Accessing Borders in Literary Journalism

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As thesis advisor for Amy Thompson.

I have read this paper and find it satisfactory.

Thesis Advisor

Date
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"Immersion reporting, narrative techniques that free the voice of the writer, and high standards of accuracy... An exciting and creative genre..."
—Norman Simms, describing literary journalism in "The Art of Literary Journalism"

"The literary journalist enjoys greater freedom in researching a story and greater flexibility in telling it, often refocusing in an instant to take us beneath the surface and into the psyche, either a character's or the writer's own."
—Kevin Kerrane, in his essay "Making Facts Dance"
I. Précis

Statement of Research Problem

How do literary journalists take a complex, often technical subject such as the conflicts and culture surrounding the Mexican-American border and create a piece of writing that appeals to readers of every background?

I grew up in a community that relied on Mexican immigrants to work in the agricultural sector, and many of these immigrants were illegal. I was raised listening to Spanish and with many close friends in the Mexican community. The subject of immigration does not only interest me, however; it impacts our entire nation so that hundreds of people are writing about immigration and the Mexican-American border in both fiction and nonfiction. I am in the creative writing field, so I combined my interest in both topics to address the issue of how nonfiction can be made appealing to every reader, in spite of being heavy with statistics, facts, and thousands of faceless people.

Context of the Problem

As long as there are jobs in the United States and an attempt to stop the flow of immigrants northward, the United States will always have conflicts involving the Mexican border. This ongoing problem makes the issue important in a literary sense because there is an abundance of information to get out on the written page concerning the subject. Combining this topic with literary journalism reaches into a broad scope of possibility for other technical subjects to be made accessible to readers.

Methods and Procedures

The most important methods I used were simply to read an abundance of material covering both the topics of the border culture and literary journalism. The process of closely
examining various components of a written piece for their techniques is not a new procedure, but each new piece of writing must be analyzed with a fresh perspective on how that particular work fits into a broad spectrum of literature. The reader must also have a strong background on literary techniques, which I have gained in my classes and furthered through my research for this project.

**Findings**

Metaphor, detail, and human appeal, which are generally considered writing techniques used in fiction, are the methods I found to be most useful in making a piece of nonfiction interesting to a general readership, and therefore making it ‘literary journalism,’ part of the creative nonfiction field. These points show that literary journalism has a high standard to uphold, being exciting and interesting while still adhering to factual evidence.

**Conclusions**

My results are comparable to others who have addressed the field of literary journalism. I simply went a step further to apply my research specifically to literature about the Mexican-American border, and found authors that have used these techniques to create outstanding writing. This is not an easy field to write for because there are so many expectations for the author, and I have high respect for those who accomplish it. The next step in this research for myself is to continue applying what I have learned in my own writing. In a general perspective, the nonfiction community will need to reach more for techniques such as metaphor, human appeal, and detail in order to continue effectively reaching a broad audience in the midst of the onslaught of information available today for reader consumption.
II. Introduction: Planning Emigration

- "It must first of all be factual."
- It "implies a process of active fact-gathering."
- The writer must "get on the story soon after it happened."
- The writing must be "thoughtfully, artfully, and valuably innovative."

—Literary journalism according to Ben Yagoda, in The Art of Fact

The field of literary journalism is a difficult area for which to write because the journalist has to take facts and figures and create literature that draws the reader in, despite an often technical, heavy subject. As an English major in the Creative Writing option, I have learned firsthand how difficult it is to keep a piece of writing interesting while adhering to the facts. One subject that has been addressed repeatedly in literary journalism is the topic of the Mexican-American border, and the culture and conflicts that arise through immigration policies and people risking their lives to cross the boundary between these two nations.

The topic of illegal immigration has fascinated me for years because I was raised in an area where agriculture depends on the steady flow of immigrants, both legal and illegal. Even though our rural community is directly on the Canadian border, far from where the Mexicans are steadily moving across the barbed wire, water, highway, and desert boundary lines, I grew up in the midst of Mexican immigrant communities. Many of the people my father employed were likely illegal aliens, with false papers. I grew up used to hearing stories of deportations and hearing the debate over whether or not we should try, as a nation, to tighten up our borders. In elementary and high school, we began learning basic Spanish because of our close connection with Mexicans, and now as a college student I am again studying the language that I have heard all my life.

Because these topics, Mexican immigration and writing, are subjects that I have a strong background in, I began to look more closely at the two concepts and how they are combined in
order to reach readers such as myself, as well as readers who have no personal background in the
topic. Through my research, I examined how literary journalists take a technical and political
subject like the culture and conflicts surrounding the Mexican-American border, and make it
accessible and interesting to readers.

III. Methodology: Beginning the Crossing

Being a writer of any genre requires lots of reading, and that is where I began as well. I
started reading anything I could find that fell under the category of immigration and culture
across the Mexican-American border: magazine articles, short stories, poetry, fiction, and
nonfiction. Because my focus was mainly on literary journalism, the fiction served as
background, while I kept the nonfiction for in-depth evaluation. Before long I noticed certain
styles that appealed to me more than others, such as the intense human element that came from
authors that truly knew the people they were writing about.

Through my classes in the English department, I have gained an arsenal of resources to
use in analyzing writing style, and these proved invaluable. Based on what I’ve learned in class
as well as in books such as The Art of Fact and Literary Journalism, I could pull apart each of
the aspects I either liked or disliked in the pieces I was reading. It is one thing to enjoy a book or
article; it is another job completely to pinpoint what makes the writing appealing and accessible.
With literary tools that task becomes possible.

There are many books written in the literary journalism genre about the Mexican-
American border that I could have used to complete this project. William Langewiesche, the
author of Cutting for Sign, explored in depth the culture and experiences on the Mexican-
American border. He spent time interviewing people and getting to know the places that
surround this boundary, then compiled them in a book that uses strong details and metaphor to
offer a gripping story line with a special emphasis on the phenomenon of a border that can be both so permeable and restrictive.

_Crossing Over_, by Ruben Martinez, is another example that I could have used to examine in depth the genre of literary journalism. He begins his prologue with the sentence, “I am close to the line,” and being close to the story is essential for literary journalism (Martinez 1). Martinez writes about a Mexican family on the migrant trail, delving into the human side of immigration and the trials that surround it.

In spite of my many options, I chose Ted Conover’s _Coyotes_ and Luis Alberto Urrea’s _Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border_. These two books offer engaging, insightful views on not only immigration across the border but the lives and cultures surrounding this chaotic, unconquerable line. One of my favorite aspects about these two books is that the voices are entertaining and honest, making the books enjoyable as well as informative.

IV. Research Findings: Moving Across

Some begin to move across before dusk creeps in, but others cling to the fence line as their only connection to home and a sense of security. Across the border there are jobs, but first there are border guards, standing off against the mass of people waiting for night and the obscurity that darkness brings. They are the illegal immigrants, looking for work and opportunity in order to support their families and communities in poverty-stricken Mexican states. The Mexican-American border has been a topic of debate for decades: who to let in, how to keep the rest out, and how to reinforce the decisions. The subject is technical, filled with political terms and immigration statistics, but more importantly the subject is personal, filled with thousands of real people risking their lives to cross a barbed wire, a highway, a river, a
desert. In order to make the Mexican-American border accessible as a written subject, literary journalists must approach the line through a combination of human interest, metaphor, and detail.

The number of Mexicans crossing the border illegally is unknown, although there are estimates. In 1998, the Immigration and Naturalization Service located nearly 1.7 million deportable aliens (Bureau of Justice, table 4.49). These aliens were not all Mexicans, but in 1997 it was estimated that about 54% of the illegal immigration population came from Mexico (U.S. Department of Justice). Many of the illegal Mexicans that are caught and returned to their native country try to cross again the same night, sometimes more than once. The perpetual flow of immigrants makes the subject a monotonous continuation of “Catch ‘em, write ‘em up, back to Mexico. Catch ‘em, write ‘em up, back to Mexico,” as one border guard described the situation (Langewiesche 42). Occasionally the monotony is broken by intermittent attention by government officials to a problem that can’t seem to be stopped or with a story about brutality by *la migra*, Mexican slang for the United States Border Patrol. This repetitiveness, combined with centuries of history surrounding the Mexican-American border, tends to make the subject interesting only to those who have a personal stake in the situation or are, by nature, history buffs.

The job of the literary journalist is to make a topic such as immigration fascinating to any reader. Norman Sims, in his essay “The Art of Literary Journalism,” says, “[Literary journalism’s] appeal has grown from the solid foundations of the form—immersion reporting, narrative techniques that free the voice of the writer, and high standards of accuracy...An exciting and creative genre, it is now regularly employed in areas previously avoided by writers with literary ambitions” (3). Sims goes on to say, “Standard reporting hides the voice of the writer, but literary journalism gives that voice an opportunity to enter the story...[and] pays
respect to ordinary lives” (3). By paying respect to ordinary people, literary journalism achieves the human interest needed to make a subject as mundane as immigration laws appeal to everyone.

In the book Coyotes, Ted Conover spends more than a year traveling and working with Mexicans entering the United States illegally and working in the agricultural sector. Essentially, Conover becomes one of the immigrants coming to the United States for seasonal jobs, and then writes down every aspect of his adventures. In discussing how he decides what to write about, Conover says, “The perfect combination has a personal challenge...[it] will require some ingenuity, dexterity, some difficulty...I prefer there be some socially compelling reason we should know more about this subject” (Conover, Literary Journalism, 302). Conover finds this combination in traveling with and writing about illegal immigrants, and he entices the reader into the story by presenting immigrants in both their successes and defeats.

In the forward of Coyotes, Conover asserts that nothing he has written will help the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to apprehend illegal aliens. In fact, Conover discovered that often the INS knows where the aliens are, but “What La Migra does not know—what it perhaps cannot afford to know—is the more human side of the men and women in arrests, the drama of their lives” (Conover, Coyotes, xviii). It is the presentation of the human side of the men and women crossing the Mexican-American border that make the accounts of Conover and others more than just immigration statistics.

In Coyotes, the reader comes to know intimately the lives of several groups of immigrants through anecdote, dialogue, and detail. In one particular scene, when Conover and a group of Mexicans are crossing the desert, Conover gives insight into the life and attitude of one of the immigrants, Jesús. Jesús asks Conover if he’s scared, and Conover reacts, “‘Scared?’
Mexicans were not always New Age males, admiring of those who shared their feelings and vulnerabilities. ‘No, I’m not scared’...I thought that sounded convincing” (Coyotes 232).

Conover then asks Jesús if he is ever afraid, to which Jesús responds, “Not too much. You just have to pay close attention to what’s happening, be ready for anything” (Coyotes 232). In this brief exchange, like so many others in Coyotes, the reader is pulled into the attitude of the immigrants: Scared? Of course not. There’s no need to be scared, or to admit you’re scared; simply be ready. These insights allow the reader to get to know immigrants so they are no longer faceless aliens breaking the law.

Another way that Conover presents the human side of illegal immigrants throughout Coyotes is by describing his own reactions to situations and showing how he learned from his experiences. In Mark Kramer’s essay “Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists” he writes, “The narrator of literary journalism has a personality, is...intimate, frank, ironic, wry, puzzled, judgmental, even self-mocking—qualities academics and daily news reporters dutifully avoid as unprofessional and unobjective” (28). Through most of Coyotes, Conover says repeatedly how little he understands the culture and attitude of the immigrants, being critical and judgmental of his own perspectives and then learning from misconceptions or lack of knowledge. He admits where his preconceptions are wrong, like how “the murky waters of the Rio Grande beyond did not exude the epic quality that I had expected,” and admits his ignorance when he asks a question about the people in a bus station and, “Jesús looked at me as though I ought to know” (Conover, Coyotes, 24, 194).

The references by Conover to things he doesn’t understand or didn’t expect help the reader appreciate cultural differences by creating a contrast between the American—the gringo—and the Mexicans. These differences and the learning process that Conover went
through are further emphasized when, near the end of the book, Conover is able to begin seeing situations through the eyes of the immigrants. “For the first time,” Conover says, “I could almost see America as a foreign country, full of mystique and danger. A new feeling had been superimposed on my old one in the course of my Mexican odyssey: Was I home, or had I arrived someplace else?” (Coyotes 219). By presenting his personal experiences in all of his ignorance, Conover appeals to the reader to understand the whole situation of illegal immigration.

Another author that deals with the struggles on the Mexican-American border is Luis Alberto Urrea, born in Tijuana to an American mother and a Mexican father. His book Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border addresses the issues faced by Mexicans in the border town of Tijuana, including the lives of people who are planning to cross into the United States or who have been returned to Mexico after a failed attempt. Like Conover’s Coyotes, Across the Wire deals with human-interest issues: poverty, death, and every-day people going about their lives in the only way they know how. “Imagine how bad things get to make you leave behind your family, your friends, your lovers [to come to Tijuana],” Urrea says in his prologue (12), and he continues to describe a scene so pitiful that it grabs the reader’s emotions and twists them until the reader feels the sorrow as intensely as Urrea did in his years as a missionary in Tijuana.

While Ted Conover appeals to the reader by admitting his ignorance as he presents the adventure and danger in the lives of illegal aliens, Urrea addresses the reader by forcing them to realize how good their own lives are. As mentioned before, Mark Kramer says that literary journalists are judgmental and unobjective, and he goes on to say, “The defining mark of literary journalism is the personality of the writer…speaking simply in his or her own right…who
doesn’t blank out emotional realities of sadness, glee, excitement, fury, love” (29). In the preface of *Across the Wire*, Urrea states plainly, “I do not intend to offer a “balanced” view of our friendly neighbor to the south… [*Across the Wire*] is subjective and biased, and I believe that is the way it should be” (2). Urrea has an agenda in his book, and it isn’t to give all the statistics and facts that are embodied in reports about the border’s culture; Urrea’s agenda is to present the human side of the Mexican-American border, even at the expense of pulling the reader out of his or her comfort zone and into the poverty of the border itself. The first chapter of *Across the Wire*, titled “Sifting through the trash,” begins, “One of the most beautiful views of San Diego is from…Tijuana’s municipal garbage dump…People live on that hill, picking through the trash…Sometimes they find meat that is not too rotten to be cooked” (Urrea 31). From the very beginning of the book, Urrea captures human interest in a dirty, smelly subject by creating his own critical voice about the situation of real people on the Mexican-American border.

Another literary device that both Conover and Urrea use to draw the reader in is point of view. *Coyotes* and *Across the Wire* are written primarily in first person point of view, adhering to Kramer’s teachings about a literary journalist’s voice being essential to capturing the audience. Kramer explains, “The audience is invited, when reading literary journalism, to…share something excluded from academic and news articles—the author’s ironic vision” (30). He describes irony as, “the device of leading readers to consider a scene in more knowing terms than some of its actors do,” something that both Urrea and Conover accomplish by putting themselves in each situation and writing in the first person (Kramer 30). For example, Urrea describes the home of a family living in the dump, detailing how, “the floor was raw, uncovered cement, and the whole house was awash in one or two inches of water,” and “In what had clearly been a living room, on a sheet of plastic, were piled all of Jesusita’s possessions—clothes,
bundles” (44). Yet, in the midst of the pallor, Jesusita and her husband welcomed Urrea in and
“very formally and graciously invited us to sit and have a cup of coffee,” and the husband,
“referred to each of us as ‘usted,’ the formal ‘you,’ and it was clear that he expected the same
respect” (45). Urrea concludes by saying, “The most lasting impression we took with us was one
of dignity and pride” (45). Through Urrea’s first person account, the reader is made privy to the
irony of the situation: an impression of dignity and pride in the middle of a garbage dump.

One of the fears about writing in first person in the literary journalism field is that it
might make the author appear more important than the subjects he or she is writing about. Ben
Yagoda, in the preface to The Art of Fact, says, “There is a distinct possibility for abuse here: the
reporter’s forgetting that he is not the story, just a means to it” (16). Memoir, not literary
journalism, is the art of writing about one’s self; as William Zinsser says in his book On Writing
Well, “the most interesting character in a memoir, we hope, will turn out to be the person who
wrote it” (146). In contrast, in his chapter titled “Writing about People: The Interview,” Zinsser
explains, “As soon as the writer steps in [to explain what the interviewee is saying] everyone
else’s experience becomes secondhand” (100). It is necessary but often difficult to keep literary
journalism separate from memoir by presenting the story without the first person voice
interfering. John Corry, reviewing Tom Wolfe’s book The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake
Streamline Baby, praised the work by saying, “even though Wolfe wrote it in the first person, he
never got in the way of his story, and he never patronized the people he was writing about” (32).
Conover and Urrea, although they write primarily in the first person point of view, never become
more important than the stories they are telling.

In both Across the Wire and Coyotes, details about situations and people are more
essential to the story than the author himself. Conover and Urrea use themselves as tools for
presenting the information, yet never get in the way of what they are showing the reader. For example, both books use the author’s knowledge of the United States to present a clear contrast for the reader. Urrea, after taking a child to the hospital for a broken wrist, says, “I sat in the echoing waiting room, waiting. It wasn’t like an American doctor’s office. No music played, for example. No framed prints of trout fishermen...No magazines...There weren’t even any carpets...All the floors are linoleum” (83). Although Urrea is the only person in the scene, it isn’t about him; the scene is about the office, and how it contrasts with an American doctor’s office.

*Coyotes* includes more personal reflections than *Across the Wire*, yet Conover still primarily uses himself as a tool to detail scenes and provide contrast in the same way Urrea does. In one situation, Conover says, “All I could see, looking forward, was the outline of Nate’s dirty shirt. But I pictured him in my mind’s eye. Some fifty years old, Nate had the look of a man who had been yelling at Mexicans under the Arizona sun for most of his productive life,” and then he continues to describe the tractor driver in further detail (*Coyotes* 41). Again, Conover is not the most important person here; Nate is. Conover is simply the vehicle for presenting the scene. He explains in the forward that this is his intention: “I have tried to make it their story” (*Coyotes* xix).

Besides writing in first person to include the reader in the narratives, Urrea and Conover go a step further by using second person point of view. Tom Bailey, in his essay “Character, Plot, Setting and Time,” says, “Second person as a narrative technique has the strange effect of both distancing the narrator and going so far as to include us in a more general,...universal narrative” (35). The heading of one of Mark Kramer’s “Breakable Rules” is “Literary journalists write from a disengaged and mobile stance, from which they tell stories and also turn and
address the readers directly” (31). He goes on to say, “Each author in this anthology [Literary Journalism], while telling tales, repeatedly looks directly at the reader” (Kramer 31). This technique of looking at the reader in the second person point of view works to distance the author and include the reader, which both Conover and Urrea do successfully.

Across the Wire particularly uses second person to make the reader present in certain situations. Most of the prologue is describing firstly what makes someone leave his or her home and head for the border, and secondly what that person encounters once he or she reaches Tijuana. Urrea doesn’t let the reader just sit by and watch, however; he writes the entire passage in second person. You are the one who has “walked, run, hidden in the backs of trucks, spent part of your precious money on bus fare” to travel hundreds or thousands of miles; you are the one who, upon reaching Tijuana, will “gravitate to the bad parts of town because there is nowhere for you to go in the glittery sections;” you are the one who, “If the coyote [guide for crossing the border illegally] does not turn on you suddenly with a gun and take everything from you himself...might still be attacked by the rateros [thieves—ratmen]” (Urrea 12-19). The reader doesn’t stand a chance of remaining disconnected and displaced from the situation Urrea is presenting.

In the forward of Coyotes, the reader also has the sensation of being captured in the story because of Conover’s use of the second person voice. While discussing how to form a relationship with the Mexicans and the need to move beyond newspaper coverage, Conover says, “To get to know Mexicans you need to speak their language, be willing to put up with living conditions less comfortable than our own, and...you need to believe in the subversive idea that a human is a human” (Coyotes xviii-xix). Although this is not as pointed as Urrea’s use of the second person, Conover effectively sets up the rest of his book by making the reader feel the
struggles that Conover himself went through: learning the language, living uncomfortably, believing that illegal immigrants are human. Each of these ideas are then addressed in great detail through the many personal anecdotes that Conover provides, including his struggles with writing in English a book that took place mostly in the Spanish language, living in places that most Americans would never venture to, and forging true friendships with people of a completely different ethnicity and culture than his own. As with Urrea's use of the second person, the reader is forced to cross the line and enter in with the author to a foreign world.

In Norman Sims's essay on the "Art of Literary Journalism," he says, "Literary journalists are boundary crossers in search of a deeper perspective on our lives and times" (19). In regard to the subject of illegal immigration, literary journalists cross boundaries literally and figuratively, and the perspective they offer with this journey is important in drawing out the human interest of every situation. One of the subjects that Urrea and Conover offer perspective on is the religious beliefs of the people they encounter. In Mexico, the dominant religion is Catholicism, and nearly every town, no matter how small or poverty-stricken, has a Catholic church on one edge of the town square.

By incorporating Catholicism into their writing, Urrea and Conover reach deep into human appeal by exposing simple, everyday occurrences involving the belief systems of the Mexican people. Images of the Virgin Mary are sold nearly everywhere people congregate in Mexico, and in Coyotes this phenomenon is seen on a bus heading from a tiny Mexican village towards the border. Conover speaks of the handicapped beggars that came on the bus at nearly every stop, "who passed out picture cards of the Virgin with an explanation on the back such as 'I am deaf and mute. This image of the Virgin costs 20 pesos... God bless you.'... Enclosed was
a tin crucifix...[and] all of us bought these cards, and...hung the tiny crucifix from [our] ashtrays...It was Mexican travel insurance” (Coyotes 197).

Urrea also mentions the people selling crosses and images of the Virgin Mary to people waiting in line at the border crossing in Tijuana. Furthermore, he transforms the belief system into metaphor in other scenes, such as when he watches a young women sob because her baby was stillborn. “The young mother’s sobs took root in my heart,” Urrea explains, “[and] they continue to grow there because on Good Friday I held her broken little savior in my hand...And come Easter, there would be no resurrection from the jar [that the stillborn child was placed in]” (86). The Mexican people making the sign of the cross and continually appealing to the Virgin for help and deliverance are other aspects that Urrea and Conover use to bring life to the stories they tell.

Along with the metaphor that Urrea uses to connect a sad event to religious ideas, Across the Wire and Coyotes frequently use metaphors to make the writing interesting and appealing to the reader. In the prologue of Across the Wire, Urrea writes, “There are many Mexicos; there are also many Mexican borders, any one of which could fill its own book” (9). On a metaphorical level, many borders fill both Conover and Urrea’s writing. For Conover, there is the border between himself and the Mexicans. The first chapter of Coyotes is “The Gringo and the Mexicano.” This distinction sets off, from the very beginning, the realization that there is a line drawn between Conover and his Mexican friends. He says on the first page of the chapter, “I was an unlikely wetback. Blond haired and blue eyed” (Conover, Coyotes, 3). Throughout the book there are examples of the metaphorical border between Conover and the immigrants.

The Mexican-American border isn’t a sure separation, however, and Conover doesn’t leave the metaphor at a simple line between himself and the Mexicans. One discouraged border
guard claimed to William Langewiesche, who spent considerable time interviewing people on the border, “‘We could link hands out here and still we couldn’t stop them,’” and Langewiesche concluded that, “the boundary acts as a filter crossed by the energetic and brave” (41, 44). At times Conover finds himself crossing the boundary, eager to learn more about the migrant culture, and other times, such as when Conover is struggling to teach Mexicans English, the immigrants also make the effort to cross a portion of the line separating the men. In the end, Conover says, “I was on that border, I realized, and bound to stay there for a long time” (Coyotes 246). Like the men and women in Across the Wire who found themselves unable to get across into the United States, Conover remained on the line as he adjusted to the things he had learned from his experiences with the Mexicans.

In the same way that Conover experienced a border between himself and the Mexicans, there is a specific border between cultures in both Across the Wire and Coyotes. Conover, in the last paragraph of his book, says, “I thought about another border, the one existing between two cultures in the same country” (Coyotes 246). This border between cultures is also seen in Urrea’s writing. In Across the Wire there is the predominant culture of the trash-pickers: “Each dompe [border-speak, neither Spanish nor English, for ‘dump’] has it’s own culture, as distinct as the people living there,” Urrea explains (31). Interacting with the trash-pickers are a wide array of other cultures: the missionaries, of whom Urrea himself is part; los cementeros—glue addicts—whose “daily life revolved around prostitution and drugs;” and the cops, who “swagger, they beat people, they demand bribes, and they shoot” (Urrea 66, 112). On the Mexican-American border, there is a constant give and take as immigrants enter the United States and American tourists visit the sights in Mexico. In the same way, there is a continual mingling and crossing of the cultural borders in Across the Wire. These metaphorical connections, along with
many others in these two books by Urrea and Conover, are part of what makes literary 
journalism appeal to the reader by creating correlations between the authors’ personal 
experiences and the actual border situation. The metaphors also give the reader a way to make 
his or her own connections between personal life and the subject matter they are reading about.

Another aspect of literary journalism that helps draw in its audience is the strength of 
detail used in this writing style. One of Mark Kramer’s “Breakable Rules” begins with, “Style 
counts,” and then goes on to say, “Clean, lucid, personal language draws readers toward 
experiencing the immediacy of scenes, and the force of ideas” (31). Kramer follows this by 
mentioning Howard Nemerov’s essay “On Metaphor,” and concluding that, “The best language 
of literary journalists is also evocative…and suited for leading readers not merely to picture, but 
to feel events” (31). Through figurative language and rich detail, Across the Wire and Coyotes 
create evocative scenes that truly make the reader feel the events that are being portrayed.

One of the best ways to be able to write a scene convincingly is to have intimate 
experience with the situation so that the details are not simply created, but real. Urrea, after 
explaining about his father, who refused to let Urrea be American, and his mother, who refused 
to let him be Mexican, says, “If, as someone suggested lately, I am some sort of ‘voice of the 
border,’ it is because the border runs down the middle of me. I have a barbed-wire fence neatly 
bisecting my heart” (Sleeping Children 4). Urrea lived the border, and knew what went on there 
in profound detail. In the same way, Conover lived so closely with the men he was writing about 
that there were risks involved, but, as Norman Sims points out, Conover’s “research strategy 
leads to rich material” (13).

The research that both Urrea and Conover did for their books is evident in the description 
and language that serve to draw in the reader and convince him or her that the situation is real.
For example, on one of the trips across the border that Conover makes with his comrades, they are stopped by the Mexican Federal Judicial Police. Conover describes the scene so vividly that it causes the reader to cringe, beginning with the initial “accusations, then Genaro’s denials, punctuated by louder accusations. Finally...the words ‘¡Ay, Dios mio, Dios mio!’ came through the wall—oh, my God, my God. His relatives...trembled as the torture continued...There were thumps and bangs from within the room...There was a sputtering, coughing, and gasping” (Coyotes 212). Conover then describes what Genaro had just gone through: “popular among the judicial police, [the torture] involved holding the seated victim’s head back, covering his mouth, and then pouring [carbonated mineral water] up his nose, through which it entered his sinuses. The torture was so common and so ghastly that almost everyone in Mexico knew [about it]” (Coyotes 213). The intense details make the reader feel the carbonated water enter his or her own sinuses and burn with the pain that Genaro was feeling.

In Across the Wire, Urrea uses description in the same way, making the reader feel intense pity or pain for the people being presented in Urrea’s accounts. Every situation he reports includes some detail that stands out, such as the “nights when the tunnels were jammed with mindless, drooling bodies; the boys shrieked in hallucinogenic terror,” or a fetus, surgically removed and then put in a Gerber baby food jar, “a yellowish fluid, mixed with pale blood” (Urrea 69, 84). In the story of Pacha, one of the proud women living in the garbage dumps of Tijuana, Urrea says, “Pacha didn’t have a television, but she did have oil barrels: she cooked in one of them. The other she used to store water. It was full of mosquito larvae wiggling like tiny fish. Its water was the color of blood” (40). The simple details written by Urrea and Conover are startling and horrifying to most people who have never seen the squalor of the dumps or felt
the agony of being tortured, yet at the same time the descriptions entreat the reader to continue to
peruse the sadness and reality of the scenes being presented.

The Mexican-American border is a complex subject, mostly available to the public in a
series of historical accounts and government statistics. More important, however, are the pain,
victory, coyotes, and trash-pickers: the human side of the faceless immigrants that stream across
the border by the hundreds. To access this human element, literary journalists must delve into
the subject with a combination of techniques used in fiction: experiments in point of view,
metaphorical connections, and rich, realistic detail to tell about situations that appeal to human
interest. As Kevin Kerrane says in his essay “Making Facts Dance,” “The literary journalist
enjoys greater freedom in researching a story and greater flexibility in telling it, often refocusing
in an instant to take us beneath the surface and into the psyche, either a character’s or the writer’s
own” (20). The art of literary journalism lies in the distinct blend of research and the author’s
voice, mingled with insight about humanity; both Conover, in Coyotes, and Urrea, in his book
Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border, achieve this with their accounts of
events surrounding the Mexican-American border.

V. Conclusion: Establishing Life on the Other Side

Through my research on literary journalism concerning the culture and immigration
across the Mexican-American border, I have gained a deeper understanding not only of the
aspects that make literary journalism enticing, but also a deeper appreciation for the culture
surrounding our southern border even as we speak. As Brenda Gazzar notes in a recent article on
coyotes, “Stricter enforcement at the border has pushed people into areas of greater risk… This
has driven up not only demand and prices, but also the chance for something to go awry.”
Stronger border enforcement means more people are stuck, penniless and homeless, in border
towns like Tijuana, having spent all their money in a failed attempt to reach the United States. The problem is not going away. As long as there are jobs available and the smallest crack in border security, Mexicans will continue their efforts to reach the United States. Furthermore, agriculture, industry and other areas of our economy will continue to be dependent on these migrant laborers.

And as long as the conflicts continue on the Mexican-American border, we will have a collective interest in the events surrounding the border culture. This interest will spur more authors to investigate the subject in their writing, resulting in more literature on the Mexican-American border than a single reader can digest. With the onslaught of available reading material, many readers will reach for pieces *Coyotes* and *Across the Wire* because these books present the facts—but more than the facts, they present the human side of the story through writing that appeals to a wide audience.

The Mexican-American border is not the only area in which this concept is true. The genre of memoir has exploded in recent years. Although there can be many explanations for our nation’s interest in this genre, one of the main reasons seems to be that memoir has a very human appeal of telling the facts of human weakness with the use of fiction characteristics as I explored in “Accessing Borders.”

Another example of the importance of these aspects of fiction in literary nonfiction comes from the *New York Times* bestsellers list in September 2005. In a review by Shawn Carkonen, David McCullough’s *1776* is applauded as having “characteristic insight and a gripping narrative” and writing “vividly about the dismal conditions.” The Revolutionary War, which McCullough is writing about, is a subject that has been explored repeatedly by authors throughout the last two hundred years. The “fresh perspective” that McCullough provides, as
well as addressing the human appeal through exploring motivation and morale during the war, combine to create the same atmosphere of literary journalism that I explored in Conover and Urrea's works: aspects of fiction making a over-written, technical subject interesting to a wide range of readers.

This desire to read the truth has caused people to abuse the genres of creative nonfiction—both in literary journalism and memoir. Recently James Frey was exposed as making up large portions of a story he sold as completely true in his memoir *A Million Little Pieces*. An article in *The Smoking Gun* concerning Frey's lies explains the book's pull on readers to make it to bestseller status: "All this terrible stuff actually happened to a guy named James Frey, a former degenerate who survived drug and alcohol addiction." *The Smoking Gun* also goes on to explain, "if *A Million Little Pieces* was fictional, just some overheated stories of woe, heartache, and debauchery cooked up by a wannabe author, it probably would not get published." In spite of our desire to read these works, the fictionalizing of genres that are supposed to be completely nonfiction makes many people suspicious of the new fad of creative nonfiction.

Literature continues to evolve as both authors' and readers' ideas and viewpoints change with time. In spite of these changes, however, certain aspects seem to remain constant even as subject matter and genres revolutionize. As readers, we still are looking for something that both entertains and speaks to us, especially if we can believe it as truth. Because this continues to be the case, the aspects that I found make literary journalism interesting in the subject of the Mexican-American border will remain the aspects that reach readers across a wide range of genres now and into the future.
VI. Appendix: Visits to the Home Country

Following is my own attempt at writing a piece of literary journalism. After my extensive research on the Mexican-American border, it would seem that my own example should be written on the same subject. However, I learned that total immersion in a subject is key to writing effective literary journalism. While I have some experience with immigration and the Mexican community, my experience with the border is several thousand miles removed from the actual scene, leaving me less than capable to tackle the subject with any depth and integrity.

Instead, I have incorporated the things I learned in researching “Accessing Borders,” and written about an experience in my own life. “Our Pheos” uses human appeal combined with a technical subject, as well as metaphor, detail, character, and other elements of fiction, while still being nonfiction. Like the borders I found as metaphors in *Coyotes* and *Across the Wire*, there are metaphorical borders in my writing as well: the border between emotion and reason; the difficult-to-cross border created by medical terminology and information that was as foreign to my life to begin with as the lives of coyotes initially were to Ted Conover.

Some might argue that this is a piece of memoir, as it comes straight from my own life. However, as Conover and Urrea demonstrate, you can write about the situations you’ve been in without it being memoir. I would argue that this is not memoir because it is not just about my experience; “Our Pheos” covers the extent of my father’s experience, as well as the technicalities of the disease he suffered. This piece required research, not just the familiarity that comes with living life.

One of the things I know I struggled with that Conover and Urrea mastered, is keeping the story from being about me, as I discussed on pages 8 and 9. This was a struggle because the story is so close to me that it is hard to distance myself, yet still keep the deep connection that is
required to access the human element of literary journalism. I have a long way to go in learning how to put all that I have learned into practice in my own writing, but I now feel like I have a firm grasp on the fundamentals of literary journalism, and can take these aspects into my future as a writer.

Our Pheos

Mom spelled it for me before she pronounced it. Pheochromocytoma. I sat at my desk, the phone pressed between my shoulder and ear, hours away from her and Dad. She explained that it was rare, less than one percent of people with hypertension test positive for a pheochromocytoma, but the doctors wanted to rule out the possibility before progressing with other tests. The easiest way to do that was with a twenty-four hour urine test, so Dad would be in the hospital at least another day.

A pheochromocytoma is a tumor that originates in or around the adrenal glands. When Mom explained this, I thought back to sixth grade science and the diagram I had drawn of the endocrine system. It wasn’t until I typed a quick search into Google that the picture came back to me. The adrenals are small, yellow, triangular glands that ride on top of the kidneys. One on the right, one on the left.

Pheos act like adrenal glands, secreting both epinephrine, better known as adrenalin, and norepinephrine, among other hormones. These chemicals work to regulate heart rate and blood pressure—and when a pheo is at work, the body receives an excess of both chemicals. The imbalance causes a wide array of symptoms: hypertension, hypotension, rapid heart rate, sweating, chest pain, increased appetite, and violent headaches.
Dad was originally taken to the hospital for terrible headaches. He had headaches often, but being a small-business owner and working around machinery and stress, it was never anything that aspirin couldn’t cure, and never anything surprising. For Dad, there was always work to do and a little pain couldn’t hold him back.

One night, the headaches got worse. He got out of bed and paced around the house because the pain was too intense to lie through. He took aspirin, more aspirin, and maybe some ibuprofen to break it up, but nothing helped. When he woke Mom in the morning he decided it was time to go to the doctor. That was serious—I don’t remember Dad ever going to the doctor voluntarily. At forty-seven years old, though not in perfect health due to near-constant allergy problems and fifty pounds that he could stand to lose, Dad was going strong.

In the emergency room, he underwent CAT scans and a barrage of questions, then was given a prescription for migraines and sent home. Two days later, a Saturday, the pain was back in full force—and then some. He said there’s nothing with which to compare the agony, and the only thing he could do was keep moving. At one point he threw himself headfirst into the couch out of desperation to make the pain go away.

The migraine medication did nothing to ease Dad’s pain, and he howled and twisted in misery while Mom drove him to the emergency room for the second time. Desperate, he begged for anything to make the pain go away, even if the remedy killed him. This time, testing revealed bleeding in the frontal lobe of his brain—the reason he had such intense throbbing and pounding in his head.

My brother, Mike, called me as Mom and Dad were in route, by ambulance, to a larger hospital in the middle of the state. All Mike knew was that Dad had bleeding in his brain, and all I knew to associate with that was an aneurysm. My limited knowledge terrified me, and as
rushed to pack a weekend bag, all I could think about was what I would do, what my family would do, without Dad.

It wasn’t an aneurysm, but when he was taken to the emergency room that Saturday, Dad’s systolic blood pressure reading was around 240. Through a process of medication and time his readings stabilized, but as he sat in the Critical Care Unit every few hours his heart rate would begin to increase, he’d start to feel queasy, and before long he’d be writhing on the bed, constrained by heart rate and blood pressure wires and tubes. The headaches kept coming back, and we sat by, helpless.

The third day that Dad spent in the hospital was when the doctors proposed the 24-hour urine test. Mike and I had already headed back to school, unable to do anything besides sit and wait for what we hoped were forthcoming answers to the mysterious problem that my Dad had become. The possibility of a pheochromocytoma seemed so low that when Mom told me of the prospect, I didn’t let it process until she called again to say that yes, in fact, Dad had the disease.

Even after the news, I refused to look anything up, scared to know what I didn’t want to find out about the foreign thing invading my dad’s body. All of my knowledge came from Mom, courtesy of doctors and Dad’s own research. It wasn’t until later, long after surgery, that I had the courage to seek out information on my own.

The urine test measures the levels of catecholamines, or breakdown products of norepinephrine and adrenaline. High levels evidence that a tumor is producing the chemicals overtime. Dad tested positive, along with only about eight hundred other people in the United States that year. The rarity of pheos makes the disease almost non-existent—less than 0.0003% of our population. With the presence of tiny hormones working overboard in Dad’s body, our family became a statistic: one of eight hundred for the year two thousand and three.
After diagnosis comes localization. Once the pheo is confirmed by hormonal evidence, it has to be found in the body. Pheos originate in the adrenal gland—either the right of the left, or bilateral pheos, occurring on both adrenal glands. They can spread, however, and be located all over the body: in the bones, the spine, the brain, the lungs. Tiny tumors invading the body, impersonating adrenal glands, like a bad science fiction plot.

Life becomes a sort of movie with a serious disease diagnosed in the family. Well-meaning people flashed by in sequence, telling their own cancer stories, leaving me with scenes and voices echoing through my mind, when all I wanted to do was run and hide. Instead, I had to nod politely and accept that these people were trying to offer condolences in the only way they knew how. Some of the accounts were terrible and sad, of people thinking they were in remission and then being diagnosed with another, more serious, cancer; other stories offered hope. One of the ministers in our church, we found out, had symptoms of a pheochromocytoma for thirty years. All the evidence was there, right down to the catecholamines in the urine, but no amount of scans could localize the allusive tumor—for close to thirty years. But technology advances, and maybe this man’s tumor grew, and after several decades of having his hormonal balance upset by an invisible mass, the pheo was located, removed, and the man led the rest of his life cancer-free.

Dad went through computed topography (CT) scans and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)—typical techniques for the localization of pheochromocytoma. The one I heard the most about was the CT scans: Dad drank barium milkshakes—a thick, chalky, foul-tasting liquid—so that the substance would highlight his digestive tract and enhance X-ray images, making the tumor easier to locate.
They found Dad's pheo; it sat lodged, the size of a large grapefruit, between his right kidney and his liver. I had a forty-minute break between classes when I learned this from Mom. I held my cell phone to my ear and gripped a stair railing to keep my other hand busy as we chatted. I gasped when I learned the size of the pheo—a tumor that big, nestled in Dad's abdomen? When I clicked my phone shut and returned it to my backpack, I stood at the top of the stairs for a moment, leaning against the railing. Holding my fingertips together to form a ball, my stomach clenched at the thought of something so big lurking there without our knowledge.

I went home the weekend after Dad was diagnosed. It hurt me, twisting my guts into a knot, to see him on the verge of tears when he discussed what was happening inside his body. Our family wasn't demonstrative, and here our lives had been tipped backwards and sideways until each of us had tears biting at our eyelids at every meal, every conversation. Dad was the steady strength of our household, the one whom nothing could beat, the one who laughed so loud everyone recognized his guffaw from the other side of a crowded room, the one who would take time out from his busy work day to save an orphaned bird—and I watched him breaking down in tears.

When it comes down to it, a pheo is a fairly decent sort of tumor to have. Our hopeful statistic became the knowledge that nine out of every ten pheos are benign. I processed this information whenever I started feeling scared, in order to convince myself that Dad would be okay. Nine out of ten, out of eight hundred...ten out of a hundred, eighty out of eight hundred. Only eighty people in the United States this year will have a malignant pheochromocytoma, so surely Dad isn't one of them. The numbers were consoling, ticking off silently in my head as I walked to class, or right after a phone call with the latest news from Mom.
It wasn’t the disease itself that scared Dad. He had a strong faith in God and the comfort that if he was going to die soon, he had someplace better to go. What worried Dad was leaving the rest of us behind—and that was what scared me too. I couldn’t imagine Mom without Dad, holidays without Dad, the dinner table without Dad. Me without Dad. He worried about all the things he had never said, or had never done. The night before I went back to school that first weekend home, he hugged me tight and told me how proud he was of me—he didn’t want me to ever forget that. I clamped my lips together as he explained that because of the nature of the tumor and the blood pressure spikes it caused, surgery was necessary but risky.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen to me this week,” he told me, tears glistening in his eyes. “I have the appointment on Tuesday, and for all I know they could send me straight into surgery. And if that happens, there’s a chance I won’t come out of it.” I blinked and choked against the lump in my throat. He gave me one last hug and whispered against my hair, “I love you.”

I held my breath that Tuesday, leaving my cell phone on during all my classes in case Mom or Dad called with news. I was back in my apartment when the ring finally made me jump. Dad explained that surgery would wait for three weeks, time for more tests and the necessary stabilizing of his blood pressure.

Because of the nature and location of most pheochromocytomas, surgery can be deadly. The symptoms, including hypertension, usually occur when the tumor is disturbed, such as being bumped or prodded. A spike of high blood pressure during surgery might be fatal, but it’s necessary to prod and disturb the tumor in order to get it out. Dad was put on hypertension medications specifically for pheos, and his blood pressure stabilized. When it was time for surgery, the doctors were satisfied that they could get Dad through with no problems.
As we learned about Dad’s disease, we found that we were lucky to be living in the state of Washington. The University of Washington Medical Center—UWMC—is one of the best—and they are relatively experienced in pheochromocytomas. Because there are so few pheos diagnosed each year, little is known about the disease. Twice as many pheos are discovered at autopsy as are diagnosed while patients are alive—it’s a hard disease to find. But, like everything in the medical field, new advances are made constantly through testing and research, and University of Washington was right in the middle of the research, claiming to specialize in the diagnosis and management of adrenal tumors such as pheochromocytoma. Part of the UWMC’s research at the time of Dad’s diagnosis was for learning new ways to localize the often-allusive tumors. In the week before Dad’s surgery, he agreed to undergo extra testing both to aid in research and to help the surgeons determine exactly how extensive their job was going to be.

I hung up the phone and cried after Mom called to tell me that there was a second tumor, slightly smaller, closely connected to the first. Because of the size of the tumors, Dr. Mann, Dad’s surgeon, had told them there was a good chance the pheos were malignant. Dad was one out of the eighty. One of eighty! Eighty in the whole fifty United States, and Dad was one of them. I remember it was a Wednesday night, church night, and I struggled to keep composed during the service. Dad couldn’t be strong anymore, so somewhere deep down I figured it was now my job. I held the tears in during the day, compressing all my pent-up frustration until night, when in the darkness and solitude of my bedroom, I would curl up in a ball and sob into my pillow, scared and mad that it was my family that this was happening to.

In all the fear and frustration, there was also comfort. After the first meeting with Dr. Mann, Mom and Dad were ready to trust him with Dad’s life. Born and raised in South Africa,
the surgeon had a slight British accent and an affable manner. Rough estimates say that most
doctors will see only one patient with a pheo in their career as a physician, and large general
hospitals admit about an average of one pheochromocytoma patient a year. A good pheo
surgeon, however, operates on about four of the tumors a year, and Dr. Mann’s numbers held up.

Dad checked in to the University of Washington Medical Center Tuesday afternoon,
shortly before my aunt Judy and I arrived. It was a gorgeous day in Seattle, uncharacteristically
sunny following a furious downpour that morning. Normally Seattle makes me feel
claustrophobic, with the constant press of people and clouds, but the sunshine made the city
bright and hopeful.

We met my grandparents—Dad’s parents—as we entered the hospital. They were
anxious and huggy, ready to be out of the city and back to their slow, unchanging lives—but
couraged. Grandma told us about a man they had seen earlier, checking out of the hospital; he
had had a kidney transplant just days ago, and was doing great and heading home—it’s so
amazing, Grandma gushed, really makes us feel good about having your dad here.

Dad clambered off his bed when I walked in. Dressed in a hospital gown and his familiar
blue sweats, he pulled me into a big hug and laughed, a combination of nerves and happiness.
The evening that followed was tense. We tried to talk about other things, tried to laugh about
Mike wearing a WSU visor in the UWMC, tried to address a hopeful surgery outcome. In the
back of our minds was the reminder that Dad might not make it out of the operating room.

A doctor knocked on the door and came in, introducing himself as a kidney surgeon and
specialist. Dad eyed him for a second, and then said, “My kidneys aren’t getting operated on.”

The surgeon laughed and agreed, “No, not your kidneys.” He was there to help Dr. Mann
during surgery, but mostly to hold the kidney out of the way while they removed Dad’s pheo. It
sank in right then what intense care Dad was getting: a surgeon—a specialist even—on site simply to hold the kidney.

Dad was prepped for surgery early Wednesday morning, and they began the initial cuts into his abdomen about 9:30. Mom stayed at the hospital overnight so that she was there when he left for the operating room, but I didn’t arrive until shortly after surgery began. We comprised the biggest group in the surgery waiting room: my mom, brother and I, Dad’s parents, two siblings, and an in-law, one of Mom’s sisters, as many as seven of our ministers from the Seattle area, and various friends that stopped by to see how things were going. The other groups were smaller, two or three people, and we felt pity for those who were waiting for their loved ones alone—our support was amazing.

They expected surgery to last maybe three, four hours. The cut across Dad’s stomach was nearly a foot long, right below his ribcage, through layers of skin and tissue. We got word that the surgeons had successfully opened him up, and that they were working on removing the first tumor. At three hours, Mom received word that things were going well but slow. We all felt the slow, talking in hushed voices in the waiting room, playing a few games that got abandoned because we couldn’t focus. We filtered in and out, visiting the espresso shop, the gift shop, just walking the halls. I tried to read for some of my classes, but never got more than a few lines before I’d look up and need to move. Other families came and went as their connection to the surgery ward was forged, then broken with the move to recovery. Time ticked by with the quiet click, click, click of people passing in the corridor outside the waiting room.

After five hours, things were still going well, and slow. The kidney had been nicked as they peeled away the larger pheo, and Dr. Mann didn’t know for sure if they could save it, but it wasn’t cause for anxiety yet. The other kidney was healthy.
Pheos are vascular tumors, the texture of raw beef, with lots of veins making them a bloody mess to remove. Each vein had to be cut and secured before moving on. When the first tumor was removed, the doctors commenced on the second, carefully unwrapping it from around the vena cava. If a pheochromocytoma is broken open during surgery, it potentially will spread to other parts of the body because the mutant cells escape from the control of the tumor’s casing. Each cut had to be perfectly in place, each move precise and careful.

When we had counted down nearly seven hours, Mike and I took a break. We headed to our condo—actually the condo of some friends who had volunteered it for our use—in order to get away from the quiet apprehension of the waiting room. Mike turned the TV on for sports and music videos, and I gave up textbooks for comic books. Sleep was impossible even though my eyes tried to slip shut as I turned each page. In typical Seattle fashion, it had begun to drizzle.

I called the hospital at 5:30, eight hours into surgery. They were getting close to sewing Dad back up, but it would still be awhile. Mike and I made a detour for pizza on the way over, hoping to ease the stress by having something to chew on.

It was around 6:30 when we turned the corner to the hall leading to the surgery waiting room—over nine hours of waiting. Mom stood in the hall with her sister, and when she looked up to see us coming she covered her face in her hands and began sobbing. My heart dropped like a jet in turbulence. I set down the pizza box and rushed toward her, pulling her into my arms. What? What happened?

“It’s okay,” she choked out. Dr. Mann had just come out, surgery was over. Mom was just overwhelmed. Through her tears she tried to explain. Things went fine. But maybe the second tumor involved the lymph nodes; they would have to test for that. And if lymph nodes, then malignant. All the numbers came back to me, mingling with the tears on Mom’s face.
Treatment for malignant pheos was all experimental, they are almost always fatal. But don't think about that, my aunt urged me. He's out of surgery and doing fine, focus on that.

The next morning before Mike and I left for school once again, we went into the recovery ward to say goodbye to Dad. It scared me. He was bloated to the extent that his skin would allow and had tubes protruding from what seemed like every inch of his chest and neck. I held his hand for a minute, smiled when Mike said he was glad that Dad wasn't dead, then took a deep breath and headed to the hall. I stooped down and sat on my heels, head against my knees until the darkness around my vision cleared and I could breathe steadily again. I was grateful to gasp my lungs full of moist Western Washington air when Mike and I headed for the parking garage and back to the other side of the state.

Within a week Dad was out of the hospital, although Mom and Dad stayed in Seattle for several days afterward just in case. The tumors had changed Dad. Not just the physical symptoms like hypertension, but there were emotional transformations too. Dad was smart, and I can't think of anything that bugged him more than someone acting illogically—he argued with Mike, he argued with his employees, he argued with Mom sometimes. Dad sold used cars, repaired anything from wheelchairs to ovens to automobiles, programmed computers, and wired buildings for electricity. My Dad could do anything, but suddenly, working wasn't so important anymore. Sure, he was back at work only days after his diagnosis, and again as soon as surgery would allow, but that was out of the necessity of keeping our family-run business afloat. His pheos made him aware of what was most important, and the main change I saw in Dad was a softening, like butter left on the counter all day. He let the mistakes of others fall away unnoticed without getting mad, and he started treating Mom differently.
I was maybe fifteen when Mom confided in me how frustrated it made her that Dad never really got her anything for her birthday or anniversary. Dad picked me up from basketball practice one day soon after, and I mentioned it to him, “Why can’t you just send her flowers or something to let her know you care?”

He shook his head and replied, “You know, I could set up an account at the flower shop so Mom’d get flowers every year on her birthday, but what would that mean?” It wasn’t in Dad to get sappy about birthdays and anniversaries and then spend time trying to find a gift for the occasion. But after diagnosis of the pheos, that began to change. I came home one weekend to see flowers on the table, and Mom grinned with just a touch of tears glistening in her eyes. “They’re from your dad, just to say he loves me.” It took twenty-six years and two tumors, but Dad finally figured it out. It wasn’t that he didn’t love her before; I know he did. For as long as I can remember, before Dad walked out the door for work he’d kiss Mom goodbye. But now, they held hands at dinner, cuddled when the family was sitting around talking. Tumors can be good things.

The pheos changed Dad physically as well. The year before surgery, Dad’s allergies—to dust, pollen, perfume—were worse than ever before. We had to stop using our wood stove because the smoke got to him, he was on antihistamines almost constantly, and everything made him sneeze. After the tumors were removed, Dad’s sinuses cleared up and for once, he could breathe normally.

A couple months after surgery, Dad held his hand out to me. “Feel that,” he said, rubbing his finger over a thumbnail. I raised an eyebrow at him but did as he said. In the middle of the nail was a groove; above the groove, the old nail was uneven, below the groove, the nail was smooth and strong. He opened his mouth in his classic look of ‘can you believe it?’ and told me
they had started growing differently after surgery. A chemical imbalance in the body produces strange results.

I was glad to be home for Christmas break. I'd talked to both Mom and Dad on the phone, getting updates, hearing everything was going well, but hadn't seen them in several weeks—and the last time had been when Dad was back in the hospital for some postoperative difficulties. I needed to be able to see for myself that Dad really was doing fine. He had lost weight due to a no-fat diet he had been on for the month following surgery, but his grin was the same, and he hugged me tight often, coming up behind me in the kitchen or at the table, telling me how happy he was that I was home.

In January, about two and a half months after Dad left the hospital, he went in again for blood and urine tests. I was back in school by the time the results came, focusing my time and energy on new classes and the beginning of what I hoped would be a smoother semester—no time outs for crisis, please. A week or so later I called Mom to get the news. "All clear!" she said. There was no evidence of any tumors in Dad, none at all. The second tumor in fact hadn't been growing on the lymph nodes, wasn't metastasized from the first but was a completely separate pheo.

There are no characteristics that show whether or not a pheochromocytoma is malignant, another of the strange facets of this rare disease. Spreading into the lymph nodes was the only sure way of knowing, for now, if the tumors would be coming back. If it were malignant, it wouldn't matter if they removed the whole thing—it would return anyway. But the only way to know was to wait. All is clear for now, but as Dad said, we have nine more of these—tests every six months for five years—before we call it good. Nine more, but there's a lot of hope in the number nine. We're counting on Dad being one of the nine out of ten.
VII. Works Cited


