

## BLENDING TEXTS

### from the author

*“At Adam’s Funeral” was written for Chris Madden-Feikes’ WRT 422: My Story/Our Myths: Studies in Creative Nonfiction. The assignment was to write a “creative nonfiction review” in which a personal response is generated through the close study of another text. After reading Cheryl Strayed’s piece “The Love of My Life” in Best American Essays 2003, I was able to synthesize my own experiences with Strayed’s; the result was a new plane of meaning and reflection that I had never before discovered.*

### from the professor

*Students began the course “Studies in Creative Nonfiction” by reviewing a self-selected creative nonfiction piece. Previously the class had read, “Toward a Definition of Creative Nonfiction” by Brett Lott. In his essay Lott characterizes the genre of book review as “creative nonfiction in that it is a written record of the reviewer in relation to the book in question.” The purpose of this early assignment was threefold: to help students develop deeper insights about a CNF text; to test and share insights or views about a particular author/text with readers; to provide a vehicle to sharpen understandings of genre possibilities and challenges while doing creative nonfiction writing. As this was an entry assignment, it was intended to help students form a writing community. Susan Crandall encases memoir within juxtaposed quoted fragments from Cheryl Strayed’s “The Love of My Life,” a piece which appeared in The Best American Essays 2003. It may be helpful for outside readers to consider that students were writing for the audience of the WRT422 class and that all students had read the piece Susan “reviews” via memoir. - Christina Madden-Feikes*

# At Adam's Funeral

Academic writing can be sharply different from one form to the next. In this unique essay, the author blends personal memories with that of an established professional text resulting in an engaging piece of writing

by Susan Crandall

I dreamt once that I was in love with my cousin Adam Campbell. In the dream, he was rosy and cherubic. When we kissed, he was soft. In the morning, my lips remembered Adam's kisses. I felt the sensation dancing quietly just above my skin, woven and brushed, like a cashmere sweater.

I talked to my dad over instant messenger and told him that I had a dream that Adam was my lover. I didn't want to tell him this, embarrassed, but something seemed to propel me forward. He typed his response, slowly. I waited. "That's O.K.," the screen read. "I dreamed a lot about my brother when he died too."

*In her essay "The Love of My Life," Cheryl Strayed writes about how her life changed when her mother died unexpectedly.*

My grandfather Hank died one day in my living room. He fell out of bed and called to my mom, singing on the night air, "Peggy, Peggy..." No one heard him until it was the cusp of dark and light. There was a moment when he died. He was a fountain of coagulation and mucus. He was very pale and his skin looked like a molded piece of white rubber. I was 16 but I felt like an infant in that moment when my grandfather took his last breath.

*"When I was a child, I witnessed a leaf unfurl in a single motion. One second it was a fist, the next an open hand. I never forgot it, seeing so much happen so fast."*

At Adam's visiting hours, there is a reception line. His mother and father and sister and brother stand up next to the casket. My dad and mom—his uncle and aunt—are up there too, along with my paternal grandparents and my dad's brother Mark. I sit in the back with my brother and his wife and my boyfriend. I watch as the room fills with people. The line toward the casket is jumbled and when people first enter the room, they don't see Adam. They see Debbie and Paul and Becky and Aaron first. Then, as the line straightens out, they see Adam, white and chalky. I watch as mouths open, lips quiver, eyes close, Adam's apples jump, breaths halt. I feel bad watching their pain so I watch their hands instead. Hand to hand. Grasping hands of my dad and my grandfather. Strangers. Sweaty hands, clammy hands, nervous hands, sad hands.

At one point, my grandmother leaves the receiving line. She is wearing the purple flowered dress from J.C. Penney that she wore to my high school graduation. "Susan, I'm glad James and I got the flu shot," she whispers to me on her way to the bathroom. She holds out her veiny hand, and I see it is pumping alive with purple. "I'm touching everyone's hands."

## the **it.** factor

The essay instantly establishes a tone, introducing a strong voice that is free of self-consciousness. This creates a feeling of candid exclusivity, enticing the reader to continue from the very first lines.

## the **it.** factor

Writing about that which is uncomfortable—this essay sidesteps writing about a topic that is "safe," focusing instead on the gray areas of grief, death, and loss.

## the **it.** factor

The repetition of the word "and" here is a break from the traditional rules of grammar, but creates a sensation that works to maintain the essay's tone. How can the rules of language be modified to create effect, and when is it appropriate to do so?

*“To express loss on that level is to cross a boundary, to violate personal space, to impose emotion in a nonemotional place.”*

I took a painting class once and was quite a beginner. The teacher, a graduate student, was talking about color. I was 20 years old and couldn't name the primary colors. I told her I must have missed that day of kindergarten. She tried to tell me about complementary colors. She said, “When you look at something red for a long time, close your eyes and you will see green.” I wondered if it worked the other way too, but I was too afraid to ask. Later, in the passenger seat of the car, I stared at the grass as it zipped by and closed my eyes. Inside, I saw the spot on the carpet from my grandfather's bleeding head. I could see red lines darting along my eyelids like a heart monitor.

*“Her absence was a ruse, a darkly comic literary device, a terrible and surreal dream.”*

I have this one memory of my father. He was standing at the kitchen counter of my apartment, looking for something to eat. It was summertime and hot. He took a russet potato from a bowl on the counter. He ran it under the tap and wiped it with a paper towel. He took a bite, white potato crunch hitting white teeth. I was astonished. “What are you eating?” I asked. “A potato,” he said. “Raw?” I asked. “Why not?” he said.

I think about my dad and his raw potato a lot. Someday my father will die. I try to figure out what I will remember about him and what I will forget. Once, I asked my dad to make me a tape of some of his favorite songs. Cat Stevens' lyrics of “Father and Son” hit me like the potato did:

‘I was once like you are now, and I know that it's not easy  
To be calm when you've found something going on  
But take your time, think a lot, why think of everything you've got  
For you will still be here tomorrow but your dreams may not.’

After listening to the tape for the first time, I told my dad that I liked it. I told him I could tell that he selected the songs carefully. After Adam's funeral, we listened to this song on the car ride home from Batavia. My dad was driving. I asked if I could play this song at his funeral. My dad nodded and sniffed and wiped his nose with a white hanky. His left hand steered. His right was on his knee. I put my left hand on his right hand and we drove home through Pennsylvania.

*“Occasionally I came across people who'd had the experience of losing someone who's death made them think, I cannot continue to live. I recognized these people: their postures, where they rested their eyes as they spoke, the expressions they let onto their faces and the ones they kept off. These people consoled me beyond measure. I felt profoundly connected to them, as if we were a tribe.”*

Dinnertime at my Grandma Grace and Grandpa James' house in Sherman, New York is a memory that doesn't fade. Aaron and Adam were good kids at heart, but at the dinner table their goodness was intercepted by mashed potato football fields and broccoli forests. Conversations were singed with 11-year-old boy bathroom stories filled with unsurprisingly sharp visual imagery and descriptions. One summer, after dinner, all the cousins—me, my brother, Becky,

## the it. factor

One of the essay's greatest strengths is its ability to draw parallels *between* texts. It is demonstrative of the ways in which sources can interact with writing, rather than just provide the traditional forms of support.

Adam, and Aaron—went down to the creek to look at crawdads and snails. I found a crayfish and took it back to my grandparents’ house in a Cool Whip container. When I wasn’t looking, my cousins found my new pet, Mr. Henry. Aaron wound up and pitched Mr. Henry, and Adam hit Mr. Henry with a plastic wiffle ball bat.

*“We are allowed to be deeply into basketball, or Buddhism, or Star Trek, or jazz, but we are not allowed to be deeply sad. Grief is a thing that we are encouraged to ‘let go of,’ to ‘move on from,’ and we are told specifically how this should be done.”*

Three sons and brothers have died in my dad’s family in the past three generations. They were never fathers. My grandfather James’s brother Luke died when he was 17 in a motorcycle accident in Mayville, New York. My father’s brother Donald Luke died when he was 28 in James-town, New York, after being drafted for Vietnam and arriving home with sudden-onset lung cancer. My mother told me once in a low voice that they suspected his gasmask was defective during training exercises. It was a secret. Adam, at 21, died secretly too. He said goodnight to his sister, Becky, on an early December morning, and Debbie and Paul found him several hours later in a snow bank. When I heard this I suddenly thought about Adam’s death certificate and the words on it. Adam Morris Campbell, it would read. Cause of death: Unknown. Location: In a crimson snow bank, Batavia, New York.

*“What did those around me do? They did what I would have done— what we all do when faced with the prospect of someone else’s sorrow: they tried to talk me out of it, neutralize it, tamp it down, make it relative and therefore not so bad. We narrate our own lesser stories of loss in an attempt to demonstrate that the sufferer is not really so alone.”*

Aaron Campbell grew up to be a real-live mortician. After Adam died, my boyfriend and I visited Debbie, Paul, Aaron, and Becky. I was worried about the visit: about what to say and what not to say. I sat on the side of the couch where I remembered Adam sitting the last time I had seen him in this living room. I felt his kisses burning on my lips. I touched the armrest and held his hand.

Aaron filled any pending silences with stories about college at SUNY Canton in the mortuary science program. Once, he said, he designed a t-shirt for a competition that was a knock-off on the absolut vodka ads; it featured a bottle of embalming fluid with the text below reading “100% proof.” Another time, he and a friend fashioned male genitalia—“penises, complete with hairy balls”—out of the pale clay used to practice modeling and applying cosmetic to the face of a dead body.

*“Sometimes a story is not about anything except what it is about.”*

At the visiting hours, Adam’s girlfriend’s mother comes to the back of the room and sits down next to me. We have never met. Adam’s girlfriend was named Susan. Susan’s mother talks a lot. “Sue is very sad,” she says. (We all were.) I nod sympathetically. Then she points at Adam in the casket. “He looks *perfect* from back here,” she says, almost yelling. “But up close, he looks really pasty. Do you think they had trouble with the skin?”



### the **it.** factor

Color is a crucial descriptive force in this essay. What might the rhetorical implications of this be?



### the **it.** factor

Incorporates an outside text in a way that is congruent to the flow of the essay—this technique creates a smooth and fluid transition between paragraphs that may have suffered if left to the mercies of traditional formatting. Would the overall effect have been as powerful if each paragraph started, “Cheryl Strayed said...”?

*“We like to say how things are, perhaps because we hope that’s how they might actually be . . . We want these things to have an order, an internal logic, and we also want them to be connected to one another.”*

At Adam’s funeral, his brother Aaron gives the eulogy. He looks professional, and he is. He says that he did not write anything down for his speech and prepared very little. He says that usually his brother Adam would write things for him: papers for school, youth sermons for church. Adam’s writing teacher from SUNY Brockport also speaks. He reads a poem Adam had written a few months before, a poem about struggling to find words and then, in the darkest part of nighttime, finding them within reach. A few weeks after her brother died, Becky told me that at night, late at night, Adam came into her bedroom and spread novel seeds. He talked out his next chapter. In his journal, she said, he had written furiously, with black ink. This writing was hard for her parents to read because they did not know what was fact and what was fiction.

After Aaron and the professor speak, we walk to the front of the church, right next to the olive green casket, and take communion. We dip pita bread in grape juice. My grandfather James and grandmother Grace kneel at the altar to pray. The rest of my family waits at the edge of the pew for them. They get up very slowly, especially my grandfather, and when he shuffles past his eyes look forward. He grabs my brother’s hand. Not long, he seems to say. Not long at all.

*“But this isn’t fiction.”*

A month after Adam’s funeral I got a headache after reading a book for an entire day. That night, I woke up and vomited into a trashcan as my boyfriend held my hair. It was my first migraine. He turned on a light to guide me to the bathroom and I felt like my head was a bag full of fluid. I felt the light touching my pupils. He asked if I was okay. I suddenly thought about Adam, the night he died, shooting up in his bedroom with the words of Hunter Thompson swimming in his head, pounding: “If this is going to get heavy, I want to be as fucked up as possible.” No one knows exactly how he died, but in my pain that night, this image was strangely comforting. I put a towel over my head. Pulsating. Lines of text swam in my brain and I vomited again, into a plastic bag.

I read later that migraines are caused by the shrinking and swelling of blood vessels in your head. Foods, tension, bright lights, smells, and noises can all trigger migraines. I also read in the New England Journal of Medicine that three children aged 8 to 10 experienced migraines after spending hours reading “Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.” Adam’s truth was part fiction. He thrived on the juices of words and the drippings of language. He ate all the trigger foods: chocolate, nuts, MSG. He waited for the flicking lights and the throbbing pain. And then he wrote.

‘All the times that I’ve tried keeping all the things I knew inside  
It’s hard, but it’s harder to ignore it  
If they were right I’d agree but it’s them they know not me  
Now there’s a way and I know I just have to go away  
I know I have to go.’

I interviewed my dad in January. I was gathering material for a book, something like I

### the it. factor

Demonstrates the validity of memory in the personal essay. Here, the author embraces and claims her memories, and does not include trite justifications for their inclusion. Experience is a valid source, too.

imagined Adam might write. I wanted to know about 1950s little league and watching a big brother change and wither and die. I wanted to learn about my dad, to know about my dad. This is when he told me about Luke, his father's brother (his own uncle), who died in the motorcycle accident. He also told me about my uncle, Donald, and the way he looked propped up in a Jamestown hospital bed. Luke and Donald were never fathers. My dad talked into the tape recorder deliberately, slowly:

“One thing I wanted to say is that I always had sort of an advantage, I thought, growing up cause my dad was always the type that took things in stride and I always just tried to follow that. So I think that was something I learned from him, like, don't get too excited about good things and don't get too down about bad things. And it was always like I could just copy him . . . and, you know, probably he was like more down about bad things and more excited about good things but he just didn't kind of show it. So that was always just something I followed with him.”

Adam's father, Paul, is standing next to the olive green casket. He touches Adam's hair. He convulses into patterns of in and out, sobs. He turns to me. “Adam was a good kid,” he says. I nod. I see the body's white plaster skin. “But he was also dark. He was a real dark kid.” I close my eyes and watch as the lights fade and the colors flicker.

*“Healing is a small and ordinary and very burnt thing. And it's one thing and one thing*

Strayed, Cheryl. “The Love of My Life.” Rpt. In *The Best American Essays*. Ed. Anne Fadiman. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003.

## works cited

**Susan Crandall**, a third-year policy studies major from State College, Pennsylvania, is graduating in May 2004. She is an aspiring fiction and creative nonfiction writer and hopes to pursue her M.F.A. in the coming years. She lives with her cat, Nathan, and a plethora of vegetarian cookbooks.

### the factor

The juxtaposition of white and dark here expose a contrast, an opposition. Why did the author choose to conclude her essay in this way?