Writing True
THE ART AND CRAFT OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

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CHAPTER 1

Why Creative Nonfiction?

There are two worlds: the world that we can measure with line and rule, and the world that we feel with our hearts and imagination. To be sensible of the truth of only one of these is to know truth by halves.

— LEIGH HUNT

Creative. Nonfiction. Until recently, “creative” in writing has meant poetry, drama, and fiction; “nonfiction” has meant journalism, business writing, academic scholarship, and car manuals. So why combine them? Because creative nonfiction offers an invitation to writers that nonfiction, as understood today, often does not. “Nonfiction” has a no-nonsense ring to it, an emphasis on objectivity and logic. “Creative,” on the other hand, is synonymous with “original, productive, inventive, not imitative.” There’s the promise of play in the word “creative”—and the possibility of adventure, discovery, the soar of language.

Put together, “creative” plus “nonfiction” produce a synergy that attracts fiction and nonfiction writers alike. At a recent writers conference, every session on creative nonfiction was packed with novelists, journalists, editors, poets, and educators all drawn to the power of these paired words that invite the poet’s attention to language, the fiction writer’s power of storytelling, the journalist’s pursuit of fact, and the scholar’s reliance on research.

Would-be writers from many disciplines also seem drawn to the possibilities of the genre. On the first day of teaching creative nonfiction at our respective colleges, we ask, “What is the appeal of crea-
tive nonfiction?” and hear this from the future chemists, poets, literary scholars, accountants, and journalists who sign up:

- “It’s writing from the inside out.”
- “Sounding like me in a t-shirt, not a shirt and tie.”
- “Being free from the rules.”
- “Capturing what matters.”
- “Telling a good, true story—and not being boring.”

These writers sense what is at the heart of the genre: a delicious freedom to write, struggle with, and recreate one person’s vision of the real world and what’s personally important in it. It’s a freedom hard to find in today’s academia or workplace, which often stresses impartial, generalizable answers. Surveys, reviews of the literature, and footnoted sources are the norm; writing in the first person is not. When used, the “I” often becomes “We” (as in “We discovered”) or hides in the passive voice (“It is understood” instead of “I understood”).

Such anonymity was not always expected. Look how freely Charles Darwin, writing over one hundred years ago, uses “I” in his famous scientific treatise, *The Origin of the Species*. In the middle of his theory of evolution he writes, comfortably, about his pet pigeons:

> Believing that it is always best to study some special group, I have, after deliberation, taken up domestic pigeons. I have kept every breed which I could purchase or obtain, and have been most kindly favored with skins from several quarters of the world. . . . I have associated with several eminent fanciers, and have been permitted to join two of the London Pigeon Clubs. The diversity of the breeds is something astonishing.

In Darwin’s day and before, credibility was less tied to the voice of objectivity. Scientific theory and personal anecdote existed side by side, the subjective not incompatible with reasoned argument. But in our specialized age, many nonfiction writers feel more pressure to separate the world we measure by “line and rule,” using writer Leigh
Hunt's terms, from the world "we feel with our hearts and imagina-
tion." To publish in scientific journals, today's Darwin would need a
more anonymous and formal persona, or editors would write: "Too
subjective. Too much 'I.' Your pet pigeons are irrelevant!" This may
be true if readers say, "Who cares?" But what if readers do care? If the
pigeon anecdote makes the treatise and Darwin more interesting,
why not include it?

Creative nonfiction, then, is a new term for an old tradition of
letting the objective and subjective work together to describe the real
world. The aim is to make readers experience that world, using the
"I" as a guide. Sometimes the "I" is the main subject of the text—and
very active; at others, it's a bit player presenting a larger subject. Ei-
ther way, creative nonfiction assumes that a lively intelligence is
always there, behind the words, speaking in a voice that, say, if we
heard it at a party, would make us want to stay awhile and meet the
speaker.

Nonfiction Plus

The world of creative nonfiction is not invented. Events actually took
place; characters are real people. The writer, who is handed the facts,
must find the story in them and tell it true, ambiguities and all. In
fiction, you can change, pretend, and invent—whatever it takes to
be interesting. In creative nonfiction, you must locate and shape
what is interesting in the messiness of real life. And interesting is key.
It's not enough to report, summarize, and analyze the facts; creative
nonfiction also values storytelling, voice, and evocative language to
illuminate those facts, making readers connect experientially—as if
they were there.

Surprising is also key—for as Robert Frost reminds us, "No sur-
prise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." Discovering new
thoughts through the act of writing enables writers to leap beyond
what's verifiable by "line and rule" so that "creative" kicks in. You
can't force it, but new truths emerge if you are open to imaginative
play, as this writer is in a two-part name exercise that begins with the
objective (I) and moves toward the subjective (II):
I. My name is Robyn. It is spelled with a “y” and not an “i” and has one “n.” It has five letters, and spelled backwards it is nybor. It begins with “r.” has two syllables, and is easy to say. It is a female as well as a male name. It is the name of a bird. It is a name my mother liked.

II. My name is Robyn, and I am like a bird. I have skinny legs and a round belly, little eyes, and I sing when happy. I’d rather live in a tree anyway and peck worms for food, live in a soft rush basket and lay my blue eggs. I’d rather sing than talk and be able to shiver in tiny waves, like a bird with its little heart beating fast. I am named for this bird. How did my mother know to do that?

The first records facts about the name “Robyn.” No surprises here. The second moves beyond to capture the subjective experience of being Robyn. It is Robyn’s name, as Robyn feels it at the moment—not just intellectually, but in the gut. Both versions are rooted in the real world; both offer information; but only the second is “creative,” as in “original,” “inventive,” “not imitative.”

Move beyond exercises, and the objective is often a springboard for the subjective, as you can see in Brian Doyle’s essay, “Being Brians” (Chapter 12, Personal Essay). His opening paragraph is filled with facts that any Brian Doyle could have written:

> There are 215 Brian Doyles in the United States, according to a World Wide Web site called Switchboard.

But the piece ends in a lyricism only one Brian Doyle could write:

> . . . he was fascinated as a small boy sitting at his grandmother’s knee and watching her sew a lace doily, the word doily squirming in his mouth, his tongue tumbling over Doyle and doily for days afterward. . . .

That’s creative nonfiction, full of surprises for writer and reader, written in an individual voice that openly says, “See this world my way!”

These are requisites, we argue in this book, whether your subject is personal or not. Suppose, for example, New York City is the sub-
ject. If your aim is to tell readers what they need to know, it's no-nonsense nonfiction. But if you recreate the feeling of the New York experience, showing what it is like, it's nonfiction with "creative" in front of it. The line can blur because good writing—straight non-fiction and creative nonfiction—always attends to the craft of language, but creative nonfiction has that extra zing that comes from an engaging voice, a special way with language, a new slant. Which is which below?

A child who grows up eleven stories in the air has a peculiar relationship with the outdoors. From the bedroom window, it was the sky that was my landscape, not the ground. The trees—saplings when I was a child, now six stories high—were seen from above, their trunks invisible under a great territory of leaves. It was as easy to touch a cloud as the earth below.

—CORRINE DEMAS, Eleven Stories High: Growing up in Stuyvesant Town, 1948–1968

Be alert at all times. The traffic density of streets in Manhattan is probably the highest in the country. . . . When driving in the other boroughs a street index and map are necessities. Note: Drivers should keep car doors locked at all times.

—AAA Tour Book—New York

A map of the city, colored to designate nationalities, would show more stripes than on the skin of a zebra, and more colors than any rainbow.

—JACOB A. Riis, How the Other Half Lives

This is the geographic center of the Village. Around the park's central water fountain you'll see street musicians, ventriloquists, comedians, crack Frisbee throwers, skateboarding youngsters, magicians, jump roping, unicyclists and disco roller skaters. The Washington Square Arch (1892) is Stanford White's copy of a wood arch he made three years earlier to commemorate the centennial of George Washington's inauguration.

—GAULT/MILLAU, The Best of New York

They step down the grooved steps, clutching items, and the attendant lugs the bags out of the bin, looking for handles. They
get excited and jostle: is someone going to steal their bags? They have all heard the stories. One of them has a cousin who came here once and was a victim of a street crime. He had to have money wired so he could get home and that was the last time their clan went to New York. There is a thing called three-card Monte out to get you. They have all heard the stories and they all come anyway. The bags thud on concrete and get taken.

—COLSON WHITEHEAD, “The Port Authority” in The Colossus of New York: A City In Thirteen Parts

*How* we say something makes all the difference. We can talk in general terms or in specifics. We can theorize or tell stories. We can sound formal or informal, personal or detached. Here are three definitions that struck us by how differently they tackle the same task: defining creative nonfiction. All are nonfiction, but only one is creative nonfiction in that it not only *tells* us, but also *shows* us what the term means.

I. [In creative nonfiction] . . . reality is mediated and narrativized; . . . the particular subjectivities of authors are crucial and should be textually embodied rather than effaced; . . . language and form must have a surface and texture that remind readers the work is artificed; . . . even though some readers are considerably more adept and enculturated, the work is not reserved for a narrow specialist audience.

II. Creative nonfiction uses storytelling techniques (i.e., dialogue, narrative description, figurative language, and character development) to tell true stories as the writer experienced them. Creative nonfiction shares the following attributes: topics based on actual people, places, and events; emphasis on personal voice; graceful and memorable language; strong sensory detail; use of memory, facts and research to shape point of view; and emphasis on lively prose that appeals to a broad audience.

III. The vertical-striped cushions in early ’70s green and brown are hard and don’t give much after three hours, yet there’s something nostalgic about the couch where I have sat for so many writing courses—and how it triggers memories. . . .

The couch is real. I’ve scribbled in the inked grooves of the wooden armrest to my right, written “Hi Joe!” to a friend who sits
here in another class. I've run my fingers over the cloth and felt the fabrics worn away by time and other young writers. Creative Nonfiction is real, or at least most of it. In my portfolio, Celeste really drove the pick-up at age eight, and my mother believed the TR-7 would flip if she drove on uneven pavement. But as with any literary genre, my view is limited, the details chosen and molded to bring out something more than just what happened.

What girl may have sat where I sit now, once crushed by comments to her poem? Perhaps a new mother napped on this couch, exhausted with her schoolwork and new child. There are so many stories to tell, but one must choose and then find the way to retell it to generate interest in readers. . . . Perhaps, I'm finally starting to get comfortable on this couch.

The first is specialized prose that appeared in *College English*, a scholarly journal for English professors. The author, Douglas Hesse, assumes his readers will know what "mediated" and "narrativized" reality is and will read on with understanding. The second, by Mimi and Sondra, covers the same territory in language meant for writers of varying ages and abilities. Both definitions offer general guidelines for understanding creative nonfiction, a useful tool when trying to grasp this genre. But if you are about to write creative nonfiction for the first time, it helps to read our student Emari DiGiorgio's definition. Assigned, in class, to define creative nonfiction by writing it, DiGiorgio gives us a highly personalized definition that makes the characteristics of creative nonfiction come alive experientially, by putting readers on that brown couch.

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*Creative nonfiction fills a niche that will never be filled by either fiction or traditional nonfiction . . . about the things that happen to people in real time and the ways those things change us a day or a decade later.*

— Gerald N. Callahan
An Umbrella Term

Creative nonfiction is an umbrella term that covers everything from childhood memoir to literary journalism about the world at large. In between are personal essay, portrait, lyric essay, travel memoir, nature writing, photo essay, opinion essay, investigative memoir, and all nonfiction that values language, voice, memory, research, and imagination to recreate the real world. Some people argue that the more subjective memoir (which relies heavily on memory) and the more fact-based literary journalism (which relies heavily on research) don't fit under the same umbrella. We believe they do. In fact, we'd include all nonfiction that shares the following characteristics:

- An engaging voice that gives personal authority to the writing and pulls the reader in—whether the “I” is at the center of the text or on the sidelines.

- A desire for self-exploration and discovery, whether writing about yourself or others. Often, the writer's mind at work, struggling to understand, is as interesting as the subject matter—or more so.

- An allegiance to veracity, drawing on fact to write truthfully about the real world—and drawing on memory and imagination to show us this world in full color. If you are changing or inventing facts to make a better story, you are writing fiction. If you are using existing facts to write the story of your experience, you are writing creative nonfiction.

- A commitment to be interesting, using a full range of storytelling devices—dialogue, description, metaphor, anecdote, character development—to draw your reader into the writing.

- A freedom in form and language to go wherever meaning and imagination take you.

- A fine-tuned sense of the rhythms of language.
An ability, as essayist Cynthia Ozick says, to find "the extraordinary in the ordinary" so that the small things in life illuminate the big ideas that make readers care.

The Subgenres

When people ask, "What do you generally write?" we answer "creative nonfiction." But if they ask, "What are you working on right now?" the answer narrows to "a personal essay" or "a portrait" or "a piece of literary journalism." All share the general characteristics mentioned above, but these subgenres—and others—have their own special concerns. It is useful to know the subgenres before you start, when you are looking for possibilities, and also after you have a solid draft and want to revise. In between, we recommend that you set labels aside and write to see what emerges.

Note: In our anthology of readings in Part II of this book, you’ll find examples, with descriptions, of each subgenre.

Memoir

A memoir consists of stories about a slice of life, as opposed to autobiography that tells the whole life story from the day of birth to the present. Memoir relies heavily on memory, a subjective tool but essential for recapturing what’s important in your past. To fill in the unremembered spaces, research can help, but the emphasis is on perceptions and feelings. How you, as writers, experience your world is at the heart of memoir; it’s your story, not history. In memoir, you bring readers into your world, so they can meet the people, live in the landscape, and understand the historic and cultural context as you remember it—even if you have no photos, film, or tape recordings to support that memory. Here, for example, Alice Walker, the adult, is recreating a childhood conversation that happened soon after a terrible injury to her eye. While writing, she becomes, once again, that young girl:

I am twelve. When relatives come to visit I hide in my room. My cousin Brenda, just my age, whose father works in the post office
and whose mother is a nurse, comes to find me. "Hello," she says. And she asks, looking at my recent school picture, which I did not want taken, and on which the "glob," as I think of it, is clearly visible, "You still can't see out of that eye?"

— "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self" (Chapter II, Memoir)

**Personal Essay**

Personal essays—or familiar essays, as they are also called—focus less on the past and more on the present, exploring some aspect of the here-and-now, which can also include connections to the past. Kandi Tayebi’s essay, for example, begins as she and her husband are watching the news on TV:

“They should take off their rings," my husband stated matter-of-factly as we watched CNN broadcasting more trouble in the Middle East. For two years he had fought in the Iran-Iraq war, but he rarely shared his experiences with me, perhaps feeling that his American-born wife might have difficulty relating to the realities of warfare in one's homeland. . . .

— "Warring Memories" (Chapter 12, Personal Essay)

Many consider the short memoir a form of personal essay, and the lines do blur as writers move back and forth between past and present. When the main focus is on the past, when the writer is saying, "This is what happened to me," we call the piece memoir. When the focus is on the present, when, as in "Warring Memories" the past enlightens that present, we call the piece an essay. Often, the difference is a matter of length. Memoirs can be book length. Personal essays are usually under thirty pages. Both, when working well, tell a larger truth about the writer's experience, one that readers can relate to their own lives.

**Portrait**

A portrait makes a person other than the “I” come alive on the page. Also called a profile or a biographical sketch, a portrait can be about someone you know well or about someone you’ve just met and/or read about. The first relies on personal experience; the second, on
research. Either way, interviewing and gathering background material will enrich your portrait, making readers see, hear, and care about this person by conveying what, to you, is unique. Consider how Alice Steinbach recreates her ninth-grade teacher in “The Miss Dennis School of Writing” (Chapter 13, Portrait), using description and her character’s own voice:

... But it was not Miss Dennis’ appearance or her unusual teaching method—which had a lot in common with an out-of-control terrier—that made her special. What set her apart was her deep commitment to liberating the individual writer in each student. “What lies at the heart of good writing,” she told us over and over again, “is the writer’s ability to find his own unique voice. And then to use it to tell an interesting story.” Somehow she made it clear that we were interesting people with interesting stories to tell. Most of us, of course, had never known we had a story to tell, much less an interesting one. . . .

Essay of Place

An essay of place captures a setting or a series of scenes by combining factual information, strong sensory detail, a story line, and the writer’s point of view. If you are writing about Washington Square in Greenwich Village, New York, with just a series of facts and no point of view, you are writing straight nonfiction, as in this Gault/Millau guidebook description that begins, “Around the park’s central water fountain you’ll see street musicians, ventriloquists. . . .” It’s when you make us feel your experience at Washington Square, as essayist Cynthia Ozick does, that you are writing creative nonfiction:

... already late, I begin walking very fast toward the park. The air is smoky with New York winter grit, and on a clogged Broadway a mob of trucks shift squawking gears. But there, just ahead, crisscrossed by paths under high branches, is Washington Square.

Opinion Essay

This form presents a point of view you feel strongly about and is often found on the op-ed page of a newspaper. (Op-ed literally means “opposite the editorial page.”) Most opinion essays are straight non-
About now, most recent college graduates, a mere week or two beyond their last final, are giving themselves a nice respite. Maybe they’re on a beach, maybe they’re on a road trip, maybe they’re in their rooms, painting their toenails black with a Q-tip and shoe polish. Does it matter? What’s important is that they have some time off.

Do they deserve this time off? Well, yes and no. Yes, because finals week is stressful and sleep-deprived and possibly involves trucker-style stimulants. No, because a good deal of the four years of college is spent playing foosball.

I went to a large state school—the University of Illinois—and during my time there, I became one of the best two of three foosball players in the Land of Lincoln. I learned to pass deftly between my rigid players, to play the corners, to strike the ball like a cobra would strike something a cobra would want to strike.

Note: Visit our website at <college.hmco.com/english> for the full text of this opinion essay—and others that use creative nonfiction to present their arguments.

**Literary Journalism**

This form of journalism combines investigative reporting with personal voice, storytelling, and memorable language. Rather than just convey the journalist’s facts (who, what, when, where, and why), the writer wants to recreate the experience of the world being investigated. There’s a strong authorial presence even if the “I” is mainly a guide, rather than a key character. Tracy Kidder, for example, spent a year observing Chris Zajac’s fifth-grade classroom before writing *Among Schoolchildren*. He doesn’t use the pronoun “I,” but we feel his presence in the room nonetheless:

When Chris had first walked into her room—Room 205—back in late August, it felt like an attic. The chalkboards and bulletin
boards were covered up with newspaper, and the bright colors of the plastic chairs seemed calculated to force cheerfulness upon her. On the side of one of the empty children's desks there was a faded sticker that read, OFFICIAL PACE CAR. A child from some other year must have put it there.

Kidder doesn't just report; he recreates experience. Rather than just tell what happened, he shows characters and scene—and as readers, we begin to understand that deeper levels of meaning lie beneath the facts. This difference distinguishes straight journalism from literary journalism in that the apparent subject (what happened) is not the real subject (what the events mean). This interpretation gives literary journalism its timeless quality, making Chris Zajac's classroom in 1988 still seem relevant today. (See Chapter 15 for more of Kidder's writing on Chris Zajac and her classroom.)

Almost any writing—book reviews, cultural criticism, “how to” pieces, photo essays, even academic essays and literary criticism—can be creative nonfiction if the writing has voice, uses storytelling well, and has a grace of language and sensibility that shows and tells.

Ultimately, what is creative in creative nonfiction is, in the words of our friend and colleague, Ed Hack, “discovery in memorable language,” writing in which your readers “feel, word by word, a network of associations building, levels of meaning consolidating, a drama of an unfolding situation, whose essence is the insistence on making each line count.” If we do this well, readers not only enter our worlds, but they reenter their own worlds in new ways. That is the power of creative nonfiction or, as we like to think of it, of “writing true.”

Ways In...

These exercises offer ways into writing creative nonfiction. Try some or all of them and experience how the objective and the subjective can merge or complement each other. We recommend keeping a notebook where you can experiment with—and revisit—all of the “Ways In...” that end each of our ten chapters. For more on notebooks, see the next chapter, The Power of the Notebook.
1. Writing Your Name—In Four Parts

A. Write only the verifiable facts about your name: What it means, how you got it, how to spell it, what your nickname is, who else has your name. Stick with what other people would agree upon—and leave your point of view out of it. Don't think first. Start writing—5 minutes max.

Mimi writes the objective, verifiable facts:

My name is made up of 2 m's and 2 i's, short for Miriam, which comes from the Bible—either Moses' sister or his nursemaid—depending on what you read. It's thought of as a Jewish name, a girl's name. Given to me by my parents Arthur and Gerda. Renamed by sister as Mimi at around age six.

B. Now write about your name “from the inside out” as only you could write it. Make it highly subjective, exploring how your name feels to you—and surprise yourself. If you are writing only what you know, it's nonfiction without a creative leap. Again, don't think before you write—5 minutes max—and forget about grammar, spelling, or making sense.

Mimi writes the subjective truths:

I love the perkiness of Mimi, the optimism and energy of those 4 letters bouncing around without the weight of the past, the Jewish past of Miriam to drag me down. I'm reinvented as Mimi, set loose to define myself, unshackled, except when others define me with a shift of vowels: MEME vs. Mimi, the girl of immigrant German Jews who got out from being MEEERRYAM, as my Aunt Kaethe said it, bleating it like an old German goat on the Rhine. Mimi made me American until I got to U of M and became MEME who had to start saying TEARABLE and WHOORABLE like a true Midwestern. Oops, there goes the past again.

C. Read Brian Doyle's “Being Brians” to see how he used the Internet to research his name and how he worked that information into his essay. You can also research your name—using the Internet, asking your parents, looking through name books, and/or interviewing others about how they feel about their names. Questions to ask: How did you get
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your name? What nicknames do you have? What experiences—good or bad—have you had with your name? Do you think of it as masculine or feminine? What other names would you rather have?

D. Start writing again—either adding to what you have or starting anew—and see where it takes you (10-minute timed writing).

2. Identifying Creative Nonfiction

A. Using the guidelines from this chapter, read the Short Shorts in the anthology and find a piece of creative nonfiction that speaks to you. Star a few passages that pull you in as a reader and ask yourself why. Share your choice with others, reading paragraphs out loud and then discussing what makes this piece creative nonfiction and what subgenre you think it is.

B. Locate a piece of creative nonfiction not reprinted in this book. Make copies of it to share with others and explain why you think it falls in the creative nonfiction category.

3. Writing About Place—In Four Parts

Here's an exercise that shows how memory, here-and-now observation, and research can join forces to capture a special place on the page. It works best if you do all four parts in sequence.

A. Think of a place that interests you and write about it—first from memory, focusing on what makes this place vivid for you (3–4 minutes max).

Sondra chose the subway:

The faces of humanity—so many stories, so many lives literally rubbing elbows. And the pace—hurtling in darkness, bumping, lurching, traveling at lightning speed. My body alive underground.

B. Second, go to that place, and record what you see, feel, and hear. Capture as many details as Sondra did:
Kids, backpacks, CD players, fluorescent lights, man asleep, mouth open; girl, chewing on a yellow pencil, reading Tolstoy; man with a cane, The Wall Street Journal under his arm; teens, huddled together at the end of the car, their hands all over each other; a kid, tugging at his mom; she rolls her eyes.

C. Now, look up factual information about that place—Sondra found hers on the website of the Metropolitan Transit Authority:

The New York City subway system, which officially opened on Thursday, October 27, 1904... has 468 stations serving 24 routes—more than any other system in the world. Two hundred seventy-seven of the stations are located underground. There are 31,180 turnstiles; 734 token booths; 161 escalators. Each day, more than six million people use New York City Transit—almost 2 billion customers annually.

D. Finally, start again, using at least one thing from A, B, and C. You might begin by reading a few essays of place, such as Alexandra Fuller's depiction of Africa, which relies primarily on smells and sounds, or Gretel Ehrlich's lyrical depiction of an island, or Gretchen Legler's visual depiction of Antarctica. Here is what Sondra wrote:

I never tire of watching, looking, imagining. Where are they all going? Who is in love? Who's upset? The girl reading Tolstoy; the man with the Wall Street Journal tucked elegantly under his arm; the mom who wishes her kid would stop whining—who are they? The lovers in the corner can't take their hands off each other. The high school kids with their bulging backpacks and CD players move their hips in time to the music, oblivious, caught in the spell of their own private worlds. So too is the heavyset man across from me, dozing, his mouth ajar. I sit here and marvel that we are a fraction of the 6 million people who use the subways each day, breathing the same air, tucked away in a gray steel compartment, traveling at lightning speed through the bowels of Manhattan.

4. Definition—In Two Parts

Pick an abstract word that is important to you—Justice, Desire, Dating, Work, Faith—and copy out a dictionary definition,
adding a few more attributes that you think most people would agree on. Then skip a line and write a highly personalized definition of the word, as DiGiorgio does when she defines creative nonfiction in terms of a brown couch or Kathleen Norris does in “Rain” and Bailey White does in “Buzzard.” Tip: Ground your definition in something concrete, as these three writers in our workshops did:

**Love**

1. Profoundly tender, passionate affection for another person; intense personal attachment or affection; strong enthusiasm or liking.


— LAURA CROLL, CREATIVE NONFICTION WORKSHOP

**Home**

1. The place where one lives; the place where one was born or reared; a place thought of as home; a household and its affairs.

2. *Home* is walking out of the airport terminal, knowing how close you are to everything you’ve missed. It’s walking into your living room and taking a breath, even if unconsciously. It’s the smell of your father’s famous cheese enchiladas, the sound of your dog’s nails against the new hardwood floor, the unidentifiable smell from your brother’s room. Home is the desire to be there when you’re not. It is more than a house; it is that house with that family, on that street, in that neighborhood, in that city.

— KIRSTIN MITCHELL, CREATIVE NONFICTION WORKSHOP

**Courage**

1. The state or quality of mind or spirit that enables one to face danger, fear of the vicissitudes with self-possession and resolution; bravery.
2. Facing my big brothers every night when I was pledging; getting off the ski lift for the first time to go down the bunny slope; telling someone you’re in like, not love; sitting in the last seat on a roller coaster; moving out; not moving back in; cutting off my dreadlocks after 13 years; growing them in the first place.

—Kevin McCall, *Creative Nonfiction Workshop*