before the sun if I’m going to have a chance.” He grabbed the bagged lunch from her and gently lowered into the backpack beside spare shells, extra handwarmers, bottles of water, and a flashlight.

“Please, Lester. What if you fall and break a bone or hit your head. This isn’t safe. Danny or Todd can be here in less than a half hour.”

“The sun will be up by then and the day will be shot. The best time to shoot is just as its rising, Patty. I’ll be fine, I promise.” He leaned in and kissed her cheek. She was helplessly frozen. Something had been decided in that moment, she was sure, but the truth of it escaped her. Patricia cautiously plodded away and began helping him collect all that he’d need to hunt: clothes, food, water, ammunition, rifle, and food. Twice more she tried to raise objections, but Lester moved with a singularity of purpose that she had not seen since the diagnosis. Covered in layers of weather gear with rifle and backpack strapped over his shoulders, Lester felt a sense of youthful formidability and allowed himself a smile. Patricia felt a flicker of pride as he beamed. She remembered countless mornings like this one, Lester and the boys hunched groggily over warm breakfasts. A subtle flicker of Lester’s lips broke the illusion, the brief spike of pain rupturing out through his concentrated effort and revealing itself to her. Before she could raise a final objection, he said a final “I love you” and exited.

He ambled with his awkward gait and waited until he heard the screen door’s familiar whine and clap before letting out the sharp sigh he’d kept buried for several minutes. Patricia was still watching, so he focused on each step and walked with as natural a pace as he could

muster. Tears rolled down his cheeks and he clenched his teeth violently together. Once through the first two rows of trees, he pressed his back against the trunk of a thick oak and yelped, his right hand plunging through the folds of his jacket to press against his side. Air came in great, heaping inhalations as his eyes bulged and his temples throbbed. In the dark of early morning, the trees were little more than black spears against the hazy, gray twilight. Trees creaked against the bitter cold wind, and the occasional glob of slush fell from a branch with a splat. Always, as if in rhythm with his heart, there was the white noise of rain muffled by soaked leaves. The shadows of the forest leered over him, making him feel tiny, alone, and insignificant. The mountain seemed wholly devoid of anything alive.

"Come on," he hissed through clenched teeth as he pushed himself off of the oak to generate a bit of momentum. He worked his way uneasily for about a hundred yards before the ground graded steeply uphill and he was forced to follow the old four-wheeler paths he and his sons had carved over years of use. The paths were a bit overgrown, but far easier to climb than trying to push through thick walls of blackberry and mountain laurel. He progressed up the mountain with all the grace of a freight train, each shuffle a cacophony of snapped deadwood and wet leaves. His breathing echoed and muted the subtle murmur of the now receding rain. The thick cloud-cover would buy him more time as the sun would not peer over the eastern lip of the opposite end of the valley, a view he and Patricia had gasped at on their first morning in their home. He choked more of the cold air down and willed his feet to keep moving. After another few hundred yards, the underbrush faded away, replaced with massive, moss-covered stones standing like ancient sentinels. Even as a boy, these stones seemed sad to him, pitted and forlorn this high up on the mountain where nothing but tough, thin trees grew. It was against one of these stones, one the size of a rail car, that Lester finally pressed himself before sliding into an

exhausted pile at its base. He'd intended to go much farther, but his body surrendered. Lester's left leg was numb from the hip to the knee, and his chest and throat burned from the chill air. For a moment, he imagined the rhythmic gasp of hospital ventilators and their antiseptic stench. His feet burned with blisters from the friction of over-sized boots. His arms and hands shook violently from the exertion. He let his backpack fall from his shoulders and haphazardly drew it to his chest, and he doggedly rooted through it to find a water bottle. After a few deep glugs, he rested the back of his head against the stone, the cold of it leaking through his wool cap and rapidly chilling the accumulated sweat. The air smelled of wet earth, decomposing leaves, and high-altitude ozone. The clouds thinned, and the horizon had collected some color of the sunrise. The fog evaporated from the depression between the two mountains, seeming to melt and recede into the very earth. From this spot against the stone, the great expanse of the valley unfolded before him. Caterpillars of headlights, tiny pin-pricks at this distance, crawled along the turnpike that cut along the valley before turning off into tunnels his kin had blasted through the mountains one hundred and twenty years prior.

The hills were an intricate quilt of yellows, ochres, and the dull greens of winter wheat with clusters of specks indicated cattle or sheep. Lester's body settled, and the water restored control over his faculties, but Lester found himself pinned to this spot. He felt momentarily unburdened, as if the mountain air had ripped free the thing rotting within him. A magnetic certainty of purpose had pinned him in place, and he desired that this moment, pure as it was—ripe with nostalgia, freedom, and beauty—crystallize in his very soul. He shut his eyelids hard against sudden tears, and positioned the butt of his rifle between his boots and muzzle in the soft flesh behind his chin. He whispered prayers and a desperate plea for forgiveness, not from God but from Patricia, whose strength he could not equal. Head against cold rock and eyes toward the

sky he waited, his breathing calm but anticipatory. Then, it peeked awake, the forgotten, gnawing nothing. At that twinge, that miserable reminder, Lester pulled the trigger. The furious eruption obliterated thought, memories, pain, love, and all the vapors of his being violently torn away in the backdraft, sucked along in the bullet's vortex and dispersed into the crisp October morning, the rifle's clap echoing long after the vapors were no more.

CHAPTER 3: REFLECTING ON THE WRITING PROCESS

My own nonfiction work, heavily inspired by Maclean's writing, Chapter 2's "Weight," proved more difficult to compose than I anticipated once I considered it through the lens of creative nonfiction. I immediately had to grapple with a number of issues regarding the line between creative and nonfiction as laid out in Chapter 1. My first iteration focused entirely on the factual and sought to satisfy Philip Gerard's journalistic expectations of the genre. This first draft resulted in an exceptionally boring and brief work for one simple reason: the facts are limited. And adhering exclusively to the limited facts stripped the work of its humanity. Lester's death and the manner of it was writ in stone, but the relevance of such a dramatic act in a society so unwilling to broach the topic of suicide was lost. So too was the "why." What, in a culture that is insular, stubborn, but proud, could push a man to such an act? The facts do not adequately answer these very human questions, and thus a greater exploration and experimentation with the creative nonfiction was necessary. I took inspiration from Maclean's own approach to his brother's untimely death and sought to compose a work which reflects the Valley and its people much in the same way that he prioritized composing a work that emphasized Montana over his own relations. As I'll outline in this chapter, a number of factors made determining fact very difficult in this particular case: my culture, Lester's culture, and circumstances. As I plodded through more drafts, I sought an approach more in line with Gutkind, but I think the end result is likely toward the D'Agata end of the spectrum. After weeks of vacillating between scrapping the project altogether or forging ahead, I settled on trying "to write the story you would like to read" (*Keep It Real* 156).

This story interested me because of my relationship with Lester's community. Willow Hill is a rural community located immediately off of Turnpike Exit 189. I have come to know the

community through marriage; my wife was born and raised there, having attended Fannett-Metal High School (where she was, until two years ago, the school's all-time leading scorer in women's basketball). Willow Hill, one community of many that is collectively lumped under the name of Path Valley, typifies rural Pennsylvania. Its economic base is agriculture, everyone seems to know everyone else, and its people are often tight-lipped with outsiders while gracious and warm with their own. Conversely, I grew up in Peters Township, a wealthy suburb southwest of Pittsburgh that sold its agricultural soul to those who work high-end jobs in the city but prefer a comfortable lifestyle away from it. Though my parents enforced a comparably Spartan existence to my classmates, Peters Township is the place where hired help handle the labor and your reputation is tied to the car you drive, the house you live in, and the restaurants you frequent. Needless to say, my adoption into Path Valley culture has been both interesting and frustrating; a high school English teacher from the suburbs doesn't quite fit the Path Valley mold for masculinity. But, I've learned to hunt and worked on a Christmas tree farm long enough to partially amputate my left thumb, which earned plenty of credit. I've found a niche predominately with the older members of the community, and the husbands of my wife's friends. I'll never be true blue Path Valley, but I'm welcome there; and that's something. One of the great sources of consternation in the valley, as explained to me by my wife, so far as it relates to outsiders, is the idea that outsiders look at the valley with judgment and a desire to tell them how they "ought to do things." It is for this reason that, despite my relationship to the valley, it would be imprudent for me to ask around about Lester and to attempt to interview those close to him. The risk of inflicting stigma on myself and my wife made investigation impossible.

As I attempted to ingratiate myself to the Path Valley community, I spent a great deal of time playing observer. Its people, especially the older generation, predominately value work

ethic, religion, and community, while the younger generations struggle with the same conflicts most Millennials and Generation Z face—declining employment opportunities, rising cost of education, and a feeling of detachment from establishments. These issues are amplified by both geographic and cultural factors; the valley's rural location limits the availability of quality employment options and there are few universities in the immediate area. Path Valley's youth, like many other insular, rural communities in the US, has been wracked with a spate of overdose deaths. My brother-in-law's graduating class, numbering less than forty, has already seen four of its members die to overdose. Death is rife in the valley, but it is rarely talked about aside from a brief mention. These issues bear meaningful discussion and exploration, but the taciturn nature of those from the valley, especially when being looked at from the outside, all but forbids it. Creative nonfiction offers an avenue to discuss these issues, and my role as an outsider gives me convenient insight into their world.

Something about the death of Lester Martin, a story that I'd heard and only pieced together through bits and pieces of hearsay and gossip, had sunk its tendrils in me and refused to let go. I thought the story warranted writing because his suicide seemed an alien thing in the valley. The simple fact is that struggle and disappointment simply comes with the territory there.

My mother-in-law, Wanda, co-owns and operates a chicken farm. Her husband, Mike, similarly owns and operates the biggest fish farm on the eastern seaboard. Billy Elliott, a family friend and Christmas tree farmer has shown me the complexities of family-owned agri-business. I've worked for him, hunted on his farm, and spoke to him at length about farming. Through observation and discussion, I've come to realize that the life of a farmer is an intensely difficult one with no end to hardship, demands, and defeats. But, they endure and remain the most pleasant, humble folk I have to pleasure of knowing. I came to view them as the mold from

which all farm folk, or at least all of them from the valley, were stamped. This stereotype is not an uncommon one. Popular culture often reinforces this image of the farmer as well. This stereotype is damaging, however, in that it blinds the public to the very real psychological and mental struggles that rural Americans are combating, a point investigated at greater length later in this thesis and available through the humanistic, creative exploration within the spectrum of creative nonfiction.. Lester Martin's surrender, not meshing with my preconceived notions, was shocking and challenged the foundation of my perception of Path Valley. The research conducted with this thesis, however, has disabused me of the notion that suicide is rare in that culture. In fact, as Chapter 4 will explain, my perception was a dangerously inaccurate, albeit commonly held, view of mental health in rural America. It is for that reason that I think this story is a valuable one and showcases the need for creative nonfiction to allow for the literary latitude discussed in the first chapter when trying to reach vitally important topics hidden behind cultural barriers.

"Weight" was the result of a chance encounter I had while hunting many years ago. I was hunting on the periphery of a Christmas tree farm tucked high up in the mountains of Path Valley. It was a frigid, overcast morning, and I was hunting for bear in a place where bear are not known to roam in the late fall. They'd come that low in the spring to graze on wild blueberries, raspberries, and the occasional bird feeder. In the waning days of fall, however, they were more likely tucked high up atop the mountain in the rocks, fat and ready to bed down for winter. Earlier in the year, trail cameras picked up a heavy sow and several cubs in the area. I was excited at this but too naïve to know that the likelihood that she'd stuck around this late in the year was close to nil. Bored, freezing, and alone, I decided to trek about the woods and explore my surroundings. I was hunting above Billy Elliott's Christmas tree farm high up on the

mountains. This was my first year hunting bear, and I was still too sleepy to process Billy's explanation of where his property ended and his neighbor's, Lester Martin's, began. When I stumbled across another orange vest along an old fire trail, I froze fearing I'd overstepped Billy's property and landed on someone else's, an understandable offense in the offseason, but a grievous one during bear season. The figure did likewise, and we stared across the few hundred yards at one another. Without word, we both turned and departed.

I'd later discover that I'd crossed paths with Lester Martin, Billy's neighbor, who was actually the party guilty of trespassing—a fact I wouldn't learn until that afternoon when recounting the awkward encounter to Billy.

Lester Martin had a reputation for being a bit of a character in the valley. Though well known as a fixture at his church, Lester had a habit of butting heads with neighbors over seemingly innocuous matters. These conflicts were largely dismissed as him being a bit of a curmudgeon and didn't appear to disrupt the generally positive view folks held of him. He'd somewhat disappeared from the "public eye" in his later years. At the time, this moment was utterly inconsequential, and I continued about my life without much interest or care for the man with whom I'd crossed paths. His name came up with some frequency in "valley stories"—the small town gossip I'd overhear around the dinner table at Wanda's or when out with my wife's friends—but he was never the principal character. Like so many others in the valley, he was a farmer who worked in other capacities to make ends meet (mostly, I'd eventually discovered, as a federal health inspector). He was particular about his property but generally well-regarded.

Why I chose him as the topic for this story, however, was how he'd died. In 2016, Lester Martin disappeared during bear season, and after a day-long search conducted by his sons and state troopers, was discovered dead. He'd shot himself. When his body was discovered, it had

been dragged a considerable distance and was badly mangled by bears. I left these bits from the tale because they distract from the story's goals. It is one about facing the insurmountable and watching something alien to Lester steal all that defined him. Revealing this gruesome epilogue seemed cruel to my subject regardless the factual nature, and I don't think they do anything to improve upon or further elucidate the truth of his suicide.

The following year, his family specifically set up a bear drive in order to attempt to kill the animals that had taken part in his death. Valley superstition held that bears that have tasted human flesh might become more violent and dangerous to humans, an idea that I suspected they knew was as ludicrous as I found it—at least, I hope so. My suspicion is that the bears would bear the brunt of the blame for Lester's death because it was easier and cleaner than accepting the suicide and all that came with it. As an outsider, I struggled with this mentality and couldn't understand why there wasn't more discussion of the circumstances and causes of his death rather than scapegoating animals. His family's bear drive—a type of hunting in which hunters make a long line across a mountain and move in unison, almost combing the area, in order to spook up game for the others to shoot—was held, coincidentally, on the same day that I had chosen to hunt. The drive crossed my path up in the state game land atop the mountain and I shared small talk with one of his grandsons before calling it a day. The experience made me curious, however, how many similar stories from the valley are suppressed and how frequently the anguish of suicide is displaced rather than being studied and dealt with in a way that helps heal. Reading his obituary and talking with those who knew him, Lester had a far-reaching impact on his community, and thusly, so too would his suicide.

My hope is that "Weight" and works like it could carry the dialogue about a topic that is inherently taboo and difficult to discuss to communities that otherwise wouldn't dare broach it.

The story of Lester's suicide stuck with me, not because I knew him, but because suicide seemed an alien response to hardship in the valley. Regardless, suicide, already a taboo topic in the broader society, is almost unheard of in the valley, so Lester's tale became something I kept coming back to. I knew he'd been battling cancer for some time, and I presumed his final act was a surrender to the disease. Much in the way that animals intuitively know when they are dying and disappear one day, I imagine Lester had come to the conclusion that there was not victory possible and instead retreated from life and society to end things on his terms. It was this act of surrender and watching the things that he'd most worked for and valued taken from him by the disease that would way heaviest on someone from the valley. When my stepfather-in-law complains about the fish industry fading and the sixteen hour days wearing on his health and psyche, the thing that keeps him going is his fear of losing what has been in his family for three generations—in fact, they celebrated 75 years just last summer. Similarly, when my mother-in-law was passed up for bonuses she'd earned or lost large percentages of her flock to variables outside her control, her greater fear was losing the farm and LLC that she'd started with her father. I'm not sure what to call it—self-sufficiency, possession, or ownership of one's faculties—but it is this fear of losing that which one has, not in a materialistic sense but in something more instinctual, that drives the people close to me to continue to beat on against these intransigent currents. It was witnessing these struggles that made me imagine that what pushed Lester was not the addition of yet another burden on an already onerous life, but rather the reduction of things.

That word, "imagine," became the biggest hurdle in actually composing my creative nonfiction story. Wading through four separate drafts as I tried to find the right blend of fact and creativity was challenging. The early drafts were as accurate as possible, but the readability

suffered greatly. The issue of truth and fact imposed itself on the writing process early and often. I tried writing only what I could verifiably confirm, and I generated about a half page blurb that would be more at home as a side blurb in a shoddy, online newspaper than in a creative thesis. The truth is, I know very little about Lester Martin, how he lived his life, who he was as a person, who his relations were, etc. And, I had very few means by which to learn more about the man. There is a clear divide between who does (the young) and does not (the old) use social media in the valley. Very few of Lester's generation even have internet access in their homes—I still suspect my mother-in-law only got a wireless router in the hopes that I'd be more willing to visit her and spend more time there—so I couldn't resort to social media to discover any details of his existence.

As I said earlier, Lester was always the peripheral character in stories around the valley, and never the headliner. I considered conducting interviews, but my lack of familiarity with his family and the taboo nature of suicide (his obituary, in fact, claims he died peacefully at home) made this an impossibility. Talking to my wife, her family, and Billy were fruitless as well. Discussing personal matters, especially those with the gravity of Lester's, would be inappropriate in the valley. Simply put, it isn't done, and it sure isn't done with someone like me, an outsider, regardless the good graces I'd earned. When I broached the topic with my wife, she shut it down quickly and assured me that people would not only not talk to me but that it would reflect poorly on our family as a whole. So, I looked instead to his obituary. At almost a page-and-a-half of text, it was surprisingly thorough, talking about the many jobs he held in his lifetime, his passion for woodworking, his role in his church, and his relations. It even mentioned the specific items he enjoyed crafting. This provided the foundation upon which I built the story. Similarly, I used the colloquialism "awhile" to further root this story to south-central Pennsylvania. Anyone

reading this story who has ever lived in Fulton county will readily recognize this as distinct to their home. The distribution of dialogue, too, is something that bore consideration in the methodology for writing this work. The men of Path Valley are far less communicative than the women, so Patricia talks significantly more, and thus becomes a more central figure in the work, than her husband. It is in these details that the identity of Path Valley and its people is preserved and respected. Though this was not written for the community, it is still a humanistic work that strives for an accurate portrayal of its subjects and the culture wherein they live.

The goal of this tale is my own attempt to understand the mind of someone who could not only take their own life, but who had suffered so great a physical pain that it seemed the best option to humanize the facts of a person's life while sharing parts of a culture so few understand, experience, and appreciate. Likewise, it's to try to understand the reticence that people from my wife's home have toward discussing mental, physical, and psychological health. Perhaps in an area in which suffering of all sorts is commonplace, people simply don't bother talking about it. What happens in this story is fundamentally true. The dates match up. The names are accurate. The prognosis, manner of death, and even the weather—I was out on the same mountain the day he died—are all true. The discussions, the personality quirks, and the individual moments, however, are my best stab at what the last days of their relationship might have looked like. But, Gutkind points out that "truth is precarious, unstable, and elusive… the search for truth, the battle for whose truth matters… is the stuff of stories—tense, suspenseful stories—the stuff of both creative nonfiction and narrative history" (*Keep It Real* 78).

I chose to write a story that is as respectful and true as I can make it and one that helps me process and understand a man who I'd barely known who comes from a place with which I'm intimately connected but ultimately very likely ignorant. In reflecting on my writing process,

and my struggles to properly capture truth and story, I feel that this reflection accomplishes a number of things. Firstly, I think that it shows how the process of writing this story helped me to more clearly see the realities of a culture in which I am at worst a tourist, at best a partial member. It also showed me how my own cultural influences altered my perspective and helped to disabuse me of false perceptions that I had prior to beginning the process. Secondly, I hope that it justifies the decisions made for the sake of crafting a readable narrative that still fits within the creative nonfiction genre. I'll conclude my thesis with how my process serves as an example of and contributes to the ongoing debate, as discussed in the first chapter, over truth and story in creative nonfiction.

CHAPTER 4: CREATIVE NONFICTION MOVING FORWARD

As Chapter 1 highlighted, the desire to define creative nonfiction in concrete terms has been a maddening exercise fraught with disagreement. Like many other genres, it has become a spectrum represented by figureheads at each extreme and in the middle. What is important for creative nonfiction moving forward, however, is not seeking a definition. As Gutkind points out, "This is a subject that has been beaten to death over the past couple of decades—yet never seems to die" (*The Best Creative Nonfiction xiii*). Instead, creative nonfiction needs to begin to look at its aims and how best to achieve them. I was, at the outset, obsessed with a fear that the story I'd written wasn't actually "nonfiction" enough and pondered this definition. The deeper I got into the research, however, the more I realized the futility of that definition. My first chapter discusses, at length, the challenges of establishing truth and factuality especially in a modern era. So, I chose instead to focus on the aim of the work and how creative nonfiction could function as the most effective vehicle for executing this focus. The aim of "Weight" is to shed light on Lester's suicide by means of looking at it as a human act and breaking down the event through the lens of my experiences with the people of Path Valley. Witnessing the importance members of the valley place on self-efficacy and independence guided the experimental look into Lester's waning days as he combated pancreatic cancer.

In today's sociopolitical climate, creative nonfiction has to weigh its potential avenues: is it merely a means by which true stories are told cinematically, or can it become an avenue for social change by exposing the reality of our society? Is it, like journalism, a means of holding authorities accountable to their constituencies and thereby the literary vehicle of the general public? And if it seeks this noble end, must it adhere to objective truth and fact, or is the greater, "cosmic" truth of its content the ideal focus? Cultural considerations are imperative as creative

nonfiction ponders these questions. The world is rapidly shrinking; creative nonfiction can illuminate aspects of culture and launch important discussions on issues that were often hidden behind the walls of culture. Creative nonfiction, itself a liminal genre that blends many aspects and claims a wide breadth of writing types, should embrace the flexibility that this affords it. Gutkind summarizes the evolution of creative nonfiction well when he explains that,

> Like any art form, creative nonfiction continues to develop and deepen. Using a broad brushstroke to describe the genre's current trends, we can note a strong journalistic component in many nonfiction writers. These writers bring with them a long tradition of strict journalistic ethics, a commitment to reportage and a series of publishing venues (newspapers, magazines, and electronic media) that hold the same values. In the universities, a second thread is developing. Poets and fiction writers are producing lyrical essays and memoirs, emphasizing distinctly unjournalistic modes of storytelling. While they bring great narrative craft to their writings, they do not necessarily stress the journalistic demands for fact-based narrative. (*Keep it Real* 51-52)

It was with this in mind that I wrote my own work, trying to push toward the creative and leave behind the journalistic while still respecting my subject and seeking a subjective truth. My experience taught me that this is a challenging and volatile manner of writing. Gutkind's reminder that you can't legally slander the dead became a barrier that I frequently hid behind. Each choice I made had to be balanced between what made the most sense for the story and what was the most honest with the desperate hope that both spectrums would simply align for me. Emboldened by authors like D'Agata and Gutkind, to a lesser degree, I shed some of that fear and accepted that my story would be imperfect from a journalistic standpoint but would still, at the end of the day, be inherently true. It did, however, give me a true appreciation of the

diligence required of journalistic approaches to creative nonfiction. As I struggled with this, I constantly came back to O'Connell's interview with Norman Maclean and was emboldened by the author's approach to composing his works. Maclean's emphasis on getting the details exact but seeking the underlying patterns and order of things that make the most sense narratively formed the crux of my own experimental approach. Admittedly, my subject was not share the personal proximity that Paul did to Norman, but I leaned heavily on my experiences of having lived in the valley, abided Maclean's literary latitudes, and sought to compose a work accurate to the valley and revealing of its peoples and its views. It is for this reason that I think creative nonfiction should present itself as a spectrum rather than merely choosing, as both sides of the genre are of critical importance to the whole.

My own effort's aim was initially to grapple with a subject personal to me, but it grew with the research. As I proofread and edited the story, I sought to apply magnifying glass to the challenging topic of suicide in the hopes inspire discussion of issues that are becoming increasingly prevalent, yet remain rarely discussed. Specifically, I zeroed in on the concept of loss and presented the cancer as an ever-hungry void that devoured his ability to do the things he loved, take part in the communities he cherished, and cheated him of his many passions. As I mention prior, research opened my eyes to the shocking realities that suicide is extremely prevalent in rural communities. A Centers for Disease Control study published in 2016, "Suicide Rates by Occupational Group – 17 States, 2012," "found that the occupational group farming, fishing, and forestry had the highest suicide rate of any occupational group. In the 17 states studied, the 2012 suicide rate… was 84.5 suicides per 100,000 persons" (Yonder). According to *Newsweek*, "In the U.S. the rate of farmer suicides is just under two times that of the general population" (Farkas). These numbers, however, probably undersell the issue. In fact, "The exact

numbers for farmer suicides is difficult to determine because farmer deaths are often reported as hunting, equipment or farming accidents instead of suicides. Access to highly lethal means — firearms, poisons, machinery — result in a large proportion of fatal suicide attempts" (Farkas). This same "cover-up" played out in Lester's own suicide, with his obituaries claiming that he died peacefully at his home. Were it not for my unusual access to the gossip avenues of Path Valley, I would have remained ignorant to the reality of Lester's suicide. Being privy to the truth and seeing how quickly it was repressed, I felt compelled to write this story and to challenge the culture's stubborn approach to a fast-growing problem. Creative nonfiction, if journalistic, is investigative in nature, and the serendipitous nature in which I stumbled across this story seemed too valuable to waste and too important not to tell.

Until writing this story, I did not have an adequate appreciation for the scope to which suicide affects rural communities. The process was enlightening. As I mentioned in the last chapter, I was completely blind to the realities of suicide in rural areas. My exposure to farmers, predominately through the lens of my mother-in-law, her husband, and a close family friend, I'd come to appreciate that farming was intense, thankless work, but that the farmer work ethic trumped those challenges. In fact, I'd come to idolize my fictive view of the farmer as a resilient and humble force that could endure any disappointment, stress, or challenge. But it is this exact stereotype that is so damaging, that farmers buy into this mythical person that can absorb any amount of hardship and keep trudging along is one of the leading reasons that depression and suicide among farmers is on the rise: "Farmers tend to adhere to the stereotypical image of the self-reliant, tough farmer who doesn't complain. A farmer who complains of being depressed will usually be labelled crazy, whiner or wimp by fellow farmers. Instead of talking about his depression, a farmer might say, 'I'm just tired, worn out'" (Farkas). Without proper

infrastructure or respect for mental health, however, farmers are far less likely to both seek and receive aid from mental health professionals. Creative nonfiction can take these stories and become the voice of a demographic that is only starting to discuss the issues within its own community. In fact, it is the obligation of the genre to "not shirk from controversial topics or sometimes from passing judgment on them" (*Keep It Real* 85). Whether it be journalistic or narrative, creative nonfiction can be a persuasive spotlight on unheralded and challenging issues. If people will not talk openly, then we must use creative nonfiction as a means of exploration and revelation. It is only through story that Lester Martin could be better understood as his own words and those of the people to whom he was closest are not available to us. "Weight" represents more than just one event: his final suicide.

Gutkind's observation that "Creative nonfiction is thriving yet moving in two different directions simultaneously" is echoed by almost all of the pillars of the genre (*Keep It Real* 52). The genre's future is exciting to predict, and it will be interesting to see what factors play the greatest role in shaping it—be it publication, public interest, authors, etc. It will indeed be "interesting to see what develops next" (*Keep It Real* 52). Perhaps my greatest takeaway from this thesis is that creative nonfiction is deserving of its place in literature as one of the most exciting and emergent genres both commercially and in terms of authorship. The process of writing my own story forced me to consider a wide breadth of tactics primarily for researching my story, which opened my eyes to the very difficult decisions that must be made in the pursuit of the story. While my story landed toward the end of the spectrum that favors the creative over the nonfiction. As I ponder where this story could go next, my ideas are now shaped less by my desire to write the stories and more by how accurately I can research and write them. I originally envisioned "Weight" as part of a series of stories about Path Valley, and I've been considering

who I can interview, what primary resources I can mind, and how I can accumulate as much fact as possible in the composition of future stories. At the outset of this thesis, however, I had a very opposite reaction to creative nonfiction; I thought it limiting and restrictive. But, I now discover that the truth and fact is, in fact, liberating.

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