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ABIGAIL THOMAS

For You, For Me

When I first started thinking about this conference, I was curious about why one chooses fiction for one story and nonfiction for another. Most of what I write is drawn from personal experience so for me it's pretty simple: some stories need to be served straight up—that's nonfiction. Others need more architecture—that's fiction. It's a decision best left to the gut. It has been a long time since I wrote fiction. I can't decide whether I miss it or not. It felt like flying when it went well, but then so does everything; it was great to go chasing some bright scrap of cloth, or a pregnant Dalmatian, or a wild goose, but sooner or later, once you'd had your fun, you'd have to put a roof over its head, give it a place to live and a reason for existing. All that damned craft. All those damned arcs. Nonfiction is simpler. All I have to do is get it right.

Writing is the way I ground myself, what keeps me sane. Writing is the way I try and make sense of my life, try to find meaning in accident, reasons why what happens, happens—even though I know that why is a distraction, and meaning you have to cobble together yourself. Sometimes just holding a pen in my hand and writing milk butter eggs sugar calms me. Truth is what I'm ultimately after, truth or clarity. I think that's what we're all after, truth, although I'd never have said such a thing when I was young. And I write nonfiction because you can't get away with anything when it's just you and the page. No half-truths, no cosmetics. What would be the point? Why bother writing at all? Once in a while you come too close to an uncomfortable truth, and your writing goes flat, and your first thought might be to change the subject. But this is the most interesting of moments. There is so much to be found out. Hiding behind that paragraph is probably something worth knowing. You can stare at the page and realize, hot dog, this is a safe to be cracked, or you can crawl under the covers and take a nice nap.

I wrote an essay last spring about not feeling guilty anymore—about having had the guilt burnt out of me. It was a proud piece, and rather strident in its claims, but when I read it aloud I felt as if

I was being embalmed. I showed it to a friend. “What’s wrong with this?” I asked. “Why isn’t this working?”

“Because it’s not about not feeling guilty,” he said. “It’s about feeling guilty as hell.” Bingo. I went back, and learned a few things.

When I first started writing, my subject was (naturally) myself. I was the only thing I knew anything about, and it wasn’t much. I had been kicked out of college my freshman year for being pregnant. It was 1959, I married my boyfriend (who didn’t get kicked out) and we spent a miserable eight years together. We were too young to be married to anybody—he was nineteen and I was eighteen, but we were a particularly bad match. Looking back I think I married my mother and he married his. Anyway, we were horribly self-conscious about our new roles—husband, wife, father, mother, and we were either ridiculously polite or we were fighting. It was awful, but it was what I wanted to write about. I started with an evening I remembered pretty well. I was in the kitchen, stirring the beginnings of baked Indian pudding and my husband came in and said something and we had a big fight. The scene was easily reduced to *I did this and he said that and I threw this and he threw that*. It all mattered to me, but when I’d written four pages and read it over, I realized that this wasn’t writing, this was tattling. Worse, what had been stored in my memory as a vivid scene was whiny and boring when exposed to light. And I realized that if I wrote it the way I remembered it that it wouldn’t be true. It would only be truth for the girl I no longer was.

I could see now that those terrible years had contained a lot more hope and humor than I’d been aware of at the time, and if I wanted to keep at it, I’d have to throw myself a curve. So I made my young wife in love with her husband—which I didn’t remember being—and then, after a moment, I made him in love with someone else. That did the trick. The story picked itself up and headed off on its own two legs. I was just along for the ride, interested now that I didn’t know the ending. The characters were different, but they were living a version of what my life had been. I’d learned the truth is not contained in facts, or a perfect memory. I was going to get up and out of there. I just didn’t know it at the time.

I’ve written nothing but nonfiction for years now in spite of my poor memory. I can remember moments, and scenes, but not what

happened when or what came after. Most of my memories are free-standing. That such and such happened when I was thirty-two and the Dutch boyfriend arrived after I got my third job the second Christmas after my fourth child was born—no can do. I just can't remember. My sister would, I'd have to call her and ask, when did this happen? When did that? What year did I get divorced the second time? And then endure the scorn of one with total recall. But even if I could remember everything in its proper sequence, there's a lot of life that's interesting to live but not so interesting to write about, let alone read. And frankly, I'm bored by chronology. I don't even *believe* in chronology. Time is too weird. It contracts, then it shoots forward (or back), it dawdles, bunches up, stops still, and then suddenly we're twenty years down the road. Whole decades evaporate. For me connecting the dots is not as absorbing as the dots themselves. I'm more curious about why certain memories stand out. Why these and not others?

When I began writing *Safekeeping*, which is, for lack of a better word, a sort of memoir, I had no idea in hell what I was doing, all I knew was I couldn't stop. What were these little pieces I was feverishly scribbling? They had started coming a few weeks after an old friend died, a man I'd been married to once upon a time, someone I'd known half my life. The pages piled up. Memories, moments, scenes, nothing longer than a few pages, some were only a line or two. There was no narrative flow. There was no narrative at all. But these bits and pieces kept flying out of me, and I kept writing them down. I didn't know if what I was doing would amount to anything, but I never cross-examine the muse. It pisses her off. I left out long boring patches of life I could barely recall. I left out jobs, shrink appointments, lousy boyfriends. I left out a scene that contained two naked people and a scimitar. But I still found plenty to write. I changed voices from first to third when it felt right. I mixed up past and present. There was no chronological sense to it, no order. It was popcorn. The only thing I was sure of was that I would stop with my friend's death. Grief had been the catalyst; grief would be the end.

But I hadn't died. Everywhere around me life went on. My eldest daughter had a daughter, and she named her after me, an honor I didn't feel worthy of. My grandmotherly visit was painful, guilt-ridden, but it contained a miracle, and when I realized that this was where I wanted to end, I began to see a kind of emotional

chronology. The pieces tumbled back and forth, but something was evolving.

My editor turned it down. She wanted me to write a *novel* about that marriage, what went wrong, what went right, then friendship, illness and death. But life doesn't arrange itself conveniently into chapters, not mine anyway. And I didn't want to write a novel. My life didn't feel like a novel. It felt like a million moments. I didn't want to make anything fit together. I didn't want to make anything up. I didn't want it to make sense the way I understand a novel to make a kind of sense. I didn't want anywhere to hide. I didn't want to be able to duck. I wanted the shock of truth. I wanted moments that felt like body blows. I wanted moments of pure hilarity, connected to nothing that came before or after. I wanted it to feel like the way I've lived my life. And I wanted to tell the truth. My truth doesn't travel in a straight line, it zigzags, detours, doubles back. Most truths I have to learn over and over again.

My sister and I drank a lot of coffee and I would show her what I was writing and when she thought there was more going on than I'd gotten at, she insisted I look harder. She was pitiless. She knew me, she knew about my life. She knew the people I was writing about, and she knew how to corner me. She taught me that too much self-criticism makes for a narrow mind. She could put me in context, seeing me as part of the times we'd lived through, a perspective I didn't have. I used our conversations verbatim. They provide a useful running commentary on the process of writing. My sister is smart and very funny. She still makes me laugh my head off.

Here is an assignment I've given my students for years. Take any ten years of your life, reduce them to two pages, and every sentence has to be three words long. I'm strict about this—not four words, not two. Three words long. These can be sentence fragments, but you can't do stuff like "I went out/to the store." (The most memorable six words: "slept with Israelis/needn't have bothered.") It's a terrific assignment, if I do say so myself. Among other things, it forces you to choose. It forces you to leave things out. Learning what to leave out is not the same thing as putting in only what's important. Sometimes it's what you're not saying that gives a piece its shape. And it's surprising what people include. Marriage, divorce, love, sex—yes there's all of that, but often what takes up precious space

is sleeping on grass, or an ancient memory of blue Popsicle juice running down your sticky chin.

There is a wonderful interview with Bruce Springsteen that the BBC recorded and a friend sent me part of the transcript. He is talking about songwriting, but he is talking about all writing. I'm going to end with part of it:

“...First of all, everybody has a memory when you were eleven years old and you were walking down a particular street on a certain day, and the trees—there was a certain wind blowing through the trees—and the sound your feet made on the stones as you came up the drive and the way the light hit a particular house. Everyone has memories they carry with them for no particular reason . . . you had some moment of pure experience that revealed to you what it meant to be alive, what it means to be alive, what the stakes are, the wind on a given day, how important it is, or what you can do with your life. That's the writer's job . . . to present that experience to an audience who then experience their own inner vitality, their own center, their own questions about their own life and their moral life . . . and there's a connection made. That's what keeps you writing, that's what keeps you wanting to write that next song, because you can do that, and because if I do it for you, I do it for me.”