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BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES

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Blurring the
Boundaries
EXPLORATIONS
to the **FRINGES**
of **NONFICTION**

EDITED BY B.J. HOLLARS

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN AND LONDON

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And to the readers as well, may you carve out your own fresh terrain.

And finally, to my wife, who put up with my constant yammering about my own boundless enthusiasm for this work.

I hope you feel the same.

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BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES

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B.J. Hollars

Introduction

Let the Blurring Begin

This is a story I've been told for most of my life.

In the spring of 1964 my grandfather drove his wife and three children to the top of the Alps until they could drive no farther. Without warning, the road suddenly narrowed, steepened; finding himself trapped in a particularly unforgiving slice of terrain, my grandfather was forced to make a choice.

“The choice” (as it is now affectionately known to my family) was whether the thirty-eight-year-old husband and father of three would get them out of the jam by easing the car's wheels forward along the edge of the mountainside or take the safer bet—reversing out from the direction he'd just come.

This is where the stories begin to diverge. According to my aunt—thirteen at the time, and the oldest of the children confined to the backseat—my grandfather pressed the automobile forward, though not before taking a few precautionary measures. The way she tells it, he handed over his wallet and insurance card to his wife, then waved her and the kids out of the car. The four watched as my grandfather's hands manned the wheel, creeping the white Corvair across the narrow roadway, bypassing the drop-off by inches.

My mother, the youngest of the children, remembers it far differently. While she, too, recalls her father handing over the wallet and insurance card prior to shooing them all away, in her version my grandfather does not drive forward but rather begins the slow business of turning the car *around*.

“He was attempting a ten-point turn,” my mother remembers. “He’d drive it forward a few inches and then reverse it. And after enough of this, he eventually got the thing turned around and drove us back down to safety.”

Yet most surprising of all is my uncle’s version. He is the middle child chronologically and, quite appropriately, the one situated snugly between his sisters. When asked of his recollections from that day, he offered not only a different version, but a far different tone as well.

To his memory, *nobody ever left the car*. His mother remained on the passenger’s side while the children in back peered over the edge of the cliff.

“But we were never in any real danger,” my uncle joked, downplaying the crisis. “That is, as long as our parachutes opened.”

For years, I have tried to write about this near-missed mountaintop disaster that occurred over half a century ago. Yet I’ve struggled to do justice to the story, mostly due to the many conflicting reports. To date, my most successful attempt was to write of it in the form of a Venn diagram, in which the outer regions of the circles recounted the varied versions of the tale while the intersection of the circles remained utterly blank.

While my Venn diagram approach, too, proved ultimately unsuccessful, its unique form seemed to explain why: a story as death defying as this demands a bit more overlap.

After all, how is it that my aunt, uncle, and mother could offer three wildly different interpretations of an event at which they were all present? While I expected a few minor discrepancies (perhaps a disagreement on the make and model of the car), quite surprisingly, the make and model of the car seemed to be the only details on which they could all agree.

My grandparents—whose adult impressions could have easily offered a ruling on the most accurate interpretation—passed away nearly

two decades back, leading me to believe that the truth had died with them. However, in my most recent attempt at writing of this event, I stumbled on some new information that I believed might finally put the matter to rest.

My grandparents, both writers themselves, took turns documenting their European adventure in a humorous though unpublished book titled “Five Is an Odd Number.” I came across several drafts of their collaboration a few weeks back, though surprisingly, not a single version directly addressed “the choice” on the mountainside.

Thankfully, their work did clear up at least one issue. While my aunt and mother have long disagreed even on what section of the Alps they were in (French or Swiss), my grandfather’s written account sets the record straight; they weren’t in the Alps at all, but the Jura Mountains of Switzerland.

“To the Swiss they are mere foothills in comparison with the Alps, but to Americans from the flatlands of Indiana, they are positively frightening,” he wrote. “It would be here that our overloaded little Corvair would have its trial run.”

Yet my grandfather’s mention of the “trial run” was as specific as either of my grandparents ever got.

In a later section my grandfather adds that the Swiss roads were “excellent” though “rather narrow” and that the guardrails “although psychologically comforting, probably wouldn’t prevent you from crashing down the mountainside should the worst happen.” Even when the opportunity presented itself, my grandfather fails to mention that “the worst” nearly happened to him.

Pages later he offers one final clue: “The Corvair behaved admirably on the Jura Mountains; we were in low gear most of the way, but we made it.”

They *had* made it, and according to my grandparents’ account, the drive had proceeded without incident.

I chalked up this obvious omission as my grandparents' attempt at maintaining an otherwise humorous tone. By inserting such a dire scene, they would risk the form they'd established. They'd hoped to tell a whimsical tale of a family overseas (not a family over a mountainside) and by inserting the tale they might never have been able to return to their much-preferred lighthearted tone.

Having been born twenty years after that day on the mountainside, I am in no position to speculate on their "writerly" choices. Yet it seemed odd to me that the scene was omitted entirely, and this decision forced me to face a difficult question related to my own work:

How am I—so far removed from the tale—ever to tell it truthfully?

I am not the only nonfiction writer to face such a struggle. Nonfiction writers regularly grapple with this feeling-out process, pressing our hands to the past in an effort to report or reshape what we thought we always knew. Throughout this process we often find that we hardly know the half of it, and even the half we think we know regularly remains uncertain. Yet this uncertainty need not be a roadblock, but an opportunity—a chance to tell it new.

Collected here are the works of twenty writers, all of whom have endeavored to do just that—explore the new terrain of the nonfiction genre. They have all set out on their own perilous journeys, planting flags on far-off lands while plotting pathways into the future.

I should warn you: no two essays are the same here. While there are a number of serendipitous connections throughout (read closely, you'll find them), what remains most interesting is that while two essays may share a theme or a subject, the writers' unique stylistic approaches provide vastly different reading experiences. Despite the varied approaches exhibited in the work, each writer undertook the boundary-stretching challenge with a shared purpose—to take nonfiction to new and innovative places.

As noted, this “boundary stretching” is demonstrated in a variety of ways. While writers such as Marcia Aldrich, Kim Dana Kupperman, Michael Martone, and Ander Monson all experimented with the limitations of structure—offering an assortment of diagrams, fragments, formats, and outlines—others, including Monica Berlin, Steven Church, Susan Neville, and Ryan Van Meter, toyed with perspective and point of view. Others still—including Eula Biss and Ashley Butler—bridged the divide between yesterday, today, and tomorrow by resurrecting the ghosts of history, while Stuart Dybek and Ryan Boudinot experimented with the comic memoir, recounting a past that once was (or, in the case of Boudinot, never was entirely). Other writers stretched in terms of subject matter, explicating on the inexplicable nature of human nature, as demonstrated by Naomi Kimbell, Paul Maliszewski, and Brian Oliu—all of whom searched inward first before culling the stories back out. And there are many other boundary stretches, too, like Lia Purpura’s epiphanic essay and Wendy Rawlings’s and Beth Ann Fennelly’s private obsessions that soon become our own. And finally, let’s not forget Dinty W. Moore and Robin Hemley—two veteran writers who take another tack altogether: focusing on their first drafts and their works-in-progress to teach us what might be gleaned from our early attempts.

These experiments in craft offer a single and less than shocking conclusion: the boundaries of genre remain unique for each writer. Yet we also learn that writers uncover this new ground by their refusal to take the well-marked route. Much like a white Corvair on a mountainside half a century ago, we writers are all teetering on precipices of our own making, secretly seeking a safe way down but proud of our risks all the same.

A final word for what you can expect to find here: essays, of course, but essays that are meant not merely to be read but to be studied as

well. As such, each essay is accompanied by a behind-the-scenes look at the writer's reflections on his or her piece, allowing the reader the opportunity to spend some time inside the author's head, studying the moves and the missteps that proved crucial for the final product. While I admit that essays are not frogs (and therefore struggle upon dissection), the authors' willingness to wield a scalpel to their own work serves as a testament to the difficulty of the craft: further reassurance that writing is hard for everyone (even them!) but that each word takes us one inch farther from the ledge.

Finally, at the end of the book you'll find a writing exercise specifically designed to correspond with each essay, giving the reader the chance to put the newly learned lessons to quick use.

I urge you not only to read this book but to write in it also. You are encouraged to scrawl on the table of contents and the inner cover. Scribble until all the blank spaces are filled and then move on to a fresh page in a fresh notebook, and on to the next after that. It is my great hope that eventually, after all the notebooks have been filled, you will discover your own path, your own voice.

And that much like my grandfather so long ago, regardless of the direction you're headed, you'll find the view exhilarating.

Marcia Aldrich

The Structure of Trouble

Some think of trouble

as difficulty, as something to be overcome. **Examples:** I'm having some trouble untying this knot. I'm experiencing some trouble getting into my kayak. I'm having some trouble getting my horse to move forward.

The assumption is that a remedy is available: the knot can be untied, you can be assisted into the kayak, the horse can be moved forward from its stopped position.

as the negative consequence of unwise or forbidden behavior. **Examples:** Pregnancy as the consequence of unprotected sex; a traffic ticket as the consequence of speeding.

Personal Example: In eighth grade, my science teacher, Mr. Samuels, warned me to stop pumping my leg. I had trouble (as in difficulty) keeping still in my seat for the whole period and I jiggled my leg *aggressively*, according to Mr. Samuels, scissor kicking, he called it. He warned me that if I didn't stop, there would be negative consequences. I didn't stop. I couldn't stop. Mr. Samuels took down the wood paddle hanging on the wall near the blackboard and paddled me in front of the class.

as when someone or something behaves in such a consistently troubling manner that she becomes synonymous with the word trouble. **Examples:** My friend Martha has a puppy who so regularly misbehaves that instead of calling the puppy by her name, Lousie, Martha says, “Here comes Trouble.” Or a kitten named Trouble because he was repeatedly found caught in the toilet bowl.

as a specific event of a certain duration that causes distress, that disturbs the heretofore tranquil waters of our life. **Examples:** bad news (that can be gotten over), a fight (that will be resolved), a storm (that will pass through).

Question: But what if trouble is something larger than a fight or a storm or a piece of bad news? What if it’s a depth we plumb? What if it isn’t an event but something that lives in the body and, like the blues, it comes upon us, it comes over us and we don’t know when or if it will pass?

Women may get the blues;
Men are more likely to get a bullet
Through the temple.¹

How Trouble Feels

It feels like a headache. Even though I don’t get headaches, that’s what I say when it’s too hard to describe what I feel like when trouble comes, when I’m heartsick and want to lie down, when I can’t stand up to the day before me. A headache is an acceptable reason to lie

1. Barbara Ehrenreich, “Did Feminism Make Women Miserable?” Salon.com, October 15, 2009.

down in the middle of the day, or so it seems in my experience. Who says, *I can't stand up anymore* to her boss, her teacher, her paramour? No one who wants to keep her job. Complicated excuses or explanations that require interpretation don't cut it in the workaday world.

What You Can't Say

You can't say: *It's a blue afternoon suddenly and I've got to lie down.*

You can't say: *For some reason I can't pinpoint, I'm remembering something that happened to one of my best friends in ninth grade who rode horses with me. How one night that year, horses at the stable were left out in the pasture when they shouldn't have been, despite tornado warnings. How in the storm the horses broke out of the fenced pasture and ran as a group onto the highway where because of the storm and the dark drivers couldn't see. Some of them were hit and killed and my friend's horse was among them.*

Question: I don't know why I am sometimes visited by this memory. Does the memory make me low or does my state of lowness trigger the memory? Which comes first? I never picture their deaths—just the running and the blood draining from their brains, and then my friend getting smaller and smaller, shrinking into a wizened old woman, shrinking into someone I could hardly recognize from the girl I once knew.

WARNING: It will not go well for you if you say anything like this. People will think you are unbalanced and given to visitations. The untroubled mask must be fitted closely to your face at all times while in public.

What You Can Say

A literal medical condition is required. That's what people understand and accept. In my experience, females are incapacitated by migraines on a regular basis. All manner of female has employed the headache to get out of whatever she was supposed to be doing, to craft an exit.

Most Frequent Time of Visitation

No doubt this is a subjective calculation; some might say from dusk to dawn, the hours of darkness, what some people call the sinking time. But not me. I say late afternoon. At least that's when it begins to make its first appearance.

Right now as the dinner hour approaches, women are lying down all over the world. I can hear the collective sigh of mattresses as they lie down with their loneliness, with whatever fells them.

Personal History: I've only known one man to claim a headache before dinner and that was my husband, who said his head hurt after he slipped on the black ice of our driveway and hit his head so hard he knocked himself out. That's what it took for him to say he had a headache and needed to lie down. Men do other things when trouble comes upon them. But those things are not what I think about when I think about trouble. I don't get headaches; I don't know why. I'm not complaining, mind you, I just find it odd to have the quintessential female affliction pass me by.

How It Feels to Me

Imagine a line of dancers, a chorus line, all moving to the same relentless beat with no appearance of difficulty and suddenly one of the dancers falls out of step, she's a beat off, a beat slow, and then two beats, and soon she staggers out of the line altogether and has to grab hold of the velvet curtain backstage to keep from collapsing. What came over her, you ask. Who can say exactly, but she needs to go lie down immediately.

That's how it is for me. One moment I'm fine, moving in the rhythm, in the line, in the chorus, until I'm not. I call what happens a falling, a staggering, but rather than falter, my heart flutters, a kind of stuttering rhythm, like a blue moth flapping from side to side inside my chest, caught in an existential corner.

Origins

The trouble with troubled relationships is they are troubled. And when the relationship is with one's parents, and especially one's mother, and has been troubled since birth, or so it feels, then one's whole life is framed by this trouble.

Personal Backstory: My parents never spoke of the circumstances surrounding my birth. No baby pictures were taken. No baby book, where the milestones are recorded, exists. One winter evening after dinner while we were washing up the dishes, I asked my mother what she remembered about my birth. "Well," she said, taken aback by the sudden question, "you were a small baby, only five pounds, and you had to stay in the hospital for two weeks before you could come home."

“Was there anything wrong with me?”

“Nothing lasting,” she said as she wiped the counter for the second time. I couldn’t understand why she didn’t want to tell me about my birth, why she seemed to be keeping something from me.

“Do you remember anything else?” I asked.

She said, “You weren’t born as planned,” and looked at me hard, as if an old anger had been stirred out of the corner. “You were two weeks past your due date and in the middle of the night my water broke.”

I didn’t have the foggiest idea what she meant by waters breaking. Was she being metaphorical about not being able to hold me inside her any longer? She seemed angry, angry at me. The words *plan*, *water breaking* were parts of a puzzle called my birth that I had to assemble.

“Anything else?”

That was it. She was done telling me the story of my birth. She hung her apron on the handle of the oven door and joined my father in the den to watch the nightly news.

My mother’s defensiveness on the subject of my birth led me to believe that the day, the event, my first entrance onto the stage and into my mother’s life, was complicated by emotions I didn’t understand and might never understand. I came to think that from my mother’s point of view my birth was a mistake and that was why all the memorializing forms were blank.

Causes (1): I sometimes think of my life as one long attempt, and failure, to right the wrong-footed relationship I’ve had with my mother. One strategy after another, with the same result: failure. Hoping that some miracle of understanding would occur, that the origin of the trouble between us would be exposed, worked

through, and put behind us—bridges would span across broken waters, hands would meet.

Aside: There is an annoying resiliency in this hopeful fantasy. Despite all evidence to the contrary, hope springs eternal that we can fix things that have gone wrong even when we don't understand why they went wrong in the first place. I can't say how many times and with what vehemence I've tried to bury this hope, cremate it and scatter its ashes, set it on a leaking vessel and shove it out to sea, kick it into the deepest hole one can dig on this earth, throw it down a bottomless well. To no avail. Turn around, and there it is, hope, fresh and potent as new-mown hay, a pasture full of it.

Causes (2): Then there's the matter of my mother's trouble, how it affected me, how I struggled to understand it.

Repeated Scene

In the late afternoon my mother used to retire to the bedroom to lie down on her twin bed (my parents did not sleep in the same bed; that in itself is a disturbing fact and may have contributed to my mother's malaise) whose cool mint spread was permanently unwrinkled.

Interruption: I have found little to be optimistic about in the facts that my parents slept in separate beds during their whole marriage and that my mother was obsessive about keeping her bedspread unwrinkled.

Her retirement often followed on the heels of my return home from school. She'd follow me into the kitchen, where I was stealing an after-school snack, open the refrigerator door, and bend over to peer inside as if the shelves were the dimly lit walls of a cave and she had no idea what lived there. She seemed a bit frightened. She'd turn to me, with hands on her thin, jutting hips, and ask in a quivering voice, *What do you think I should make for dinner?* I would suggest a few items she regularly made—meatloaf, mustard chicken, seven-layer casserole—and all of them angered her for reasons I have struggled to understand. In a huff, she'd throw open the cabinets above the stove and look behind the boxes of crackers and cereal as if she'd discover a murder weapon. (The anger didn't last; maybe it would have been better if it had. Anger often keeps one from collapse. But as I said, her anger would subside and collapse would come.) Finding nothing, she'd put the boxes back into their places and say, "Just thinking about dinner gives me a headache. I'm going to lie down for a few minutes." Down the beige hall to her bedroom she'd pad, trouble incarnate, and then she'd close her door.

It was never a few minutes.

The other character in the drama of the repeated scene was my father.

He would arrive home from work expecting dinner to be in preparation, if not ready, and instead he would find my mother lying down.

Aside: When I hear people say that feminism makes women unhappy and it would be better to return to the good old days when men and women knew their places, I want to beat my head against the wall. They didn't live in my house where my father knew his place (he had the job, made the money,

and expected to have dinner served to him by my mother or some female substitute at the end of the day) and my mother knew hers (she was supposed to oversee meals, specifically dinner). It had been decided by my parents under the watchful eye of the god of matrimony that dinner had to take place at the same time each day, at six o'clock sharp, or else. This was the meal grid.

My father never went to my mother to see what the trouble was. Instead he sat in the living room supposedly reading the paper but secretly watching the sun set over the icy fields and river curving like a question mark below our house.

Question: What was he thinking? He was probably wondering how long this latest spell of my mother's would last. Would she open the bedroom door and emerge ready to make dinner, or would she stay wrapped in her mint-green spread until morning?

On these occasions my father did not endeavor to feed himself or me, rustling up cheese and crackers, at the very least. No. He slumped in his lounge chair, looking out into the dark that had fallen, until he concluded my mother would not be putting in an appearance.

Third Character in Repeated Scene (Like Mother, Like Daughter, the Chain of Substitution)

Eventually he called me into the living room and, without any preamble, asked: *Will dinner be ready anytime soon?*

On these evenings I made a box of something, usually macaroni and cheese, brought my father his bowl, and took my own portion into my room where I disappeared for the rest of the night. I padded heavily down the same beige hallway as my mother, trouble incarnate, following her foot impressions in the plush pile.

Conclusion of Repeated Scene

I never heard my father enter the bedroom they shared.

Lingering Question: Why did my mother not think she had the wherewithal to refuse dinner, to alter the marital script so as to alleviate her anxiety? Suppose a documentary were made and the filmmaker pulled my mother aside and asked her, *What do you really think about dinner?* My mother, if she were truthful, would look into the camera and say, *I hate it!* And once she uttered those three little words, she'd say more. There might be no end to what she'd say about women and dinner and marriage and other things that troubled her. My mother never said any of these things and I don't know why.

Mystery and Manners

The next morning my mother gave some explanation for her disappearance. *She had a headache* was one of her usual ones. Sometimes she said, "I'm so tired," in a threadbare voice that baffled me. I couldn't understand what tired her, what made it so hard to get through the late afternoon and dinner. It seemed to me at that early age that my mother had nothing to do all day, and I envied

her freedom. I couldn't fathom why my father's expectation that my mother make dinner caused her to fall apart.

As a child I did not understand the mysteries of marital relations and adult disappointment.

Even now I don't know why my mother never found something to devote herself to, something that was hers. The gap between my mother's promise and the outcome, between the talented and spirited mother I knew and the mother who decided to lie down, is a mystery I haven't solved.

But the explanation for her disappearance that unnerved me the most was when she said, "I don't feel like myself," and then looked into her coffee cup as if it might be poisoned.

Question: What did that mean? Whom did she feel like? Was she referring to a marriage as a body-snatching experience?

Trouble, Mine

Fear

I fear my heartsickness is a variation of my mother's "I don't feel like myself." When I lie down in the late afternoon, I worry that what ails me, what's come over me, is my mother. I fear that I am my mother, that I, too, am susceptible to the gap between promise and outcome, between how things should be and how things are. There's a pause, of some hours, when the machinery of my life breaks down. I don't know what to call it, this low, this trouble. My body slows down, but not my brain. My brain

goes *Drive on* while I'm lying on my side, holding myself like a clenched fist, like a bud that will not open. I turn toward the sliding glass doors looking out into the backyard. Nothing moves but my eyes. They blink and blink again.

I don't know why I absorb other people's trouble, the sorrow that leaks out of car windows and suitcases at the passenger drop-off. But I do. Maybe it's because I grew up trying to understand my mother. It started young, this absorbing of trouble, taking it in, making it mine. It started with my mother.

Fall

I feel the need to lie down most in the autumn of the year. It's then that my heart feels like a sore. I feel a shifting in my chest, the way a rose, once soft and unfolding, begins to harden into a hard fist with the first frost. And the visitations begin.

Often my father stands on my front stoop in a beige and stained raincoat, the collar turned up, his glasses fogged, with an attaché case extended from his arm. I open the door and he grabs my arm and moves us through the vestibule with a sense of urgency I can't understand. He sets the attaché case on the kitchen counter and removes a slip of paper, which he waves before my face. Written there is his age and the number of times I've visited in the last ten years. One sum is large and one sum is embarrassingly small. "How much time do you think I have left?" he asks.

I leave my father in the kitchen but he follows me into the bedroom. He does not remove his raincoat, his shoes drip steadily into the carpet.

I'd like to drift off to sleep before anyone else shows up, but my mother sprawls on the bed beside me. "You called," she says. "No, I didn't call you." Just like old times, we argue while my father stands dripping and waving the slip of paper. My heart feels it can't take much more before it bursts inside my chest. When will my father trudge back to his retirement home? When will my mother return to her grave? When will the ice thaw on the river?

Question: Could it be that when my mother said she didn't feel like herself, she actually felt most like herself? That the opposite of what she said was true? On those late afternoons was the mask showing that everything was okay breaking down?

Everything wasn't okay and for a few hours, or maybe longer, she couldn't open her eyes.

It's just the opposite for me. I lie down like my mother and I want to close my eyes like my mother, but I can't. They just stay open.

