

CRAFT STUDY: UNRELIABLE FIRST-PERSON  
NARRATORS AND SHORT STORY COLLECTION

by

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## Introduction

This thesis represents the culmination of an intensive year-long creative writing program offered to undergraduates at the University of Oregon called the Kidd Tutorial. The Kidd Tutorial provides undergraduates with a unique experience that mimics Graduate level creative writing programs with its small class sizes, extensive discussion of essays on different components of craft and regular peer workshops. As part of the course, students write Line of Inquiry research papers targeted at providing a concise analysis of a specific writing craft technique. In addition to this research paper, the students also turn in a well-crafted, thoroughly revised and polished collection of short stories that they have focused on developing during the year-long course in response to workshops and assigned readings.

For this thesis, I extended the Line of Inquiry research paper to allow for greater depth in exploring the craft element I chose to analyze. My craft study analyzes the use of unreliable first-person narrators in modern and contemporary fiction. During this research I learned much about the first-person narrative point of view and how it can be used in fiction. The most important element of the unreliable narrator is that dramatic irony provides a way for the narrative to defy the narrator themselves. Unreliable first-person narration is important because it allows for greater psychological realism, an important characteristic of much literary fiction. Further, dramatic irony, created from the discrepant points of views of the narrator and reader, allow the narrative to blend a powerful cocktail of reader sympathy and reader scrutiny.

When choosing a craft element to research, my interest in unreliable first-person narrators stemmed from a general lack of familiarity with the first-person point

of view. I had never written a story in first-person before this year. What I learned about unreliable narrators and the first-person point of view in general became instrumental in guiding my stylistic development over the course of the year.

In “Ninth Texas Calvary,” I use first-person and attempt to apply some of what I have learned about unreliable first-person narrators from my research. While Gary wants to tell a story about his experience as a battle re-enactor, the story is really about Gary’s obsession with the past, seen through his battle re-enacting. I use the points of view of other characters to contrast with the narrator’s point of view and show how his perspective is skewed. The story shows that while Gary thinks he is sharing a story about his experience as a battle re-enactor the reader gets another plot from the piece entirely. The reader sees Gary as an obsessive person who lives in a fantasy about the past he has built for himself through battle re-enactment.

As the culmination of my last year of work as an undergraduate, I hope that this thesis helps take its readers into an experience that changes the way they see the world. As an author, and an artist, that is my greatest aspiration.

## Unreliable First-Person Narrators

Unreliable narration refers to narration that does not relate a story in an objective way, is inaccurate or, in some cases, intentionally misleading. When applied to first-person narrators, the term unreliable narrator is somewhat redundant. Unreliability could be seen as an inherent characteristic of any first-person narrator because of the limitations of perception and the inability for one person to have all the facts of a story. Further, whether the narrative point of view is in the first-person, third-person or third person omniscient the perspective of a narrator will always influence the story being told. However, in fiction the spectrum of narratorial reliability is dynamic enough that it is productive to categorize certain narrators as being reliable sources of information and others as unreliable. The use of unreliable narrators became very popular by the mid-20th century in part due to the psychological realism and extra veracity given to a story by an unreliable narrator (Nunning 49). Wayne Booth, the literary critic who first used the term “unreliable narrator,” presented a semi-tautological definition for the term by defining it through its relationship to a reliable narrator. This definition presented by Booth in his influential collection of essays about the craft of fiction has since been debated and analyzed by researchers to refine the concept extensively. Booth describes a narrator as being “reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not” (Booth 158). In order to limit the scope of my paper I will focus on first person narrators. Unreliable first-person narrators are narrators that, for whatever reasons, are not able to provide the reader with a narrative perspective that meets the minimum

standards expected of an individual storyteller. Unreliable first-person narrators will often be the first to insist to the reader that their account of the story is impeccable. The unreliable first-person narrator plays a losing game against the authorial force shaping a story and is perpetually doomed to fall under the spotlight they so desperately try to control.

While Booth's definition of an unreliable narrator certainly helped specify an emerging textual phenomenon, for some, his definition raised more questions than answers. Critics wanting to use the concept of an unreliable narrator as a lens for looking at texts realized it was inadequately defined. Booth's definition relied on the assumption that the concept of an implied author was well understood. However, the concept of an implied author, what it is and how it functions in fictional texts is relatively controversial and has been as heavily debated as the concept of unreliable narration. Booth describes the implied author as the author's "second self" (159) and was developed by Booth to distinguish between the living author and the points of view conveyed in his or her work. This distinction was important in order to prevent literary critics from analyzing the thematic concerns of a text with reference to the historical author of the work. While many critics have accepted this fairly casual definition others have argued that because the implied author is constructed by the reader and not a textual phenomenon, it should not be used in literary analysis. Unlike many literary traits analyzed by literary critics, like figurative language, theme and plot, the implied author of a text is not an explicit component that can be underlined or cited in a quotation. The implied author is a hypothetical entity created by reader as a way of interpreting the text. However, for the purposes of this explorative paper, we need not



settle the debate about the implied author. For the purpose of my paper it is only crucial that we recognize that the speaker, narrator or filtering conscience is distinct from an entity known as the implied author, a hypothetical or imaginary author, which is also distinct from the historical author.

Booth also creates a distinction between what he calls fallible and untrustworthy narrators. On the spectrum of narrative unreliability, the fallible narrator would be somewhere between the extremely observant, detached and innocent first-person narrator, who also has an excellent memory, and the untrustworthy narrator. An untrustworthy narrator, being the furthest extreme on the spectrum, is one that may intentionally alter the story out of self-interest or malice. Unreliable narrators of the fallible variety are much more common than untrustworthy narrators who intentionally edit a story, where necessary, to manipulate the reader. .

To be understood properly, the concept of an unreliable narrator must be looked at in terms of how it functions in a text. The overall effect of an unreliable narrator involves three main actor including the reader, narrator and implied author (94 Olson). In the two predominant models of unreliable narration, Booth's text-immanent model and Ansgar Nunning's synthesis of the cognitive and rhetorical models, this three-part structure is consistent. In the "text-immanent" model, proposed by Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, narrative unreliability is a "function of irony. Irony provides the formal means by which distance is created between the views, actions and voice of the unreliable narrator and those of the implied author" (Booth 160). In Booth's model, the identification of an unreliable narrator is possible by looking exclusively at the text and how the implied author intends the reader to respond to the unreliable narrator. This

model “assumes that the classification of a narrator as unreliable can be verified when the implied author’s irony is recognized as intended and stable” (Olson 98). This model focuses on textual elements like contradictions in the narration, discrepancies between the narrator’s statements and actions, difference between how narrator sees themselves and how other characters see narrator and syntactic signals denoting the narrators high level of emotional involvement like exclamations and ellipses (98).

A more recent model has been developed that synthesizes the Booth’s text-immanent model and cognitive models of unreliable narration. Nunning describes how cognitive models of unreliable narration, developed in response to Booth’s text-immanent model, abandoned the idea of an implied author and emphasized that unreliable narration was an effect created through how a reader is responding to a text. In cognitive models, unreliable narration is “a projection by the reader who tries to resolve ambiguities and textual inconsistencies by attributing them to the narrator’s unreliability” (30 Nunning). This process of interpretive strategy is an example of reader naturalization, or the reader’s natural tendency to seek to explain textual inconsistencies or problems. For advocates of the cognitive model of unreliable narration, no implied author is necessary because the unreliable narrator is not actually identified through its violations of “the norms and values of the implied author” but instead “what the critic takes to be ‘normal moral standards’ and ‘common sense’” (43). Supporters of the cognitive model disregard the implied author based on the occurrence of “historically varied responses to reliability” that prove “narrative unreliability is not a stable objective quality but a function of reader reception” (97 Olson). By getting rid of the implied author, the cognitive model attempted to provide a more concise model of

unreliable narration. However, it is limited by its dismissal of textual features that are basically impossible for a reader to interpret as anything other than evidence purposely placed in the text by an author of unreliable narration, such as contradictions, incongruities between word, thought and action as well as self-admitted confessions of unreliability from first-person narrators.

Nunning's model, developed to analyze first-person narrators, that synthesizes Booth's text-immanent model and the model of cognitive theorists is known as the "synthesis of cognitive and rhetorical theories" (30 Nunning). In acknowledgment of the cognitive model, Nunning emphasizes that unreliable narration is "a pragmatic phenomenon that cannot be fully grasped without taking into account the conceptual premises that readers bring" (45). However, in a return to Booth's text-immanent model, Nunning also includes in his model the textual cues that create ironic distance between the reader and narrator such as narrative contradiction, thought to action incongruities as well as syntactic indications like "incomplete sentences, exclamations, interjections, hesitations and unmotivated repetition"(55). These are semantic and structural textual clues that the reader will understand regardless of what "conceptual frameworks that readers bring to the text" (39).

First-person unreliable narration is a craft-element I want to explore because I want to better understand the use of first-person narrators and different ways they can be used in stories. I have limited experience writing in first-person and want to explore this craft element so that it may inform my future writing endeavors. Psychological realism is a quality that I value in literary fiction and unreliable first-person narrators, especially fallible narrators, are valuable ways of enhancing the realism of a story by

excluding non-diegetic characters and by representing a way to disguise the hand of the author. I have attempted to implement the technique in my own writing, in the story Ninth Texas Calvary, and found it useful in letting me convey the story with minimal psychic distance between the narrator and reader but also to subtly encourage scrutiny of the narrator. The added scrutiny of the narrator is important for the story because it aimed to address how the narrator's perspective on the world compared with the reality he lived in.

Unreliable first-person narrators can be ordered along a spectrum that gauges the extent to which they are unreliable. The most important distinction between unreliable narrators is between those that are merely fallible and those that are untrustworthy. Most unreliable narrators fall into the fallible category. These narrators don't necessarily have an enormous emotional stake in the story that is distorting their account or a sociopathic inability to comprehend the emotional consequences of their actions on others. Instead, the fallible narrator does not "reliably report on narrative events because they are mistaken about their judgments or perceptions or are biased" (Olson 101). They may be alcoholics, telling the story under a mixture of psychoactive substances, driven insane or just narcissists. To put it simply, the fallible narrator is trying to be reliable but isn't because of their false reports, false evaluations and misinterpretations not because of intentional misdirection.

On the far end of the unreliability spectrum are the untrustworthy narrators. The untrustworthy narrator is "dispositionally unreliable" and the "inconsistencies these narrators demonstrate appear to be caused by ingrained behavioral traits or some current self-interest" (102). The untrustworthy narrator is a conscious manipulator of the story

through how she chooses to tell it, unlike the fallible narrator who is just incompetent. The untrustworthy narrator is calculating, self-aware and knows what she is doing when she leaves out a key detail.

An excellent example of a fallible first-person can be found in Charlotte Perkin Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." The story's narrator, Jane, is unable to relate the story accurately because of mental problems that are exacerbated by her husband's sexism. The story consists of a series of journal entries made by a woman who becomes increasingly unstable with each entry. The narrator's perspective is unreliable because, as she reveals through her prose, she is experiencing hallucinations, mania, sleeping problems and other evidence of neurosis. Though the narrator wants to believe everything is fine and it is just the wallpaper making everyone act strange, it becomes obvious by the end of the story that she has lost her mind.

Stetson uses the narrator's POV to shift the focus away from what the narrator is saying to the narrator herself. For example, near the beginning of the story the narrator goes into great detail about how the yellow wallpaper in her room is ugly: "It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance" (Stetson 648). The author shows the reader that the narrator's mental state is abnormal by showing the reader where the narrator's attention is focused. By presenting the narrator's bizarre fixation with the wallpaper the reader is clued in to the unreliability of the narrator. While this first element does not show in of itself that the narrator is unreliable, when combined with other clues and discrepancies that accumulate in the story, like the narrator's hallucinations of a woman out in a garden outside and inside

the wallpaper, the reader can have no question that the narrator is mentally troubled (649-50). In a similar fashion, the author uses the POV of the narrator to show the reader that her logical faculties are in decline and thus her reliability in question. Eventually, because of her consistent fixation with the wall paper the narrator has begun to see shapes in the wallpaper a pair of upside down “bulbous eyes” (649). Even later, she sees “a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure,” indicating to the reader that her condition is worsening and her narration even less reliable (650).

The author also uses the POVs of other characters to show that the narrator is going insane and thus her reliability in question. The narrator says that her husband “laughs at me so about this wall-paper!” (648). Although the POV of the narrator’s husband can’t be assumed “true,” the reader can consider the narrator’s husband of sound mind since his diagnosis of “temporary nervous depression” and the rest cure as an appropriate treatment is backed by the narrator’s brother who is also a physician (648). While their judgments were erroneous, the narrator’s husband and brother were basing their conclusions on the value system in place at the time and thus can be assumed mentally competent. Another important way the author reveals the narrator’s unreliability is in the action and staging of the plot. Just in terms of what Jane is doing, spying on her husband and Jennie, sleeping during the day and never at night, crying randomly and frequently, the reader can infer that the narrator is not mentally stable, which inherently affects her perception and ability to narrate a story accurately.

By presenting the story in first-person, a point of view that lends itself to minimal psychic distance, the readers are able to connect with the narrator, see the story through her eyes and, thus, are more sympathetic to the narrator. A thematic concern of the

story is the effects of isolation and oppression on an individual. The unreliable narration of the story gives the reader access to a consciousness under the effects of this kind of oppression. The way the narrator fixates on the wallpaper, woman in the wallpaper and the garden show how she is responding to her imprisonment and allow the reader to feel it. The first-person point of view limits psychic distance, makes the reader more sympathetic to the narrator's situation and, in combination with the unreliable narration, creates distance between the reader at an intellectual level but not an emotional one. This allows the author to focus the reader's attention onto the narrator without explicitly directing the reader and while keeping the reader's sympathies with the narrator.

Denis Johnson's collection of short stories *Jesus' Son* documents the drug dependent adventures of a group of young people in rural America. The stories include an unreliable narrator, Fuckhead, whom would fall into the fallible category, that twist the reality of the stories they are telling primarily because of drug use. The fallible drug-using unreliable narrator is a common form of unreliable narrator.

In "Car Crash While Hitchhiking," the narrator admits that during the bulk of the story he is relating to the reader he was "something less than conscious" because by now he had gotten rides from several people, "all of whom had given [him] drugs" (Johnson 3). In stories with narrators who are unreliable because of their drug use, the author need only mention that the narrator does drugs and the reader will begin to question to information they are receiving. Since drug-using narrators are already assumed to be unreliable by readers, the author does not need to include subtle hints and most first-person drug-using narrators will incriminate themselves effectively.

The unreliable first-person narrator in “Car Crash While Hitchhiking” allows the author to bend the limits of reality and perception without confusing the reader or demanding too much from their willing suspension of disbelief. The unreliable narrator gives Johnson the opportunity to include more surreal imagery, dynamic diction and disobey laws of space and time. The narrator claims in the story that “I sensed everything before it happened. I knew of a certain Oldsmobile would stop for me even before it slowed, and by the sweet voices of the family inside it I knew we’d have an accident in the storm” (3). Readers will respond to the narrator’s beliefs about his extra-sensory powers incredulously but will not find it hard to believe that a heavy drug user might be wooed by such a fantasy. The reader does not believe the narrator to have extra-sensory perceptive abilities but does believe that the narrator sees themselves this way. This aspect of the narrator’s mental state, which makes theoretical impossibilities seem plausible, allows the narrator to defy the limits of space and time.

Another important effect that the unreliable narration has on the story is that it allows the author to break form the traditional linear narrative structure and present the events of the story out of order. For example, in “Car Crash While Hitchhiking”, the narrator begins the story near the end, when he gets picked up by a car that he claims he know will crash. Then after making it clear that he knew the car he had gotten into was going to get into a wreck the narrator back tracks and goes back to the beginning. “...But before any of this,” says the narrator, then he describes being picked up by a traveling business man, then later a college student. It is the college student who drops off the narrator in the place that the narrator chooses to begin the story. The narrator’s unconventional storytelling technique can be attributed to his state of mind and it



provides the story with greater realism by being in a semi-disoriented chronology.

However, some unreliable narrators are not fallible because of mental illness or excessive drug abuse but because of personality traits or temperaments that skew how they see themselves and the world. Still, the effects provided by these unreliable narrators is similar to fallible unreliable narrators who are either insane or under the influence of drugs. For example, in Raymond Carver's short story, "Cathedral", the narrator is unreliable because of his personality and not mental illness or excessive drug use.

In "Cathedral", the narrator relates to the reader a visit from one of his wife's close friends who is blind. The narrator makes it clear that he is uncomfortable with the blind man, his relationship with the narrator's wife and the prospect of the blind man, Robert, coming to visit. However, by the end of the story the narrator finds himself emotionally moved when he and the blind man draw a cathedral together. The reader is clued into the narrator's unreliability mainly through slips in the narrator's emotionally guarded voice, the narrator's insensitivity and contrast between the narrator's point of view and his wife's.

Throughout the beginning of the story the narrator maintains an emotionally detached tone in which the narrator seems to be distancing himself, as best he can, from the possible emotional implications of what he is telling the reader. When explaining the nature of the relationship between his wife and the blind man, the narrator tells the reader that, during her last day working with Robert he had "touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose--even her neck! She never forgot it. She even tried to write a poem about it" (Carver 273). The narrator is careful not to explicitly state he

feels uncomfortable about how close Robert and his wife seem to be or that he is jealous about their relationship. Similarly, when he explains that his wife and Robert exchange tapes with each other documenting their personal lives the narrator does not explicitly state how he feels about this but just states the facts (274). However, the narrator's feigned emotional detachment is circumvented by syntactic clues that he is in fact emotionally invested in the situation such as exclamation points. For example, "even her neck!" and "I heard my own name in the mouth of this stranger, this blind man I didn't even know!" (273-4). Narrators with major emotional investments in a story are more likely to be unreliable because they have a personal interest in conveying the story in a certain light that is flattering unto themselves. Naturally, the narrator wants the reader to side with the narrator and agree that it is totally strange for a man's wife to have a close relationship with another man, especially a blind man. Of course, the narrator does not outright say this and maintains a level of emotional disengagement to prevent the reader from dismissing the narrator's thoughts about the blind man and his wife as simple jealousy and insecurity. However, slip ups like the exclamation points indicate he is emotionally invested in what he is describing despite his attempts to disguise it.

However, these slip-ups are relatively rare in comparison to the consistently insensitive point of view of the narrator that indicate his view of himself, others and the world is warped by his emotional detachment. The narrator's insecurities and emotional immaturity are conveyed in a scene in which the narrator reflects upon what it would be like to be in a marriage with a blind man. The narrator's point of view is extremely negative and he thinks that the situation must have been awful for both

parties and questions how a marriage could be rewarding for Robert if he never saw “what the goddamned woman looked like” (275). Similarly, it is unfathomable to the narrator that the woman could be happy to “never see herself as she was seen in the eyes of her loved one” (275). The notion of a marriage between a blind man and a woman without visual impairment represents a gruesome tragedy to the narrator and he even deems the whole thing “[p]athetic” (275). The fact that the narrator fails to grasp the profoundly romantic qualities of what he is describing, a love that was able to thrive despite the man’s disability, the extreme emotional suffering Robert must have experienced at losing his wife in spite of never having seen her and the narrator’s seeming inability to grasp that the couple’s marriage was based on something deeper than physical attraction all indicate information about the narrator’s warped point of view. Robert coming to visit forces the narrator to confront emotional insecurities he actively suppresses and seeks to avoid by presenting him with a man who has not only overcome adverse circumstances but has surpassed the narrator in achieving emotional connection with the narrator’s wife.

Along with the narrator’s highly insensitive attitude and thoughts about the situation, contrast between the narrator’s point of view and attitude with his wife’s point of view and attitude suggest that the narrator is presenting a skewed narrative. Early in the story, the narrator describes a scene between him and his wife where he reveals his attempts to remain emotionally detached from the situation are a stressor to his wife and that she knows all too well that the narrator is not comfortable with the presence of her friend or their relationship. The narrator wonders out loud to his wife about how to host the blind man and suggests that maybe the narrator, “could take him bowling” (274).

The narrator's statement is ambiguous but indicates a lack of respect for the wife's desire to host Robert and make him a welcome guest. The figurative blindness of the narrator to his own disrespect and selfishness is shown through the contrast between his point of view on the scene and his wife's. The wife is taken aback by her husband's rudeness and responds by stopping what she is doing and practically begging the narrator to show a little hospitality and respect for someone who is obviously very important to her. She explains that "if you had a friend, any friend, and the friend came to visit, I'd make him feel comfortable" (274). The narrator's point of view does not indicate that he is aware of how his attitude is being perceived by his wife and affecting her and he simply continues musing on the subject and makes insensitive remarks about Robert's wife, Beulah (275). Interestingly, this comes just after the point of view of the wife intrudes on the narrator's intended story by revealing that the narrator doesn't have any friends and that the narrator seems unshaken by the man having lost his wife (275). After the wife chides the narrator for his insensitivity about her friend's situation he asks, "Was his wife a Negro?" (275). The already agitated wife snaps at this comment and, incredulous at her husband's rudeness, asks a series of questions, "Are you crazy?", "Have you just flipped or something?", "What's wrong with you?" and finally, "Are you drunk?" (275). The narrator's inability to express his feelings about Robert are symptomatic of his greater inability to process and express his emotions in general. The fact that the narrator is simultaneously jealous of the blind man's connection with the narrator's wife and unshaken by the fact that Robert has lost his wife suggest that the narrator is unwilling to face his insecurities about the relationship he has with his own wife. The narrator's attempts to hide and distance himself from his own emotions,

how this effects his point of view and how it contrasts with the point of view of his wife all indicate that the narrator's take on this story is very warped by his own personality.

The narrator's lack of sensitivity is also shown through his behavior around Robert once he shows up at the narrator's home. During dinner, the narrator jokingly declares that they will have a prayer before eating and his wife looks at him "her mouth agape," showing that she is offended by her husband's lack of etiquette and inappropriate sarcasm (278). Later, the narrator turns on the TV while Robert and the narrator's wife are visiting and the narrator notices that she was then "heading toward a boil" (278). Another occurrence of the narrator's point of view contrasting with that of his wife comes when she returns to the living room to find Robert and her husband smoking weed together. She gives the narrator a "savage look" (280). The wife's attitude towards the visit is clearly more formal and sensitive than the husband's who is uncomfortable with the whole ordeal. The narrator's casual attitude and immature behavior-- sarcastic remarks, carelessness and lack of seriousness-- all show how he has a dramatically different point of view on the situation from his wife. The narrator's insecurities about his relationship with his wife, his general lack of social or spiritual connection to the world and emotional distancing and suppression are all highlighted by their interaction with the point of view provided to the reader by his wife. The fact that the narrator does not lie about the response of his wife show that he should be categorized as fallible as opposed to untrustworthy. The narrator is not manipulating the story consciously but simply fails to understand the justifiable basis for his wife's irritation and his lack of emotional sensitivity has a major influence on how he sees the world and action of the story.

The effect of the unreliable narration from the first-person point of view in “Cathedral” is that it humanizes a relatively unlikeable character and makes his emotional experience during the story more powerful. The narrator is understood by the reader to be very emotionally guarded so that by the end when he is having what could be described as a spiritual experience the reader is more greatly effected by his moment of transcendent grace. Interestingly, in this short story, the narrator’s drug use actually seems to make the narrator more reliable towards the end when he smokes marijuana with Robert. Since the narrator’s unreliability is an aspect of his emotional guardedness and distancing from the story he is telling his consumption of marijuana actually counteracts this and the narrator’s enhanced mood causes him to open up more and connect with Robert, which also comes through in his narration. Following the ingestion of marijuana the narrator is more forthcoming with his own emotional interiority. After his wife has passed out between him and Robert, the narrator admits to being glad to have company and explains that every night he “smoked dope and stayed up as long as I could before I fell asleep. My wife and I hardly ever went to bed at the same time. When I did go to sleep, I had these dreams. Sometimes I’d wake up from one of them, my heart going crazy” (213). This is the first time in the story that the narrator has explicitly said he felt lonely, has trouble sleeping and nightmares and copes by numbing his mind with drugs and TV. Despite the narrator’s attempt to relate the story in a manner in which he does not reveal his own emotional investments, a way that reflects his attempts to distance himself from his emotions in real life, the narrator has inadvertently drawn attention onto himself and his emotional state. By this point in the story, the reader understands that the narrator is very uncomfortable with Robert

because of his close connection with his wife and less because of his blindness. Thus, when the narrator begins opening up to the reader, even just a little, still in a guarded way, the reader is much more interested in this change because of the sympathy that has been built through the lack of psychic distance. The reader has seen the story through the eyes of the narrator and so is more effected by his movement towards connecting with Robert because the reader understands how difficult it is for the narrator to face his own emotions.

Aside from building sympathy with the narrator the first-person point of view lets the reader get to know the narrator's unique voice which, in conjunction with the dramatic irony created by the unreliable narration, allows for negative capability. Negative capability being the term, first developed by Keats, for the capacity of the human intellect to hold to opposing concepts or ideas in their head at once about a person, situation or story. Although the narrator is somewhat rude to his wife, says disrespectful things about Robert before they meet and egocentric he is humanized enough through the point of view that the dramatic irony lets the reader also see the narrator for the emotionally troubled, lonely and insecure individual he is. The sympathy built by the first-person point of view, the negative capability that allows the reader to hold the narrator as both guilty and innocent and the dramatic irony that shift the reader's attention on to the narrator deepen the effect of the final scene in which the narrator and Robert communicate and connect through the artistic rendering of cathedral. Thus, the reader experiences this breath taking moment, of the narrator drawing the cathedral with his eyes closed while Robert follows the narrator's hand with his own, at an emotional level with the narrator when the reader hears the narrator

state that it is “like nothing else in [his] life up to now,” and that despite his awareness of being in his home he “didn’t feel like [he] was inside of anything” (216).

Simultaneously, at an intellectual level the reader sees that the narrator is finally processing his emotions, letting down his guard and connecting with another person.

This effect can also be seen in another work that includes a fallible first-person narrator, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger’s controversial novel has become a widely taught course book in high school English classes throughout America because of its thematic concern with the transition between adolescence and adulthood. The story is told from the perspective of Holden Caulfield, a middle class teenager from New York, who has just been expelled from a third private school. Instead of returning home, explaining to his parents his expulsion and dealing with the consequences, Holden opts to put it off for a few days and wanders around New York while he waits until the day he is expected to return home for winter break. Though Holden tries to direct the reader’s attention to his description of an unredeemable world filled with posturing, insincerity, vanity and obscene graffiti, the more interesting narrative develops around Holden himself and his emotional breakdown that puts him into a hospital and causes him to tell the reader this story in the first place. While the narrator presents his story as if he has it all figured out, everyone one and everything is “phony” and he is the victim of a corrupt world. However, by the end of the story the reader understands that the story is not about all the “phony” “pervert” “jerks” Holden encounters, but rather Holden’s immaturity and naivety. The reader is cued to Holden’s narratorial unreliability through a series of interactions between Holden and characters whom provide foils to his immaturity and poke numerous holes in his point of view’s



credibility. The most clear examples of other characters' points of view discrediting Holden's are in Holden's interactions with a prostitute named Sunny and later his former English teacher Mr. Antolini.

When Holden is placed in scene with the prostitute, Sunny, his reliability as a narrator is damaged by his distorted presentation of the situation to the reader. In Holden's eyes, after the prostitute enters his room she sits on a chair "crossed her legs and started jiggling this one foot up and down" because she is nervous. Holden tells the reader that, "[s]he was very nervous, for a prostitute" (Salinger 123). It can be assumed that, as a prostitute who is willing to immediately undress for a stranger, she is not new to this line of work and her behavior does not reflect nervousness. Ironically, Holden sees her behavior as an obvious indication of her anxiety instead of a jaded attitude and boredom. Holden is ascribing his own way of seeing the world and perceiving this interaction because he is unable to see outside of this point of view, limited by his immaturity. Sunny provides a point of view contrast with Holden because as a prostitute she sees sex as banal, trivial and a business while Holden, the virgin, has no experience with it whatsoever. The gap between Holden's interpretation of the situation and the actual reality of the situation, as seen by the reader, can be pictured as a widening ironic gap. As the story progresses and Holden encounters more characters whose points of view contrast with his own, the ironic distance becomes wider. The reader understands that Holden's perspective on the story is skewed by his immaturity and factors this into their interpretation of the rest of the story.

Another important character whose point of view contrasts with Holden's to reveal his unreliability is Mr. Antolini. After going on a date with an old girlfriend,

Holden contacts his old English teacher Mr. Antolini because he has essentially nowhere else to go until he is expected home. As a learned and mature man, Mr. Antolini is a foil to Holden's youthfulness and immaturity, as is Mr. Antolini's point of view in the story. Holden comes to Mr. Antolini and expresses a characteristic aspect of immaturity, stubborn emotionally based beliefs that he is unable to logically substantiate and, when confronted with this, a refusal to acknowledge this. This is shown when Holden shares the story about his "Oral Expression" class in which he doesn't think it's fair that students were so insistent on staying focused on the topic of their presentation with Mr. Antolini. As Holden says, when someone is speaking he likes them to stick to the point but not for them to "stick *too* much to the point." (238)

When Mr. Antolini pressures Holden on his beliefs about oral expression Holden declines to support his position. Mr. Antolini proceeds to confront Holden about his apathetic attitude towards school and is again deflected. The contrast between these two characters is fairly clear as one is significantly more mature than the other in both age and demeanor. This opposition that is set up between Holden and Mr. Antolini, along with other information like the duration of their friendship and Mr. Antolini's relationship with Holden's parents, discredits Holden's later accusation that Mr. Antolini is a "pervert" for patting Holden on the head as he sleeps. Holden wakes up to Mr. Antolini patting him on the head and reacts in a way that is by this point in the story understandable but not because it is a reasonable response. After Holden gets upset, he states that Mr. Antolini was trying to "act very goddam casual and cool and all, but he wasn't any too goddam cool." (250) Holden goes on to talk about how Mr. Antolini's behavior was "pervery" and how he'd had such experiences "about twenty times" since

he was a kid (251). In this particular scene Holden's perspective does not hold up to the scrutiny of the reader who understands that Holden perceives this innocent act of affection as perverted because of his skewed perspective on the world. Perhaps it was crossing a line, but Mr. Antolini obviously cares deeply about Holden, knows he is experiencing some emotional trouble and just wants to comfort the distraught young man. Thus, instead of getting the reader's support, the reader sides with Mr. Antolini in this scene and thus a moment that should have united the narrator and reader against a common foe actually served to increase the dramatic irony and distance between what the narrator understands and the reader understands. The reader is acutely aware that the story is being filtered through a very immature point of view that causes a corresponding distortion of the facts in his narration. The author has coaxed the reader out of the perspective of the unreliable narrator using contrasts in point of view as well as the narrator's misinterpretations of situations and character intentions and placed the reader in a position between the unreliable narrator and the story he is telling. From this place the reader is able to see the parallel narratives unfolding. One being Holden's story of his experience in New York after leaving school as told through his perspective and the other narrative being the implied author's story of Holden telling the story of his experience in New York after leaving school.

In certain ways, Holden Caulfield is a very hard person to sympathize with. Holden is somewhat spoiled, very cynical and egocentric. However, because the reader experiences the story through Holden's unique, often entertaining, point of view, the reader is able to sympathize with him. Thus, the unreliable narration, which provides for analytical distancing through the ironic gap also keeps the reader emotionally close to

the narrator and deepens the emotional effect of the story through negative capability, just as in “Cathedral.” While the reader sees Holden for the spoiled child he is, the reader also understands that Holden is experiencing a difficult time in his life.

An important effect of the unreliable narration is that it allows the reader to be immersed in the point of view of the narrator while keeping the reader analytically distanced from the character. The psychic distance keeps the reader emotionally close to the narrator while also widening an ironic gap between the reader and narrator that creates an external perspective on the character, the perspective of the implied author. This is important because it can take a character like Holden, who is antisocial, rude and immature, and make them sympathetic. The reader still sees Holden’s bad traits, early on in the story the reader learns Holden has a tendency to intentionally aggravate people. Holden explains that he calls one of his friends “Ackley kid” because Holden knows it drives “[Ackley] mad” (11). Soon after this scene, Holden decides to smoke a cigarette in his dorm room “to annoy” his roommate Stradlater because Holden knows it “drove him crazy” (23). Then much later, the reader sees that Holden is generally egocentric and concerned chiefly with himself and his own interests. The reader sees this through his insensitivity and rudeness while trying convince an old female friend, Sally, to run away with him. A conversation during which he makes Sally cry and his first thought is not remorse for hurting her feelings and upsetting her but fear for himself that Sally might “go home and tell her father” and Holden will experience negative consequences (72). He has a condescending attitude in which everywhere he goes he is “surrounded by jerks” (46). Holden’s behavior is offensive to the reader but because the reader is in the head of Holden and becomes familiar with Holden’s unique

sense of humor, mannerisms, tendency to exaggerate and redeeming qualities the reader is able to maintain sympathy with Holden despite his negative characteristics.

Holden's unique voice is portrayed very vividly through the narration's stream of conscious style in which the reader is along for the ride with Holden's internal monologue. Holden has unique mannerisms that humanize his character and make him real for the reader. For example, Holden insists on using the adjective "old" as a modifier for just about anything and it appears dozens of times throughout his narration. Then, there is Holden's favorite hyperbole: "It killed me," a phrase that appears several times throughout the narrative (1,9,57,68). Then of course there is Holden's constant sarcasm. When Holden describes Pencey he says they "advertise in about a thousand magazines, always showing some hotshot guy on a horse jumping over a fence. Like all you ever did at Pencey was play polo all the time" (1). Similarly, Holden mocks his fellow classmates' team spirit when he mentions that it "was the last game of the year, and you were supposed to commit suicide or something if old Pencey didn't win" (1-2). Holden's angst comes through in his sarcasm all throughout the story.

Holden's sense of humor is also a powerful way that his character is humanized for the reader. Holden admits that he likes to "horse around" and enjoys using his imagination to make his everyday world a bit more exciting. When Holden visits a well-liked History professor from Pencey before returning for home, and the professor insists on going over an essay Holden wrote for him on Egyptian culture, Holden remarks that Spencer, "started handling my exam paper like it was a turd or something" (6). In statements such as this, Holden's bitterness and imagination come through very vividly for the reader. Similarly, after Spencer has read the paper aloud, Holden

remarks that Spencer looks at Holden “like he’d just beten the hell out of me in ping-pong or something.” (7) Holden’s sarcasm can be off putting, but at times like this his sarcastic sense of humor makes Holden more sympathetic by illustrating a very unique and interesting voice. Another instance where Holden’s sense of humor helps individuate his character is following Holden’s encounter with the prostitute Sunny. Though Holden already paid the prostitute, she has returned with her pimp to extort the young Holden. Holden resists the pimp’s demand for money and even calls him a “dirty moron.” Holden’s courage earns him a fist to the stomach but Holden makes the best of the situation and after he gets up from the floor and starts walking to the bathroom Holden tells the reader how, “I sort of started pretending I had a bullet in my guts.” (56) Holden goes on to describe, in great detail, a cinematic drama he creates around this event. Holden imagines himself “on the way to the bathroom to get a good shot of bourbon” before getting his gun to kill the pimp and then have Jane “come over and bandage up [Holden’s] guts.” (56) Holden’s vivid fantasy contains elements straight out of Hollywood-- glorified violence, romance and death-- yet Holden thinks his brother is a “prostitute” for working in the movie industry. This contradiction adds to his character depth and complexity. Due to the first-person point of view of the story, the reader get to experience Holden’s powerful imagination first-hand. By experiencing Holden’s unique sense of humor, mannerisms, hyperbolic sarcasm and inspired imagination the reader has deep access into Holden’s worldview and his negative traits are more forgivable.

Additionally, the reader’s immersion in Holden’s internal monologue reveals that Holden is complex and that despite his antisocial tendencies he also has a philanthropic

vein and appreciation for the delicate innocence of youth. The redeemable qualities that Holden expresses in his internal monologue are another important way in which Holden gains the reader's sympathy. A significant instance of Holden's endearing moral conviction is near the end of the novel when he repeatedly encounters obscene graffiti. Writing "Fuck you" on the wall of a school or museum seems like something the bitter, antisocial and extremely sarcastic Holden might do himself or at least think is funny (108-10). So when Holden gets upset and deeply offended by the marks of graffiti he encounters at his little sister's school and a museum, his character dimensions deepen. Holden first sees "Fuck you" written on the wall of a stairwell in his little sister's school while he is resting on the stairs because he is nauseous with hunger and fatigue. Holden explains that the sight of the graffiti "drove [him] crazy" and Holden actually rubs it off the wall before continuing up the stairs to deliver a note for his sister to the principal's office (107). On his way out, Holden finds another "Fuck you" on the wall of a different stair case, this one "scratched on, with a knife" so that Holden could not do anything about it (108). Yet again, while Holden is in an exhibit of Egyptian culture in a museum he sees that someone has written "Fuck you" with a red crayon on the wall (110). Holden's reaction to these vulgarities complicate his character, making him more human, and also shows the reader a side of Holden they have not seen as much of. Holden remarks that you "can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any" (110). The reader's sympathy for Holden is strengthened by this moment in which the origins Holden's abrasive attitude and demeanor are alluded to. The reader understands that Holden's angst is somehow related to this sense of exhaustion and Holden's inability to find sanctuary from the slings and arrows of the modern world.

Another type of unreliable narrator is one that is more than just fallible but is untrustworthy because of intentional manipulation of the story to affect the reader. In “How to Tell a True War Story”, the narrator provides an account of an experience he had in Vietnam while explaining his beliefs on storytelling. The narrator in this story makes many direct addresses to the reader which theorists have identified as one trait common to unreliable narrator’s (Nunning 97). In “How to Tell a True War Story,” the narrator reminds the reader periodically that “[t]his is true,” “[i]t’s all exactly true,” “[i]t all happened,” “here’s what actually happened” (O’ Brien 1-5). Importantly, each of these direct addresses to the reader is given further emphasis by being an independent paragraph that is isolated and stands out from the others because of their brevity. Ironically, the narrator’s repeated insistence that the story is true, in conjunction with other repetitions, causes the reader to question the truth of the story.

Similarly, the narrator pauses frequently to make explicit comments on his own reliability and admits he is manipulating the facts (Nunning 97). For example, the narrator admits that “[i]t’s hard to tell what happened next” while describing a scene in one of the stories he tells (O’ Brien 2). Then the narrator explicitly states that when retelling the story they edit parts to improve its emotional punch and the narrator’s storytelling technique is “adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth” (9). The narrator’s unreliability is shown by his insistence that the facts of a story might be less important than the idea or feeling the story is trying to convey. Similarly, he argues that embellishments might be more truthful than the facts. As a result the reader can assume that certain details in the story he tells about the death of one of the soldiers in his company have been altered or made up entirely. The narrator



is untrustworthy, does not hide it and argues that manipulation of the story is actually essential to its telling.

The unreliability of the narrator in this story poses a very interesting philosophical question to the reader of what truth in storytelling really is. Also, it poses the question of where the allegiance of a storyteller should lie: should it be to the facts or the feeling that is trying to be conveyed? The narrator sides with the notion that the primary allegiance of a storyteller is to the idea, feeling or message of a story and that the facts it is based upon are secondary in importance. Unreliable narration is used in the story to challenge the meaning of truth and how it relates to fiction. The narrator's first-person point of view and self-proclaimed unreliability allow the text to engage in philosophical questions without slowing down the story and the intrusion of a non-diegetic author.

First-person unreliable narration is a craft-element I wanted to explore because I want to better understand the use of first-person narrators and different ways they can be used in stories. I have limited experience writing in first-person and wanted to explore this craft element so that it may inform my future writing endeavors in the first-person point of view. Psychological realism is a quality that I value in literary fiction and unreliable first-person narrators, especially fallible narrators, are valuable ways of enhancing the realism of a story by excluding non-diegetic characters and by representing a way to disguise the hand of the author. I have attempted to implement the technique in my own writing, in the story Ninth Texas Calvary, and found it useful in letting me convey the story with minimal psychic distance between the narrator and reader but also to subtly encourage scrutiny of the narrator. The added scrutiny of the narrator is important for the story because it aimed to address how the narrator's

perspective on the world compared with the reality he lived in.

In conclusion, the use of unreliable narrators in modern fiction takes many forms but in each instance they seem to create similar effects. The most important effect, of which all other effects could be seen to result from, is that there is no psychic distance between the narrator and reader but a simultaneous analytical distancing between the two. The minimal psychic distance allows the unique voice of a narrator to come through which increases reader sympathy and can permit negative capability in characters that are both deeply flawed but also relatable and humanized. Also, the technique allows the author to disguise her role to some extent, increasing a story's realism but still allowing the author to control the focus of the reader and create dramatic irony through discrepant awareness between the narrator and reader.

## Critical Introduction

An influence that shows itself in all of my work is that of realism and minimalism. This is in part due to personal taste as well as the predominant norms of modern literary fiction. I have read for leisure and studied for craft the work of Chekhov, Munro, Salinger, O' Connor and Carver. Each of these authors have written phenomenal character driven realist fiction. The quality of being character driven is the most obvious influence that carries over into my writing from the authors I have studied. In each of my stories, the central focus is a character who is being forced to confront something that they are attempting to avoid. In each story the dramatic action of the plot is pushed forward by the needs of the characters. For example, in "Jimmy of the Lake," the dramatic tension is primarily from Jimmy's desire to live on the lake conflicting with his need to come to terms with the past. In "Ninth Texas Calvary," the narrator is obsessed with the past but needs to engage with the present. Similarly, in "Larry," the main character wants solitude and control over his surroundings but needs companionship and love.

An important element of the work from the authors I have mentioned, and literary fiction in general, is allegiance to the reality of what it means to be human. I have been influenced by fiction in which the author has no role in judging a character or determining guilt but merely presents characters with as little value judgment as possible. In the fiction of Chekhov and other realist authors, the main goal is presenting humans as neither wholly good or wholly bad. Further, the fiction these authors create is driven by character need as opposed to external action. Again, in "Jimmy of the

Lake,” the plot is propelled forward by Jimmy’s desperate need to live on the lake. There would be no story if Jimmy did not have the obsessive attachment to the lake but simply moved along his way when asked to leave. Similarly, in “Ninth Texas Calvary,” the drama of the story comes from the narrator’s obsession with battle re-enactment. The narrator’s need to be confronted with reality is the driving force behind the story. In “Larry” the main driving force behind the action is Larry’s obsessive model collecting and need to connect with people he cares about.

In addition to being character driven, “Jimmy of the Lake” shows the influence of realist authors because the main character, Jimmy, is not raised above other characters in the story. In “Jimmy of the Lake”, the main character Jimmy is not presented as a perfect individual and helpless victim. Jimmy is portrayed sympathetically but he is not exalted above other characters in the story. The reader should be sympathetic to Jimmy but the narrative does not present Jimmy as being completely innocent. Jimmy is a grown man and although his way of life on the lake was working for him temporarily it was not sustainable. Gary Butcher, the narrator from “Ninth Texas Calvary” is presented through first-person in order to give his character more sympathy and allow the narrative to pressure his values. In “Larry,” the main character is presented objectively. I try not to sentimentalize Larry’s character or his loneliness and present him in the way he might see himself.

“Jimmy of the Lake” recreates 60’s era central Texas and presents a man confronted with the prospect of losing a vital connection to his past. This story was inspired by an anecdote my father once told about his childhood and the story as a whole contains an interesting blend of biographical information and fiction. Jimmy is

based of a homeless man my father met while fishing with his brother and father on a lake that is near my grandparents' home. My grandfather and two of his children were camping out on the lake, right on the bank, during the winter and met the person who became the real life inspiration for Jimmy. The man passed by my grandfather's campsite in a canoe was very friendly and talkative, tried to sell my grandfather fish and then moved on. However, the next morning my father's brother opened up the truck they had driven to the lake in and was greeted by a strong odor and evidence that someone had stayed the night inside the truck. My grandfather said that the man snuck onto the bank and hid inside the truck to escape the cold. In addition to this anecdote, Jimmy's honorable discharge from the army was inspired by my own grandfather's honorable discharge from the national guard for stealing whiskey from one of his commanding officers.

Following a series of what Jimmy interpreted as disgraces and failures, Jimmy chose to live on a lake that has sentimental significance to him because it holds his memories of growing up with his brother and is also responsible for the tragic death of his son James. The story portrays the beauty of nature and explores what it means to live in harmony with it. However, it does not idealize Jimmy's mode of life and posits that the lone hermit way of life has advantages but is also unsustainable and is not how humans are designed to live. While Jimmy's way of life seems to be more natural than the urban life that had become the norm in Jimmy's time, Jimmy's lifestyle is actually missing a fundamental aspect of primitive human culture. Community, Jimmy's reliance on the land for sustainment is romantic but the narrative pushes against this romanticization by showing that it can't last forever. Humans need to belong to a

community in order to thrive and while absolute solitude and communion with the lake are what Jimmy wants. What Jimmy needs is to come to terms with the past, forgive himself and acknowledge that in his old age it is dangerous to live the way he does and that it is preventing him from establishing the human connections he needs in order to move on from the past and build himself a new future.

The story contains formal elements that are intended to recreate the oral tradition from which the modern craft of short fiction has developed. The repetitions of the sound of the clam shells is intended to mimic the kinds of repetitions that are found in written epics and stories that were passed down for generations orally long before they ever were written and thus retain certain formal qualities, like these repeated phrases, from the oral tradition. These repetitions were included in the story because they helped the teller memorized, remember and retell long and complex narratives. Of course, in my short story the sound of the clam shells serves a different purpose. The “percussive sound of the clam shells” function to show that the past is always with us, in motion and effecting how we are in the present and what we will become in the future. The first time the reader hears the clams, they know nothing about Jimmy and the sound of the clam shells is just an interesting detail of the setting. The next time the reader hears the shells, they have learned more about Jimmy and his past so the sound carries more weight and resonates as a meaningful characteristic of the lake. Finally, after Jimmy is pulled from the lake, the last moment of the story is the sound of the clams. By now, the sound is more than a detail and in addition to functioning as a sensory detail it has become imbued with a significance beyond itself. The sound has an eternal quality. Despite the drama that has just unfolded, the sound of the clam

shells remains unchanged. The past's immutable influence is carried in the present moment and on into the future.

To manage time in the story I use flashbacks for exposition and traveling between the front story and backstory. In "Jimmy of the Lake," the backstory, or parts of the story that lead up to the real time of the story, is essential to its meaning as a whole. An important goal of the story was to portray Jimmy's psychological depth by including information about his past. Jimmy's obsession with the lake is closely related to his obsession with the past. To negotiate the immense backstory with the relatively compact front story, the three days during which Jimmy's campsite is found and he is eventually removed from the lake by police, flashbacks were essential. In each case, because the story is written in third-person close, Jimmy's flashbacks were triggered by dramatic action and stayed in his point of view.

A major thematic focus of the story is understanding the hermit lifestyle and exploration of what kinds of experiences might make a person retreat from society altogether. A major thematic concern of the piece, that relates to the hermit lifestyle of Jimmy, is what it means for humans, a highly social species, to isolate themselves and minimize their contact with others. To live the life of a hermit is at odds with the human tendency towards grouping but comes quite naturally to many. Understanding this phenomenon was part of the story's initial impetus.

Memory was another central thematic element of "Jimmy of the Lake". Jimmy's pie box of valuables, Jimmy's history at the lake, the sand of the lake bed and Jimmy's story are all dramatic elements with symbolic resonance of the theme of memory. Further, Jimmy's familial home overlooking the lake is a metaphorical representation of

Jimmy and his obsession with his past. Jimmy wants to believe he started a new life on the lake but he still carries his past life with him literally, in the pie box, and figuratively because of his feelings of guilt and failure. This relates to the formal structuring element of the clam shells at the beginning, middle and end of the piece. These repeating framework shows that while trauma and emotional pain can hobble a person to the extent that they are unable to look toward the future, their attention so undivided with rehashing the past and imagining, time does not stop and the past drifts further out of reach.

One of the major difficulties I experienced while revising earlier drafts of the story was how to explain Jimmy's attachment to the lake. Why Jimmy was so obsessed with the lake was something I intentionally left out of the first draft because I wanted the emphasis to be on Jimmy's obsession with the lake and his inability to comprehend leaving it. However, in all of the criticism I received on the first draft, and later drafts as well, the question of why this man was so obsessed with the lake always came up. I realized that why Jimmy was obsessed with the lake was an integral component of the story. Without the "Why," the story was just a character sketch and anecdote. The "Why" was what the piece needed to have resonance with readers and convey why Jimmy's removal from the lake was such a significant moment in the character's life. Also, in the earlier drafts I had Jimmy voluntarily leave the lake after being asked to leave. In revision I determined that it was not fitting with his character who has lost everything but this lake and the memories it holds for him. I changed the end so that Jimmy's only leaves the lake because he has no choice is in fact taken from the lake.

This piece's thematic focus on obsession represents a connection between "Jimmy



of the Lake” and two other stories in this collection. Both “Ninth Texas Calvary” and “Larry” prominently feature characters with obsessions. Obsession is an important thematic concern for my work in general because it is an interesting characteristic that can be both a positive and negative character trait. Many of history’s most revered individuals have been obsessed. Gandhi was obsessed with satyagraha, Napoleon, Alexander the Great and Atillah the Hun with power, Einstein with physics and understanding the universe. The human psyche seems to be particularly inclined towards obsession, mania and expending focus and energy on a single hope, question or challenge.

“Ninth Texas Calvary” is loosely based off of a different friend of my father’s who is a radical conspiracy theorist and gun rights advocate. In real life, Philip, who Gary is based off of, is convinced that society is on the brink of a precipitous collapse. I heard from my father that Philip keeps loaded guns hidden all over his house, is a religious listener of Alex Jones and has calculated, several times, a date he thinks will be the end of the world using various variables. Interestingly, the more I worked on this story the less the character began to resemble Philip.

In “Ninth Texas Calvary,” I use first-person and attempt to apply some of what I have learned about unreliable first-person narrator’s from researching my extended Line of Inquiry. While Gary wants to tell a story about his experience as a battle re-enactor, the story is really about Gary’s obsession with the past, seen through his battle re-enacting. I use the points of view of other characters to contrast with the narrator’s point of view and show how his perspective is skewed. The story shows that while Gary thinks he is sharing a story about his experience as a battle re-enactor the reader

gets another plot from the piece entirely. The reader sees Gary as an obsessive person who lives in a fantasy about the past he has built for himself through battle re-enactment.

Revising “Ninth Texas Calvary,” was an interesting process because, of all the pieces in this collection, it underwent the most radical reconstruction and revisioning. Essentially the only component of the original draft that has made it into “Ninth Texas Calvary” is the main character and narrative voice. The first draft of the story was about a gun-fanatic, doomsday prepper and security guard, named Gary. At this point, Gary was not a battle re-enactor and his most obvious character trait was that he is obsessed with preparing for the apocalypse and exercising his 2nd amendment right to carry a gun. Gary’s perception of the world was warped by fear and he spent most of his free time working to become fully self-sufficient in preparation for what he believed was the impending collapse of advanced civilization. Then, one night while walking his dog, Gary is assaulted and ends up killing his attacker with one of the handguns he always carries.

This story, “Doomsayer,” ended up having so many problems that I opted to piece together an entirely new plot based on the same character. While thinking about Gary and his personality I determined that he would have been drawn towards battle reenactment because of his longing to be a part of the military and general engagement in escapist activities. Thus, in the second draft Gary was now focused on battle re-enactment and his doomsday prepping fell out of the story. In revising this draft of the piece, which now bore the name “Ninth Texas Calvary,” I ran into the problem that I was unable to negotiate between the two obsessions that define Gary: doomsday

prepping and battle re-enactment. I chose to focus on battle re-enactment because I felt that it was easier to portray a character obsessed with battle re-enactment and keep the character from becoming a caricature.

“Larry” is about a man who has become so obsessed with collecting models and entertainment media that he has almost withdrawn from engaging in life completely. Larry finds comfort in the predictability of his favorite sci-fi films, enjoys the complete control he has over his models, his power to give a sense of order to the chaos of the world around him and struggles to accept that reality and the people around him are not as easily manipulated as the parts of a model.

Obsession is a prominent theme in the piece that is explored through the main character’s need for order in and control of the physical world around him. The main character’s obsessive compulsive tendency to seek and create symmetry in his surroundings are effects of his inability to relinquish an illusion of control over the various aspects of his life. The main character refuses to accept that much of the factors that influence one life are completely out of their control. Larry’s models, movie collection and constant attempt to create visual symmetry help him to inhabit a fantasy world in which everything is predictable and controlled. However, an on and off romance between Larry and a woman, Dana, represents a major fault line in Larry’s worldview. Larry can’t control Dana or even his own feelings about her. Dana challenges the narrator to acknowledge the futility of his obsession with control and order.

Another theme present in the piece is the theme of fantasy, illusion and self-delusion. The power of the human mind to create illusions and buy into these for self-

delusion is immense. The five senses provide a constant stream of information to our brains that would be altogether unmanageable without our ability to selectively perceive our world, recognize patterns and create illusions that give meaning to our daily rituals.

The character Larry is based off of a friend of my father's. His name is Daniel in real life and he is just as obsessed with models as Larry is. Daniel has always interested me because he seems to lead a somewhat peculiar life. Daniel lives in Houston by himself in an apartment. I am interested in why he has remained a loner. When I asked my dad, I learned that Daniel had a serious long term relationship but that he didn't want to get married. Daniel, his obsessive model collecting and his apparent preference for the bachelor life are the primary inspiration for this story.

In future work I want to explore ways of making stories more psychological realistic. The unreliable first-person narrator is an example of a literary technique that adds to the psychological realism of a stories presentation. I want to look into other ways that stories can mimic reality to the extent that the fictional worlds and real worlds blend together. The unreliable narrator is a very interesting way in which modern authors have learned to hide the hand of the author, increase the ability for the reader to suspend disbelief and still communicate with the reader. I would like to learn about more techniques like this and possibly develop an original method to this end.

Similarly, the subject of mental illness is one I find intriguing and it is a theme I would like to explore further. In each of the stories in this collection, obsessions are a common character trait shared by the main characters. I want to pressure the boundary between sanity and mental illness. In future fiction I want to convey certain thought patterns that typify various mental illnesses in hopes of better understanding them.

Similarly, I want to create characters that display tendencies that, if more overtly expressed, would qualify as illnesses or disorders. The taboo nature of mental illness interests me because while western medicine has rapidly got to work eradicating parasites, killing bacteria and viruses, curing physical illnesses and generally extending life expectancy it has remained unable to illuminate the complex and vast frontier of the human psyche. Attention to physical wellness and hygiene is an integral part of the modern human's daily life. However, this kind of attention is not given to mental well-being. Depression, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Anxiety and many other mental problems are barely understood by experts, carry a mysterious quality to the average person and are rarely the subject of public discourse. Depression could be seen as a major public health problem because of suicide and loss of worker productivity. However, depression is not given the same attention it would be given if it were a physical illness that gets in the way of work and left untreated can result in death. The most obvious reason for this incongruity between the perception of physical and mental illness is that people can't see mental illness the same way they see physical illness. When we see someone with a broken arm in a cast, for example, it is easy for us to imagine the problem. However, when we see someone who is suffering from a mental illness we do not have the same ability to identify the source of their pain. Even cancer is easier to comprehend than mental illness. It is not as hard to imagine our own cells dividing out of control as it is to imagine what is happening in a depressed person's brain when they attempt to take their own life. I want to explore the mind as a delicate component of the human form that can suffer the same way our physical body does when it is neglected and not properly cared for.

## **Jimmy of the Lake**

Jimmy looked at the thin smoke trails rising from campfires on the opposite bank of the lake. He followed them into the sky where they dissolved into the orange sliver of sun that hadn't yet sunk beneath the horizon. The grassy bank where he sat lay a foot above the lake bed, and small freshwater clam shells deposited by the waves had accumulated on the sand where he rested his feet. With each slap of a wave the shells were set in motion and made a sound like pebbles trickling through a rainstick as they collided with each other beneath the water. The interval of the waves seemed perfectly timed so that just as the last shells had settled into silence another wave would slap against the muddy wall of the bank to put them back in motion.

He woke up early the next day before sunrise, stoked up a fire from last night's coals and fried a couple eggs. Then he set out to the south end of the lake to lay a few lines and check a few snares he'd set in the woods near the bank. He had caught a couple good-sized fish before the sun rose so he started his rounds with the new fish and a few he had pulled from the pen to sell to the people visiting the lake.

Jimmy wanted some groceries so he tied his boat on the eastern bank and walked up the road that had been recently paved for the first time. It wasn't far to Bill's General Store, so he didn't mind walking, but he enjoyed it when a pick-up would stop for him to hop into. He liked leaning against the cab and watching the road wind away behind him.

When he returned to his camp with a few bags of groceries he was shocked to find that it had been dismantled. The fish pen was pushed over so that the fish were all

gone, his bedding had been thrown in the water, and he could see where it was stuck on a low hanging branch that dipped into the water at the edge of the small overhang it created. His box of tackle was missing. After tying the boat to a nearby tree branch, he went straight to a tree at the edge of the camp. In its tangle of exposed roots was an old animal burrow that he used to store a pie box of personal effects. He took out the box and opened it up to make sure everything was accounted for: an epaulette from his national guard days; his savings from selling his home six years ago; an envelope filled with mostly pictures of his ex-wife and son but also one of him and his brother Eric in their National Guard uniforms; an arrowhead and some fossils he had found while digging for bait.

In the years he'd been living on the lake this had never happened. He had amiable relations with the ranchers who owned the land on his side of the lake and who he occasionally ran into as he was setting snares in the forest. One of the older ranchers had even offered Jimmy work with room and board. Jimmy didn't want to be so far from the lake so he opted to come up to perform odd jobs every now and then to make extra money, mainly in the winter when the lake was seldom visited. The rest of the time he was able to sustain himself with fish from the lake and small game from the surrounding woods. Though, during the busier spring and summer months, when the lake became more lively, he liked going around the edge of the lake selling fish and bait because it gave him an excuse to talk with people. Jimmy pulled the foam pads, sheets and his sleeping bag out of the water, rung them out and hung each over a branch to dry. He decided he would move up the bank a ways, find a new spot, and hope it didn't happen again.

In the morning, he woke up on the bare ground to the disarray of his campsite and, disappointed that the destruction of his campsite had been no dream, packed up his things in his boat and left. With his tackle box gone, he only had the supplies he kept in the boat: his shovel, some rope, a small bit of spare line, an almost empty bucket of bait and a few fishing poles.

He found another spot, much like the last, with a roof-like overhang of tree branches that arched over the bank and barely dipped into the water. He set some beers in the water so they'd be cold when he got back and went out to catch some fish. Since sound traveled far across the lake, even though he could barely see them, he heard a father and his child splashing around and laughing.

Jimmy loved children and enjoyed the sound of their laughter. Years back, while he was still working as a tax consultant his own son, James, had died. Encephalitis - the doctor wasn't sure how he had gotten it but it was probably from swimming in the lake. Jimmy had mostly come to terms with it but still wondered why the lake had taken his boy from him. Jimmy and his brother had swam in the lake countless times and never gotten sick. After James' death, Jimmy's wife, Roena, said she couldn't live in the house anymore. Apparently she couldn't live in the same state either, last Jimmy heard, she had moved out to New Mexico. Jimmy was reluctant to sell the house he had grown up in, the house his great-grandfather had built himself, but all the empty rooms made him uncomfortable. Roena had done most of the tidying up so in her absence the corners were left to the spiders and a fine layer of dust settled in. Despite his charmed childhood memories of growing up in the home, it started to lose its familiarity after James' death. The rooms seemed empty despite the growing mess of clutter and when



Jimmy didn't watch the TV he looked at the walls or the ceiling. After consecutive nights of falling asleep in a chair in front of the TV, one afternoon he stepped out onto the porch, which had a view of the lake and decided to walk down for a swim. The water felt good and he started camping out down by the lake. First just on the weekends, then gradually more until he didn't sleep in the house a single night for a month. He felt more comfortable in the warmth of a campfire, watching sparks fly up into the sky, than in the cold blue glow of a TV set. He would spend whole days sitting out in his father's old motorboat, with a bobber on the water, reading or listening to the sounds of the lake. He started talking to other fishermen and campers and felt happy again for the first time since he had lost James. He felt like he could start over on the lake, it offered him a future and helped him forget about the past. After several more months without setting foot in his old home, he sold the house. That had been six years ago and now he could barely remember a time when he hadn't slept under the stars by the lake.

He had camped out at the new spot just a few days when one evening he heard the roar of a motorboat approaching him. Once it was close he heard it quiet down to a steady hum. Jimmy could hear its prow cut through the water over the hum of the idling engine as the boat got closer to the bank and his curtain of tree branches.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" Jimmy heard a man say. All he could see through the overhang of tree branches was the circular face of a bright flashlight against which he shielded his eyes.

"I'm just camping out here, sir. I live here."

The man's boat pierced the overhang, and he cursed as the narrowly parted

branches scraped over the sides of his boat and he had to duck down. When the prow of his boat bumped awkwardly against the bank, the man almost fell forward but caught himself with a hand on the side of the boat. The clean-shaven man in his mid-thirties was neatly dressed in a plaid pearl button shirt tucked into blue jeans behind an oversized silver-plated belt buckle. He wore a pair of pristine cowboy boots. Jimmy was somewhat amused by his appearance until he saw the shotgun in the hull.

“Well, you’re going to have to clear out right away. This here is the property of the Perry Properties Co. The previous owner mentioned there was an old man who stayed down here, and we can’t have any squatters on our property. You’re trespassing.”

The man’s stern tone reminded him of the judge at his court martial hearing when he was kicked out of the national guard. One night he had gotten a little drunk while stationed at the base and, on an impulse, stole a fifth of whiskey from his Lieutenant’s locker. At the court martial hearing he was given the choice of an honorable discharge or being demoted back to private. Jimmy had struggled through private and private first class and wasn’t about to go back to freezing his ass off warming up icy cold john lids for his commanding officers. He decided to take the opportunity to get out and spend more time with his wife and young son. Two months later, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Jimmy’s brother, a lower rank in the same unit, went to the Pacific. While Jimmy was at home with Roena and their boy James, Eric was killed in combat along with every other member of the unit. Jimmy never told anybody he’d been in the guard because he knew it would inevitably lead to him having to reveal why he had left.

“With all due respect, sir, this lake is my home. I been fishin’ it since I was a

boy, my dad took me and my brothers to this lake just like my dad's dad took him. I been here six years and ain't had no problems, never disturbed nobody."

The man paused for a moment then said, "I don't care, that don't make it your lake. The last owner shouldn't of let you stay here, it's against city code and we can't have you living out here all by yourself. It ain't my decision to make. This is private property, so clear out or next time it will be the police."

The man aimed his flashlight around Jimmy's campsite and saw nothing around the fire except for Jimmy and the small boat, with its rusted outboard motor, rising up and down in the water against the bank. The man spit thick brown juice into the water.

"I'll give you three days but after that I better not see you again." With that he tried to pull back from the bank but the boat was wedged into the raised bank and just stood still as the engine howled louder and louder. The man cursed again. Without a word, Jimmy stood up and used his bare foot to push the prow away from the bank. The boat jerked back suddenly and the back of the boat pushed through the overhanging branches so the man let off throttle. The engine barely hummed as the large boat slowly backed out of the curtain. Since the wide stern pushed the overhanging branches back instead of parting them, the wet mossy tips of the branches dragged over the man and boat like the bristles of a broom. The man muttered something and ducked again as Jimmy watched the muddy blotch his foot had made on the shiny white prow glide back. The curtain settled back, and Jimmy heard the motor kick in to a higher gear and buzz away until the sound gradually faded into the harmony of frogs, cicadas, the percussive clatter of the clam shells and lapping of waves. Jimmy's eyes got hot, and he wanted to yell, but he just stared into the embers beneath his fire until he felt tired

enough to sleep.

The next day, he got in his boat and decided to check if there were any other spots far enough from his old one where he wouldn't be a bother. The center of the western shore where he had been and what he determined must belong to the Perry Property Co. was perfect for camping as it was flat and forested right up to the bank. On either side, the shore was steep and rocky and there wasn't any shade. He could set up camp further back from the bank, where it leveled out and trees started to grow, but then he'd be right up next to the ranchers' herds and deeper into their land than he felt comfortable with. The North and South ends of the lake were dammed.

He realized that he couldn't leave this place: it was his home. There was nowhere else for him to go. He could probably find work and a bed at one of the ranches, but the lake would always be his home and it was a man's right to die in his home.

With this resolution in mind, Jimmy returned to his new campsite. He decided he'd build the fire a ways from his camp to throw them off his trail for just a bit. The next few days went on as they had before the man had ever shown up, and Jimmy was starting to think maybe they had forgotten about him.

Then one day he saw the motor boat cruising along the bank toward him through the bushes. He hopped into his boat and waited until the boat disappeared in a bend in the bank then paddled out of the overhang hoping to get to the other side of the lake.

The boat appeared again though. Jimmy heard the motor kick into a higher gear and begin approaching him rapidly. He yanked the pull start of his motor. After sputtering a few times, the engine roared to life and Jimmy engaged the throttle. He knew he couldn't outrun the brand-new motor boat, but he wasn't going to just give

himself up. He picked up speed until the throttle was wide open and he was going faster than he had gone in years. The wind massaged his hair and face; the loud buzz of the motor and his thoughts faded until he was just feeling the wind and sun and fresh smell of the lake. He leaned over and just barely let the tips of his fingers cut into the lake; then he smoothed his palm out over the surface and held it there, watching the dip and frothy wake it made in the lake's face.

He looked behind him and he recognized the man steering the wheel of the boat. He could also make out the black uniforms of a couple police officers.

The boat approached him rapidly as Jimmy was nearing of the dams, and he turned around to face the motor boat. The boat slowed down. Once it was about thirty feet away, Jimmy heard one of the police officers talking into a megaphone.

"Sir, this is the Williamson Country police. You are under arrest for trespassing. Turn off the engine and put your hands up."

"Trespassing? Like hell I am!" Jimmy yelled back at the men.

"Sir, turn off the engine and put your hands up. If you refuse to comply, you'll be charged with resisting arrest as well."

Jimmy throttled the engine and darted off past the boat. Jimmy circled the lake while the boat tailed him several times until the engine on Jimmy's boat began to sputter and finally choked out. The boat was not far behind him and kept a distance. Jimmy heard the megaphone again.

"Sir, you're only making this worse for yourself."

"I don't suppose anybody could make this much worse on me. You can't touch a man with nothing to lose. Come and get me," said Jimmy before he dove into the

water.

If he had gone off and fought and died with his brother like he should have, James would never have gone down to the lake with his father that hot summer day, wouldn't have gotten sick and wouldn't have died. James would be a grown man by now. Today he might be visiting his mother in the home Jimmy's grandfather had built overlooking the lake. After dinner they would look at a framed photograph of Jimmy in his military uniform, mounted on the wall, and say a few words about missing him and the times they had shared. Roena might tell James stories about his father, about the brave war hero who sacrificed himself to defend the country. Jimmy would have been better spent as a memory, an honored figure in his son's life. Jimmy's wife could be comfortable knowing she too had given about all a country could ask for and she could die a noble widow or remarry for all he cared. Instead, Jimmy was here on the lake that had killed his son, smelly, unshaven and unemployed. He was treading water, resisting his fate, like a hooked fish desperately using up all its energy against a steadily retracting line.

The men in the boat looked at each other in confusion. None of them wanted to follow Jimmy into the water but they realized that would probably be the only way to get the chase over with. The boat edged closer to Jimmy as he treaded water to keep his head above the surface. Jimmy let the men get just a few feet away when he took a deep breath and dove under the water. He swam as fast and long as he could. When he surfaced he was a good twenty feet from the boat and he could see the men with their hands to their brow scanning the water.

“Over here!” he shouted.

He let them get close enough that one of them could have easily caught him if

they'd jumped into the lake but none of them did and Jimmy took another dive. He toyed with the men in this way several times before he began to feel fatigue set in and realized he was almost had. The men on the boat knew he would tire eventually, so they just kept following Jimmy around since none of them wanted to get into the water.

Jimmy's lungs started to burn, his arms became numb and he could barely even tread water. He floated on his back looking up at the clear blue sky and started to feel warm tears roll down his temples into the lake. The boat idled next to Jimmy, bobbing in the waves.

"Sir, you're under arrest. Are you going to get into the boat or not?"

"Do what you must, officer, but I ain't just gonna hop out of the water onto your damn boat. One of you fellers might have to get wet." Jimmy splashed the men weakly with his arm. The men in the boat weren't able to avoid the water and cursed in frustration.

"Come on in, the water is great," said Jimmy.

One of the officers sat down on the side of the boat while Jimmy taunted them and began taking off his shoes and socks. Then he unbuttoned his shirt and removed it as well as an undershirt. He turned around so that his feet hung over the edge of the boat and prepared himself for jumping into the cold water.

"There you go. Come on now. All at once, don't be shy!" said Jimmy.

The officer glared at Jimmy and let himself fall into the water, keeping a grip on the boat so he wouldn't get his hair wet. He grabbed Jimmy by the wrist and held onto the side of the boat with his other hand.

"Let's just drag him back to the shore." With that the boat kicked into gear and

began slowly heading towards a dock on the public side of the lake.

“You’re one stubborn sonbitch you know that?” said the officer holding onto Jimmy wrist. But Jimmy wasn’t listening. He was floating on his back as best he could, trying to catch his breath and looking up at the blue sky.

It was a busy day on the lake and the back and forth spectacle of the chase had drawn a considerable crowd at the the dock. There were some familiar faces who looked at Jimmy solemnly and many who had never met him, but had been filled in during the long chase. The officer led Jimmy up the boat ramp and had him sit on a bench along the shore.

“Back up, people,” demanded the officer.

The crowd spread around the two dripping men and there were hushed conversations and exclamations of disapproval. Some people were snapping photographs while others heckled the men in the boat. Those that knew Jimmy personally were saddened by the desperation in Jimmy’s face.

“Well thats’ a damn fine catch you got there, officer,” said a shirtless man holding a beer. “What is that? A 6 footer?” Jimmy smiled.

“There you have it folks, there’s your tax dollars at work,” said another man bitterly.

The police put Jimmy into their cop car and left the lake in a hurry, embarrassed by the attention of the crowd that waved goodbye to Jimmy. The crowd lingered around the dock chatting and in wonder at the strangeness of the event until it had gradually dispersed and it was quiet again except for the sound of the clam shells tumbling over each other in the waves.



## **Ninth Texas Cavalry**

I commemorate each anniversary of the battle of the Alamo by visiting the chapel in San Antonio. When I went this year I met Pete and he is who got me into battle re-enacting.

Before I entered the shrine I removed my cap and held it over my heart as I walked under the large archway at the entrance of the Alamo Chapel. Entering the old building with its high vaulted ceiling and limestone walls made me feel as if I had stepped back in time. I walked down the long corridor-like room towards a pair of marble statues, Davy Crockett and James Bowie that stood in each corner. In a glass display case near the statue of Crockett was a knife with a wooden handle. A small placard next to the statue said that the knife may have belonged to Crockett and been used by him in the battle during the last moments of his life. Beholding such a relic gave me a sense of awe and I wanted so strongly to hold it in my own hand. On the wall between the statues was a painting I had seen before in textbooks growing up, Dawn at the Alamo. I ended up staring at the painting for a long time, I don't know how long, but I almost felt like I had entered into the scene myself. I was there fighting along with Crockett and William Travis. I could hear the yelling of men, the clash of swords, the screams of the wounded and the reports of muskets. I could smell the gunpowder and see the dense clouds of smoke. I was there and I felt truly alive.

After looking through the chapel and barracks I exited through the gift shop. Even though I had told myself I wouldn't buy any of their junk, I couldn't resist and bought myself a coonskin hat in the style which Crockett would have worn. I went to the Alamo plaza to find the spot of James Bowie's death bed where, bedridden with

illness, he had bravely died as the Mexican soldiers swarmed into his room. I found the marker and standing there with my eyes closed I could picture his final moments as the door burst open and he began firing his pistols into the crowd of Mexican soldiers before being bayoneted. Such bravery and courage, if I had the chance I would honor his memory with an equal show of fearless loyalty.

I stood on the plaque waiting for someone to walk by who I could ask to take a picture for me. I saw several couples and families but I didn't want to bother them since they looked busy, so I waited until I saw a guy who was by himself and looked like he wouldn't mind.

"Excuse me, sir, would you mind taking a picture for me?" I asked the man.

"Of course," he said. I gave him my camera and put down the bag with my coonskin cap next to him.

"I want to put this on real fast," I said, and pulled out the hat I had bought, took off my cap and glasses and put on the coonskin cap.

"I know its kind of silly," I said. "I don't plan on wearing it too often." I walked back a few feet towards the plaque marking Bowie's deathbed and stood with my hands on my hips.

"How's it look?" I asked.

"Fine," he replied staring through the viewfinder. "Alright, smile," he said even though I already was. "Looks good, do you want me to take a few more?"

"Let me see how it turned out real fast," I said and jogged back over. "Yea, that looks great but I want to do a few more, if you don't mind."

"No problem," he said. I jogged back over and kneeled with one knee on the

ground and tried to smile a little bigger. “Smile,” he said again and I saw his finger push the button.

“One more,” I said. “This time with my gun.”

I took my Smith and Wesson M29 and held it across my chest after making sure there wasn't anybody walking by. I had brought my Smithy because it didn't really make sense to have a German world war era piece at the Alamo! He took another couple pictures and said I should come see how they looked. I put up my gun and walked over. I looked through the pictures with him, shook hands and thanked him.

“That's a fine piece you got there,” said the man.

“I am glad you aren't afraid of guns, some people think you're a nut if you carry around a piece. I figured you wouldn't mind, the hat and all.”

“No, of course not,” he said. “I understand,” he pulled up his left pants leg to reveal a small Berreta in an ankle holster. We both smiled.

“My name's Pete” he said.

“Gary, Gary Butcher, nice to meet you.” I picked up my bag and took off my coon-skin hat because it was hot and itchy and I was starting to feel a bit silly wearing it. I put it back in the bag and put my cap back on. We walked together a bit reading the historical markers and plaques that were interspersed throughout the plaza and then went out together for lunch.

“Yea, I would be in the marines, but they won't have me because I'm 4F,” I said before pausing for a sip of Lonestar.

“4F?” Pete asked.

“4F, it means they don't want me since I've got a titanium rod in my leg. It's

bullshit is what it means. It doesn't slow me down at all, gets a little sore in the winter but its nothing a few pain pills doesn't fix."

"That's a damn shame," said Pete. "Any man who wants to serve his country ought to have that right. What happened to your leg anyway?"

"Oh, nothing really, I was a kid riding my bike across an intersection, on my way to school, and some son-bitch in a Silverado hit me. Might not of snapped my femur in half if the yuppie didn't have a grille-guard. Got me right in the leg, speeding too.

"Ouch."

"Yea, bastard didn't even get into trouble, even though I had right of way. That damn grille guard, I could tell that thing hadn't ever even been off a paved road, he just liked the look of it."

"I am sorry man."

"I suppose I am lucky. I wasn't wearing a helmet or anything and it threw me nearly 15 feet, at least I didn't split my head open or anything; minor concussion was all."

"I am actually in battle reenactment group and we're always looking for new members, Ninth Texas cavalry," said Pete. "We participate in battles all over the state. We are one of the most popular and decorated cavalry units in the region. Just last year we were commissioned for a History channel special on the Mexican-American War."

I was pretty impressed, I had seen documentaries like that and some of the battle scenes seemed really well done.

"Yea in a few months we are doing a San Jacinto reenactment," said Pete. "We could probably have you ready by then."

I ended up participating in the San Jacinto reenactment with Pete and it was a lot of fun. I felt a bit silly at first but by the end of it I felt like I was really there. Once I got into character it was really exciting. The blast of musket and cannon fire, the smell of gunpowder thick in the air and the man who was playing Sam Houston was great. He was really into it, I talked with him after the battle and he just refused to break character I talked to some other soldiers in the chapter and they said once he stepped on the battle field he was a different person. He had been in all kinds of reenactments and just in the past decade had started to specialize in mid to early 19th century era battles.

I started selling my plasma to make some extra money for period supplies and clothing. Eventually, I was able to get a period musket and replica Texas calvary uniform saving up most of a few paychecks, money from my plasma and dipping into my savings a bit. While I was hooked up I would read random articles about new artifacts that had been unearthed at the site of an old battle field and I think that is when I really started imagining what it would have been like to be a cavalry man during that battle. I could almost feel the warmth of a campfire and the sparks floating up with the smoke and the smell of beans. A simpler time, such honorable men and here I am selling my plasma so I can make believe I am a soldier like them. I started to become more and more involved in my role as a cavalry men, I couldn't help it. While I was working my security shifts at the construction site, grocery store and around the strip mall parking lot I would wear my powder horn and pretend I was guarding a frontier fort against mexicans and comanches instead of looking for vandals and graffiti. I tried to imagine the large asphalt parking lot as a flat grassland prairie and the store fronts as the old wood and adobe kind you see in the movies.

Over a few months I accumulated even more period gear and began spending a lot of time at the library researching the Mexican-American war. I went on more reenactment camps with my friend Pete and even a few full immersion event in which we lived like real cavalry men for the whole weekend. No electronics or running water and we even kept our conversations to period topics. It became a vivid fantasy, so real it began to make more sense to me than my life outside reenactment. All I really did when I wasn't reenacting was do things to make money, so I guess I wasn't missing much. I just wish I had enough money to spend time with my cavalry men full time and not worry about an apartment, taxes or any of that crap. It wasn't an expensive hobby, after you got the basics, the biggest expense was really just gas for traveling to the reenactment sites.

I kept waiting for some nut to come running out of the Zales with a bag full of loot, guns ablaze, but of course nothing like that ever happened. The most exciting thing that I have ever gotten to do was chase some kid doing a beer run. I almost caught him but he was too fast. I managed to get cut him off at the entrance to the lot but he ditched the beer and ran through some bushes.

Now this is the craziest thing that has ever happened to me. Well, it could have been a dream but I am pretty sure it happened. I can't prove it and you might think I am crazy but you just got to believe me.

We were camped out near Bastrop. It was late at night, most of my unit had went to sleep. But I stayed up talking with Pete and another guy in our unit he had introduced me too, Hayden. We were some of the more hard core of the members so we stuck to only period conversation. I like Hayden because he is almost always in

character while we are camping, not just when there are observers. He used an old soldier's diary, Private Roy Miller, from the special collections at a local library to reconstruct a whole identity for himself. Sometimes I think he forgets who he is and he really thinks he's this Roy Miller guy. Anyway, eventually Pete went to sleep and it was just me and Hayden. By then I was just asking Hayden random questions to try and get him to screw up his story or contradict himself but he was too good. I don't know how late it was when we finally went to our tents but it must have been at least four in the morning. The sky wasn't black anymore, birds were singing and the embers from the fire were barely glowing.

Back in my tent I still couldn't sleep. When I first started camping out for the reenactments I never got a good night's sleep. It was the same way back when I was a boy scout. But by then I had spent enough nights out with my unit that it wasn't a problem anymore. I was about as comfortable on the ground as on my mattress at home. I think it was Hayden's Roy Miller act getting to me. I had been asking Hayden about his family back home, you know, to try and trip him up but he never slipped up once. He started talking about his younger brother who had lied about his age and enlisted to try and find him. The kid died in battle before he ever found his brother. It was a sad story but I didn't know if that was in the diary or Hayden had made it up.

I was laying on my pallet thinking about that when I decided to go for a walk. Not my brightest idea since I didn't have a compass or anything but it was figured anything would be better than laying in my tent thinking about this dead kid. Hayden said his name was Matthew. The moon was full and it seemed bigger than usual, or closer. There weren't as many stars out since it was getting brighter but that moon was

still shining its eerie silver against the dark blue sky. There was a pair of ruts in the tall grass that led away from our campsite and I decided to follow them so I wouldn't get lost.

The ruts were real obvious when I first started walking but they gradually became fainter until I was just kind of guessing. By the time I realized the ruts were gone, or I had gotten off their trail, it was early morning. The moon and the last of the stars were gone but the sun was still out of sight. I could hear birds all around me even though there were barely any trees. I looked back the direction I had come and it was apparent I was totally lost. I should have turned back when the ruts started to fade but I had thought I could still see them faintly. Of course, I didn't have my phone because it was back in the parking lot.

I didn't panic or anything. I will be honest, I did have a moment where I felt my eyes get wet like I was a little baby but I got a grip pretty fast. I was never scared really, just frustrated. I felt foolish wondering around in my calvary outfit, it started to feel like a costume, I didn't belong in this time any more than I did in the past. I tried yelling Pete's name a couple times but even if he had been in earshot it was still pretty early. I was pretty certain of the way I had come but I wasn't sure if I should walk anymore and risk getting myself in deeper. I sat down in the grass to catch my breath for a minute and drank a little water. When I lowered my canteen I saw a figure off in the distance. The person had to have been at least a football field away but I could just barely make out their silhouette and I was certain it was a person. It definitely wasn't a tree. I stood up and started walking towards him. When I had gotten about halfway to him he looked over his shoulder at me. I waved my arms and yelled but he didn't make



any sign of recognition that I could tell and just started walking away.

I was sure he was a reenactor because I could see he had a rifle strapped onto one of his shoulders so I picked up my pace to try and catch up. At first I thought he had just not seen me or heard me but I noticed that even though I was practically running I wasn't gaining any ground. I had to stop for a second to catch my breath. Also, my bad leg was starting to pulse and I could feel a cramp coming on. I was leaning forward with my hands on my knees panting like a dog when I saw the bastard had stopped. Like he was playing games with me or something.

I rested for a while and drank some water. I just stood there with my eyes on this mysterious figure until I was breathing normal again. Then I took off towards him, I was trying to surprise him a bit. I was running as fast as I could when I stubbed my toe and lost my footing. I fell on my hands and was stunned for a second. Then I rolled over onto my back and just lay there trying to breathe. I must have fallen asleep for a while because when I woke up the sun was on its way up and it was pretty hot already. I sat up and, get this, there was my campsite, right in front of me. I could just barely make out the shapes of our tents set up in a neat row on the horizon. I brushed myself off and started walking back. I did a quick scan but my mysterious friend was gone.

Of course, when I got back to the boys none of them believed me. They just said I needed to lay off the whiskey. They thought I had wandered off and was trying to mess with them or something. I am not a religious man or even spiritual but I feel like that figure meant something. I believe it was the spirit of Matthew Miller guiding me back.

## Larry

A reading lamp near the middle of Larry's kitchen table gave a concentrated circle of light over the 1:16 Hetzer tank that now lay in several pieces: turret, hull, engine and exterior plates casting shadows on the outspread pages of yesterday's newspaper.

Having done a preliminary assembly, touched up seams and mold marks with sandpaper the day before, disassembled the tank into the smaller sections and laid down a primer coat Larry was now ready to begin painting. Beside the light was a small wooden box that contained his little 17 ML glass jars of acrylic paints and next to that was a large rectangular tin of paint thinner, some of which he had poured into a plastic cup. In another cup were his paintbrushes that ranged from the precision triple zero brushes for engine components, buttons, eyes, brows and lips up to broader size eights and a few large quarter-inch brushes for primer coats or large parts that called for wide swaths. He took out a few colors from the box, scarlet, steel, olive grey, brass and flat black for the instruments, engine components and other interior details of the tank, shook them and unscrewed their lids. He dipped a size 3 brush into the steel colored paint and began making small strokes over one of the cylinders of the tanks engine.

After he had been carefully painting the tank for only a few minutes and reached a meditative state of undivided engagement he heard his telephone ringing through his earplugs. He was in the middle of painting a fire extinguisher that was mounted on one of the interior walls of the tank's hull and wanted to at least finish that so he let the call go to voicemail, if it was important they would leave a message. When the phone stopped ringing he waited to listen for whose disembodied voice might come to him

through the answering machine. He took out one of his earplugs to listen to the message from his chair.

It was Dana. He hadn't heard her voice in months and it suddenly reminded him how much he missed her. He imagined what she was doing while she called him. Her attention sounded divided and he could hear a dog barking.

"Hey, Larry, it's Dana, give me a call back," she said.

He decided he would call her back after he was finished painting for the day. He returned his full focus to the Hetzer and after a few minutes was reabsorbed in carefully dabbing paint on an instrument panel in the interior of the tank. A few hours later he had every piece of the model painted, from the tracks to the turret operator's blue eyes, and they were now drying on his kitchen table. Tomorrow it would be ready for an airbrushing to create a camouflage effect and once that dried, decals and the final assembly.

When he finally called back it was beginning to darken outside. The thousand lights of the city resisted, pushing a purple dome into the black sky. While the phone rang Larry looked out the sliding glass door of his apartment at the wooden fence that bordered his small unused backyard. He was slightly nervous and had put off calling her as long as possible. He always got nervous when calling Dana on the phone. As if the ringing sound set his heart on edge, a kind of warning of what was to come, in those moments he would hope that she would not answer, not answer and never call back. However, once the conversation got going his discomfort would disappear and by the time the phone call ended he would realize the silliness of his anxiety.

“Hi, everything okay?”

“Hello,” she said. “Yes, of course. But Jake needs to tell you something. One second, let me give him the phone.”

Larry was confused but didn't say anything while he waited. He heard Jake and Dana arguing quietly. Then Larry heard Jake take the phone.

“Hey, my mom wants me to tell you that I stole one of your models,” said the boy. “I am sorry. She told me to tell you I was sorry.”

“Huh, I actually had no idea one was missing,” said Larry. “I appreciate your apology.”

“Yeah, he stormed off already and didn't hear that but I will pass it on,” said Dana. “Really, I am sorry, I was just picking up his room and found it today. Can I drop it by your place sometime?”

“If you want. Its not a big deal. I've got plenty.”

“No, I will bring it back,” said Dana. “It looks like a nice one.”

“Okay, come on by whenever,” said Larry looking around his empty apartment. The kitchen table was still covered with the modeling supplies but everywhere else was clinically organized. “Or, do you want to meet up for lunch sometime instead? I wouldn't mind getting out of the house.”

“Umm, sure, if you want,” said Dana.

Larry knew that when Dana and her son Jake had moved in that he had messed with Larry's tanks and some of his other models. Still, Larry was surprised that Jake was interested enough in any of them to take one. Shortly after Dana and Jake had

moved in, when Larry realized it was going to be a problem, Larry talked to Jake about not touching the models. Larry tried to be stern and intimidating but it didn't quite work. Jake didn't stop playing with Larry's tanks but he did start trying to cover his tracks a bit. Jake would put the tanks back in almost the exact right place. With a little effort Jake probably could have fooled Larry but there was always something amiss for Larry to notice. Even though Jake never damaged them, Larry didn't like the idea of a child playing around with his models like they were just simple toys.

Larry hadn't started cataloguing his models until a few months after Dana and Jake had moved out so Larry had no idea which model the kid may have taken. Larry realized he should have asked Dana if Jake had opened it. If it were opened, Larry didn't want it back anyway.

The next morning Larry went out to look at some hobby shops. He inquired at each store and each time was told the Superfortress was out of stock and they hadn't seen a Kumonga in years. By the time Larry made it home he hadn't found the model he was looking for but did come back with a few new model kits. He grabbed a notebook off of a shelf in his living room and sat down in a blue chair in the middle of his living room in front of his TV with the brown bag of models he had purchased. He took them out one at a time and ran his fingers over the smooth shrink-wrapped boxes, looked at the illustration on the front of the package and then at the photograph of the completed model that was printed on the back. After taking each one out and admiring it individually he placed it on his lap, making a small stack until the bag was empty.

He flipped through the notebook that was divided into sections based on the

subject of the model and began recording the name, brand, manufacturing date and stock number of each of his new models in their respective places in his catalog. When he was done, he put the bag into a bag of bags in his laundry room and the receipts into an accordion folder. Then he picked up the small stack of models and went into a second bedroom where he stored his collection. He opened the door and stepped into the room flipping on the light switch. There was a narrow L shaped pathway that was clear of models. The rest of the room was filled with neat, waist-high stacks of models organized on the same principles by which they were ordered in his catalog, though he periodically reformatted his notebook and the layout of his collection as well. He had tried organizing them by manufacturer, time period and number of parts and always subdivided the main organizing principle by scale, stock number, alphabetical order or date of manufacture. Now he had settled on what seemed the most logical organization principle at present, by the subject of the model, subdividing that by time period and when necessary subdividing that by stock number.

After placing his new models in their respective columns and straightening them a bit with his palms he went out into the living room and closed the door. It had become dark out and he turned on a tall lamp in the corner of the living room. He made himself dinner and brought his plate out to his kitchen table in the back of the living room behind his home theater system. He ate in the dimly lit room and remembered how Dana had poked fun at him for insisting that he always sit on the side of the table facing the kitchen and how he would spend several minutes carefully aligning every detail of the table spread, napkins, plates, silverware, condiments and seasoning into perfect

symmetry. For a moment while he chewed a mouthful of dry chicken and rice he wished he had given in and yielded to her desire for marriage. He usually preferred to be alone but she knew how to cook and make him smile in a way that eluded his understanding. Then he remembered what it had been like when she had moved in. All the little things she did that annoyed him, things so little only he would have noticed, like the way she would come home and slide her shoes off and leave them in the middle of the living room, throw the mail on the table in a mess or watch DVDs and leave them in the player, or worse put them back at random in the wrong place on the shelf. They had gotten into multiple arguments about such petty things and they always ended in the same way with her amused at how worked up he would get and Larry upset for her being unable to admit, or even realize, any wrongdoing.

Then there was the time he had thought that they might enjoy assembling a model together. Despite her initial enthusiasm, after the preliminary assembly her boredom expressed itself through her insistence that they paint the tank's exterior white with black stripes like a zebra and give the turret operator a tie-dyed uniform. Larry gave in but they still ended up giving up on the project and the zebra-flagged, as she called it, Panzer was never fully realized. He still had it stored in a box, partially assembled, in the left corner of the second bedroom's closet.

After dinner he cleaned the pan he had used and put the rest of the dishes in the washer. He went back into the living room and stood before his extensive collection of DVDs deciding which he would watch. He had seen them all, some of them more times than he could possibly count, every box set and special collector's edition director's cut

and usually rewatching was a pleasure for him, why risk watching something new? something unfamiliar? He loved these characters and the safely accessible worlds they inhabited and he liked to think that they loved him. However, tonight nothing seemed particularly appealing, he put *The Aviator* back in its place in the A section, strange that it would be out of place, had he misplaced it there? Or had he not noticed it since Dana had moved out?

That week Larry and Dana decided to meet at EZs, a retro diner that they used to frequent when they were first dating. The diner was designed to look like an old soda shop from the 50s. Both Dana and Larry grew up in small towns and liked the diner's nostalgic faux soda counter even though they agreed it was tacky. Larry had arrived early and sat in a red leather booth waiting for Dana. After moving the salt and pepper shakers against the wall, to either side of a glass jar filled with sugar packets, Larry straightened out their menus and looked out the window. After a few minutes, Larry saw Dana's little Nissan truck turn into the parking lot, she had brought Jake. Dana got out of the car and Jake, holding a model kit, lagged behind her as they walked into the diner. Larry caught their attention and they walked over to join him in the booth. Larry saw the model kit had been opened.

"Jake," said Larry, standing up to shake Jake's hand. "Dana," he said before giving her a stiff hug.

"Hello," said Dana. "I forgot how silly this place is," she said looking around and smiling. Jake, also taking in his surroundings, seemed to agree it was silly. After they sat down, Jake slid the model kit across the table to Larry.



“Sorry,” said Jake. “I opened it but I didn’t lose any of the pieces.”

“It’s alright, the Tupolev, at least you have good taste,” said Larry. Jake didn’t smile. Larry looked at the image of the bomber on the front of the model kit.

“Did you try to set it up?” asked Larry. Jake used his straw to spin the ice in the water their waiter had brought over.

“Yes, he did. When I found it he had put some of it together but just barely. I don’t think he--”

“I didn’t have any glue,” said Jake, “or paint.”

“Well, there you have it,” said Dana.

“You should keep it Jake,” said Larry. “I can find another Tupolev. And I have paints and glue you could borrow.”

Larry had hoped Dana would come alone so that they could catch up a bit but he didn’t mind Jake’s company. Larry was able to make the kid laugh a few times, which made him feel a little more relevant. Dana seemed to be enjoying herself and they mostly talked about her new job in the special collections department of the university library as a preservationist. After an hour Dana had to take Jake back to school. Larry made sure to give Jake the model back and walked out with them to their car. Before opening her door, Dana turned around to say goodbye to Larry and he instinctively began going in for a kiss but managed to catch himself, though he wasn’t sure if Dana had noticed or not.

At home, after sitting in his blue chair for a while, Larry dialed Dana’s number. After a brief silence, he heard the first ring and wanted to hang up. When he heard her voice on the answering machine he felt relieved that she hadn’t answered and he could

just deal with the machine. He cleared his throat in preparation for leaving a message.

“Hey, its Larry, I know this is random, but I had a really good time at lunch today and I was wondering if you wanted to finish that zebra-flaged Panzer?” He wondered if his voice sounded as strange as he thought it did or if she even remembered the model they had started builing together. “Give me a call back. Maybe Jake could come over too and we can set up the Tupolev too.”

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