



# STORY AS SACRAMENT:

AN INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY ALLISON

*By Jacqueline Doyle*

“SOMETIMES IT SEEMS to me that all you do in a story is experience its presence. It’s a sacrament. It’s always so small when you say, ‘Well, this story meant,’ and you give a homily about what it meant. But in the presence of a great story, you’re not thinking about what it meant, you’re just trying to draw a breath in the presence of that story.”— Dorothy Allison

Internationally known for her two best-selling, award-winning novels, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998), Dorothy Allison was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1992, has won several Lambda Literary Awards, the 2007 Robert Penn Warren Award for Fiction, and numerous other awards and honors. She has also authored a collection of poems, *The Women Who Hate Me* (1983, 1991), a collection of short stories, *Trash* (1988, 2002), a collection of essays, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class & Literature* (1994), an autobiographical reflection on storytelling, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995), and a new novel, *She Who*, scheduled to come out this year. Most recently she has published “Place” in *The Writer’s Notebook: Craft Essays from Tin House* (2009) and “Jason Who Will Be Famous” in *Tin House Magazine* (2009), the short story that she read to an enthusiastic, standing-room-only audience in a packed auditorium at California State University, East Bay, in January 2009, when she visited as part of the Distinguished Writers Series.

Six months later, on a sunny July day, I met with Allison in the wooden house in Guerneville, California, that she shares with her partner Alix, their sixteen-year-old son, Wolf, two dogs, and three cats. The yard was a jumble of summer flowers with spots of sun, sheltered by towering redwoods and a dense, green forest of trees. Allison led me into a sun-filled kitchen, where she swept stacks of papers off a round wooden table in the corner. “I’m getting ready to teach for a semester at Davidson,” she explained. “The work’s got to be done. My partner’s not happy. My child’s not happy. I’m not happy.” Just back from teaching at the Tin House Summer Writers Workshop at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, Allison was about to teach at the Squaw Valley Writers Community before leaving for North Carolina to serve as McGee Professor in Creative Writing at Davidson College for the fall semester. The schedule on her

website listed nine public appearances in the coming months, more in 2010. “I’m a slow writer,” she said with some regret. “I need all this to support my writing.”

**Jacqueline Doyle:** *In your review of Bobbie Ann Mason’s most recent novel you talk about your preference for “character-driven” rather than “plot-driven” fiction, and “speech that sings, description that startles, and best of all, some person I almost—but don’t quite—recognize from my own experience.” That’s actually a great description of “Jason Who Will Be Famous,” the story you read at Cal State. Could you talk about how you got inside that character?*

**Dorothy Allison:** Have you driven through Guerneville? We’ve got this little problem with tweakers. We’ve got a huge problem with methamphetamines and tweakers. They’re mostly children, between the ages of twelve and twenty, standing around downtown all the time. They’re lost. You see them on the street corner, it breaks your heart. They’re not all tweakers. I started hanging out downtown, walking around, and trying to figure it out. Mostly they’re just kids who have no sense of anything waiting for them, no hope, no job. Their parents are barely surviving. They don’t see who they’re going to be. They break my heart. But I fall in love with them. And at the same time I’m in total despair looking at them.

One day I’m talking to this kid down at the liquor store and he said something like, “Well, then, when that happens,” not believing that anything like that would happen. He’s talking about something he wanted to do, as if it would ever happen, and it was exactly in the same accent that I say the exact same thing. It was like, “Oh, we’re the same person.” [laughs] “We have the same fantasy life.”

I’m always saying, “I’ll get that work done if I go to jail. If I go to jail, I’ll get so much work done.” Which is absurd. I know for a fact you get no work done in jail. They’re always interrupting you. But it’s that fantasy of “If I could interrupt this life and step into that other life,” and they just believe it. That’s the comfort. That’s the fantasy. That’s the dream. And I just started following the character, and he was so funny. And so tender. I love him.

I have no clue what’s going to happen. Because I know also that what happens is that if you get caught up in that dream, you never do anything to change your life. And he’s going to be working, he’s going to be trimming buds, he’s going to be his daddy in twenty years.

**JD:** *I’m interested when you say that you found something of yourself in him, and that allowed you to enter into him. Is there a kind of doubling of yourself in all of your characters, even the ones that aren’t autobiographical?*

**DA:** Well, it’s the thing writers do all the time. You try to look out of other people’s eyes. You only get a version, and it’s an imaginary version. You have to

have a sense of shame, because you're stealing souls. And you're hiding inside them. You fall into these characters and they can say anything and you can pretend it's not you.

**JD:** *Are you writing more stories about teenagers in Guerneville?*

**DA:** I'm interested in the whole outlaw culture up here. Because it dovetails how I grew up. Because "river trash" is "redneck trash" is "trash." There are certain assumptions that you make when you grow up poor in this country about who you are in the world, and there's an enormous supply of self-hatred, but it is livened by a greater hatred for the culture above you that's sitting on you. For me, it has this enormous charm. I've talked to "river trash" here who are dead ringers for the kind of people I knew in Greenville, South Carolina, in the Appalachian Mountains: suspicious, distrustful, live off the grid, hate the government, try not to pay taxes, try to steal everything they can steal because they feel so deeply robbed. I start talking to these people and it's like I'm home.

**JD:** *Have you finished more Guerneville stories, with characters besides Jason?*

**DA:** The long story that I almost read is called "Tell Me Something I Don't Know." It's the one that's closest to being autobiographical, about a woman who's a writer who moves up to Guerneville and is fascinated with Janis Joplin. She meets some of Janis Joplin's old cronies, and swings an invitation to go meet one of Janis's ex-girlfriends who lives back in the woods.

**JD:** *Did Janis Joplin live up here?*

**DA:** Her ex-girlfriend did.

**JD:** *I know you've said that you were writing something about Joplin. You have some wonderful description in Cavedweller of her music.*

**DA:** Yes, I stole some of that out of the Janis stuff because that project wasn't working so well. Well, the story is that she goes to meet this woman, the ex-girlfriend. She never actually gets to speak to Linda (although I did speak to Linda). It's part something that happened to me, it's part a story I was told. A woman's going to meet some people, and you can only meet these people by invitation. The story I was told was that someone was going to meet some of the Grateful Dead people, and she was told, "You drive out here, you park your car, you look for the red sign, you go up the dirt road, you turn left at the persimmon tree." And in the middle of it, they tell her, "Don't get off the path. Don't step off the path. Stay on the path." So the woman drives out there, she's walking. And it's hot, but in the shade it's cool. She steps off the path.

She walks ten feet and the ground gives way, and she falls. Because the path is the only solid ground. The rest of it is all covering over *something* that she doesn't ever see. She hangs above it in a net, and they have to come rescue her. So they do come rescue her, and they pull her out, and they drag her up the hill, and she's got a cut on her leg. She's saying, "I'm sorry. I was stupid,"

and they sit her down and they feed her some tea and they bandage her up and then she realizes they're not letting her go. And that what they're doing is debating whether they're going to kill her or not. Because what's under that netting is deeply dangerous. And they don't want anybody to know. Shit, they could disappear her. She stays there three days.

The story is constructed so that she's telling a story to her niece, who's in jail, in the basement of the courthouse. It's the middle of the night, and she's trying to tell a story to her niece that will make her niece realize that she's in serious trouble, and that she can't keep mouthing off to the cops, and that she's really got to be on her best behavior to get out of this with any chance of a future life instead of going to prison. She's trying to get the kid to be serious and the kid is belligerent, and full of bravado, and won't listen, so she starts telling the story of when she went to interview this woman and what happened when she stepped off the path. But you're in her head as she's telling the story, and it goes back and forth between what *really* happened to her and the story that she's crafting to both scare and coax her niece. Which is really fun writer's stuff.

**JD:** *So you're playing with the different functions that story and memory can serve.*

**DA:** Yes, I used true stuff. My niece did get arrested and I did have to go and keep her out of jail, and persuade her, and I used various mechanisms for doing that. And then I used fiction, or at least stories I've been told. I also used something else that happened at another time, a guy I met that scared me badly, deeply, and made me realize that some of the genial people up here are seriously dangerous. There's the guy who runs the meth lab, which is what she almost discovered, and a teenage girl in the story who wants to kill her, who is just in lust to kill her, and spends the whole three days smelling her skin, and touching her, and wanting to kill her, a sharp-toothed, crazy meth freak who is probably the most dangerous person in the book. In that story, she's probably about fifteen. In the last story I've been working on, she's twenty-nine, with two kids, no teeth. I wound up at Emory last year working with the Theater Department, where we did a stage version. So now I'm adapting it as a play. I haven't published it as a story yet.

**JD:** *At Cal State you said that you don't tell your students that part of the writing process is "going crazy." How crazy? Is that particularly true of autobiographical writing out of a very deep place like Bastard Out of Carolina, or is it true of all writing?*

**DA:** Well I think it's true of all writing that's done well and with intensity. There are three different kinds of craziness. One is inhabiting the character, and *really* inhabiting the character, emotionally, and feeling all that stuff. Some of this is whiny and silly. I mean as if imagination were as dangerous as living the life. It's not. It's an act of imagination. But you can get in that character and get caught. If you're reading and you fall into the character, you become

that character. If you're writing with great intensity, you fall into that character is so complete you start thinking in that character and you can think in some dangerous ways.

Then, there's the writer's self-consciousness, and arrogance. That will drive you crazy. Because that will disconnect you from reality.

**JD:** *The arrogance of thinking you can do that as a writer?*

**DA:** Of stealing people and remaking them on the page. Of believing you know who they are, when all you've done is imagine a version of them that's only good for a few seconds. People are not short stories. People are not even novels. People are fucking encyclopedias, and have huge range and depth that a story can just capture a slice of.

I'm always telling my writing workshop people that stories don't explain, stories do not explicate, stories offer us a stunned vision of a character or a moment. And it is that stunned vision that is the story, it's that haaaaah, intake of breath. That does not go very deep sometimes. Sometimes it does. Sometimes it doesn't. But the writer imagines that it does. The writer imagines themselves as an all-seeing, God-like eye. That's very dangerous, and that will drive you crazy.

**JD:** *I was thinking about the God-like eye in Cavedweller. Delia can't forgive her ex-husband, and yet there's that moment when God seems to forgive everyone, and is that the novelist or . . . ?*

**DA:** Is it God, or is it Dorothy? [laughs] The writer, or God, has to believe each character's version. There's a kind of arrogant confidence that you know these characters, and that they really make sense. I mean, what *do* you know? I'm inventing all this. I'm inventing these people. I'm inventing this town. I'm inventing God. That arrogance fascinates me, and scares me. You can take it too far.

**JD:** *And the third way of being crazy?*

**DA:** The third way is losing faith in the voice, which is the writer's path to hell. That happens all the time. It happens in the context of the writing, it happens over and over again in the writing, and the only thing I know that is useful about that is that it's happened to me so many times that I know it will happen, that there will come a point in the narrative where the narrative stalls or I start thinking, "Wait, is Clint really trying to con Cissy, or is he really trying to make amends?" And you know, you lose faith. There are many ways of doing that: lose faith in the action, lose faith in the voice of the characters, especially if you have a couple of different people, and that shifts point of view in that narrative.

**JD:** *You started off with Cissy in Cavedweller, didn't you, in first-person narrative, and then changed it?*

**DA:** Shifted it all to third.

**JD:** *Was that after a crisis in the writing, or was it a kind of experiment? I know you got stalled on that book at some point, too.*

**DA:** I get stalled on every book. That's where the crisis of faith happens, the voice stops, and you have to work your way back into it. No, I think I shifted it because of the "dancing dog syndrome." Because I was told, "Oh, look, she's got such a natural Southern storytelling voice, when she speaks out of the 'I.'" But that's the huge class contempt of this culture. The middle class speaks in "we" and "they" and the lower class speaks in "I." Men speak in "we" and "they," and women speak in "I." At least that's the assumption. And they treat you like a dancing dog: "Ooh, it can dance. It thinks it's something." I know that shift happened because of that. But once you shift point of view, and I pretty much always do—I go back and forth from first to third to see what falls out and what comes in—the one that works the best stays, and third-person worked best to move between all of those characters in *Cavedweller*.

**JD:** *I was hoping to hear more about your forthcoming novel. Is She Who in first-person, or in third-person? Or both?*

**DA:** I shifted back and forth. There are *huge* sections that were in first-person. I still have to decide. The book is in two completely different versions and I have to decide which is . . .

**JD:** *Oh.*

**DA:** I know. [laughs]

**JD:** *Is it from the consciousness of the victim who goes into the coma?*

**DA:** I started out in Cassy, as she was recovering after being thrown off the parking garage next to the Metreon in San Francisco. She's assaulted. She's raped, but they don't find that out until they get her stabilized because she's so close to dying. Whoever attacked her threw her off the top of the parking garage and she landed on a Ford truck and smashed the window and smashed herself, broke both her hips. And they keep her alive and there's a long year of recovery. She's in a coma for most of ten months, in and out, barely conscious. Everyone who loves Cassy is destroyed. Cassy's gone. There's no Cassy for a year. Just a body in a hospital recovering.

**JD:** *What does the title mean?*

**DA:** It's from the poem by Judy Grahn, the sheaf of poems, which are exquisite, wonderful, and from her book of short stories. And then it's just: "She who?" She doesn't remember. When she wakes up, she hasn't got full amnesia, but she thinks she's thirteen. She thinks her father's just died. She's lost ten years. And very gradually she recovers it. Originally in the first draft she never recovered it. She just becomes this new person and she's *told* everything that happened. But she never remembers. That didn't work right. So when I went back to the book, after putting it down for three years, I hewed a little bit more to what generally does happen, which is that memory comes back in

fragments, in a different context.

**JD:** *I read that you went to a recovery center in Santa Clara to see what it was like.*

**DA:** It pretty much destroyed me. Remember when I said about going crazy, and the arrogance of writers? I started out with this character Cassy, this golden girl—she’s a student about to graduate from Stanford, she’s going to law school at NYU, she’s got a big scholarship, she’s got a mother who dotes on her. It’s the model California golden girl life. And I fucked her up. I really destroyed her. I bent her bad, to see who would come out the other end. Now that’s a mean and awful thing for a writer to do. That’s why we’re such motherfuckers. The problem is the arrogance of creating one of these people, and destroying them, and then rebuilding them. We do it easily, we do it with language, we do it in paragraphs.

I went down to Santa Clara largely, simply to vet what I had done. I had more than half of a draft, three quarters of a draft, and basically I wanted to go see what a recovery unit was like. I wanted to check out the language, I wanted to see the beds, and find the names of the frame in which they fit people in comas so they can flip them over so they don’t get bedsores. I wanted all that language. And that was basically what I was going for, just to vet my details, and make sure I hadn’t gone off into some writer’s creation fantasy. But I spent a couple of days down there, and met a bunch of the doctors, and toured the unit, and met some of the kids, mostly teenagers. They were real. It wasn’t fiction. These were thirteen-year-old girls who tripped on the steps, these were sixteen-year-old boys on motorcycles. An entire ward of boys on motorcycles.

You read the news reports, you read the books, and it’s a character, it’s a creation. Then you see a sixteen-year-old in a bed who looks like a baby bird because his mouth’s always going open and his mother is standing there sobbing. Her child is gone and dead. There’s another creature who’s wearing her child’s body, not her son. The ground went out from under me. The arrogance of what I had been doing hit me, and I lost it. I lost the narrative. I lost the flow. It killed the book. It stopped it dead. And it was all about the arrogance of what I had done.

**JD:** *I read somewhere else that you’ve lost several novels, partly because you are a “binge writer” and they were interrupted at crucial times.*

**DA:** Doesn’t anybody ever say they too lose books?

**JD:** *I’m sure they do, or the book transforms itself into something else.*

**DA:** I think it transforms. It becomes something else. And I’m a slow writer. I seem to have to do a whole lot of work to constantly shore up my confidence in my right to do this thing. I meet a lot of writers who don’t have to do that. I’m jealous as shit of them.

**JD:** *You were wonderful at the Cal State reading with our student writers. So many of*



*them said that they developed new confidence after listening to your talk after the story. And you were so encouraging with them individually during the book signing*

**DA:** Good. You have to be. We need every story they've got. And on one level I can look at myself and tell myself that, but in the meanwhile inside, it's all hairline cracks held together with duct tape.

**JD:** *And telling that to students is part of your function as a teacher?*

**DA:** It's part of my purpose. I'm better at growing good writers than I am at being a confident, continuing writer. The process is constantly interrupted for me. And I'm ashamed of this fact, and I'm embarrassed deeply.

**JD:** *It's not easy.*

**DA:** It's not easy. Writing death is easy. Killing people is easy. I've got so much rage backed up. You bust that dam and I can kill people for days. [laughs] But writing inside survival, or making good decisions is much harder. *She Who* stopped for three years, and when it started again, Cassy was up near Gualala at a goat farm, looking at a nun, who I didn't even *have* in the first version. But there was Margaret, the nun, all in third-person, and I love Margaret. She'd been a nun in El Salvador in her early twenties, teaching, and the story I give her is a story that I adapted from two incidents in which nuns were murdered, but I had Margaret survive. Margaret is taking in refugees from all kinds of horrific moments in history. She has got a thirty-year struggle with violence and hatred for the man who raped her and imprisoned her. She is trying not to hate him but she dreams of killing him. It was so much fun to write the parts where she dreams of killing him. It's great language. She's got all this God stuff. I love that shit. She got through her teenage years by memorizing Elizabeth Bishop poetry. I love all that shit. I can play with that shit. So I wrote this scene in which she's doing this thing in which she's basically trying to cure herself of a wine-rich desire for revenge centering on a man who's already dead. What she's trying to do is make herself stop imagining killing him. And stop fantasizing all the ways he could die, because that's what she's been feeding herself for years.

**JD:** *That theme runs through a lot of your fiction. You've said somewhere that you wrote Trash out of rage and revenge, Bastard Out of Carolina out of grief and compassion, Cavedweller out of understanding. Maybe all of them share the impulse toward redemption and forgiveness.*

**DA:** I was raised in the South. I think I'm seeking redemption all the time. Me and Flannery. I think we all are. But I read the scene with Margaret at Squaw two years ago. [laughs] I tell myself, "Squaw. Serious writers. Serious work. I can read one of the most troublesome sections of the book." Well, they hated it, just hated it. [laughs]

I have cut it by a third since then, and tightened it considerably. Margaret is a woman who's been raped, who got through it by abandoning everything she's ever believed in and hating that man. At the end of it, her huge accomplishment

is that she fantasizes him coming into the kitchen, drinking a glass of water, and walking out. And for thirty years, every time she's fantasized him coming into the kitchen, she's killed him. And she lets him walk out. I find that glorious. That's her triumph. But I don't think they heard that.

I'm obsessed with violence. I'm obsessed with revenge. I'm obsessed with forgiveness. I have a huge investment in redemption. But I have a huge investment in believing that people are not monsters, or that even those of us who are capable of monstrous acts can achieve a kind of redemption and forgiveness. How else am I going to live in America post-Bush, and not go crazy.

**JD:** *There's a passage I've always loved in Two or Three Things I Know for Sure: "The story of what happened, or what did not happen but should have—that story can become a curtain drawn shut, a piece of insulation, a disguise, a razor, a tool that changes every time it is used and sometimes becomes something other than we intended. The story becomes the thing needed." When you change the story, or Margaret changes the story, so that her rapist comes into the kitchen and gets a glass of water and then simply leaves, you're playing with memory, with narrative, with possibilities.*

**DA:** You stepped into dangerous territory when you said "play with memory." First, there's playing with narrative, different possibilities. Every time you make up somebody, you make up somebody because of things you've learned or seen or become fascinated with. Every story that you've ever taken in, every story you've ever read, every movie, every TV show, every piece of gossip, it all melds and becomes the people that you make up. The roots of all that: huge, and wide, and sometimes you can't tell. And sometimes you can't tell what the intention of the story is when you're following the character. I didn't know where Jason was going when I started with him. I knew he was this kid whose fantasy of how he would really get around to really changing his life was that he needs to be kidnapped and held in a basement, because then he'll get the focus and he can do stuff. But I didn't know about his Dad, I didn't know about his Mom, and when that starts coming in, I don't know where it all comes from. That's the story that changes in your hand. The story goes where it's going. You can't control that, and I don't think you should. You should let it, and see what happens.

But when you work with memory, when you're telling true stories, actual lived experience, it's really very, very dangerous, because the act of turning memory into narrative subsumes memory.

**JD:** *You've quoted E.L. Doctorow as saying that "writing erases memory." You seemed skeptical of memoir and the current memoir boom when you talked about it at Cal State.*

**DA:** There are stories we trust and stories we don't trust. Actually a lot of that distinction I don't trust. Because I think the stories we trust are the stories we're most familiar with, and those are often lies. So what I love about memoir,

especially memoir from people who have not generally been encouraged to write memoir—people of color, queer, working-class people—is that our stories actually are genuinely surprising and tend to be much “meaner,” more “sensationalistic,” if you will, and not trusted as easily as the stories by recovering middle-class women in the suburbs. All they have to do is get religion and learn to cook, and they’ve got a framework for their work that is immediately, intimately trustworthy. What I love about memoir is that it reestablishes what the fuck is trustworthy. And it puts new stories on the table that are true and can be documented.

I love some of the people who go to Squaw and talk about memoir, because they have a rigid concept of what is acceptable in nonfiction narrative. And I think there should be some expectations in nonfiction narrative about what is a true story versus what is a fiction. I prefer a narrative that uses fictional style, because it’s simply so much better story, so much more readable, but that always creates an undercurrent of “Is it trustworthy?” At this point memoir or “based on a true story” sells so much better than fiction. So people tend to take memoir and push the limits into fiction.

**JD:** *There is something different about a narrative that claims it is true and not fictional.*

**DA:** It’s a deep betrayal. If I write a really good version of something that actually happened and I change details to make it a good story, I *lose* the details of what actually did happen.

**JD:** *Bastard Out of Carolina is a fiction, with truths in it, but also factual changes.*

**DA:** I made notes as I was working about what I was fictionalizing.

**JD:** *How do you feel about the author playing with memory in order to create fictions?*

**DA:** I believe in that absolutely. I think we will anyway. Where do stories come from? Stories come from lived experience, and from stories other people have told us. If somebody tells you a story so vividly that you see it and feel it, it’s inside you, you almost think it happened. When I was writing *Two or Three Things*, I called my sisters, I called my aunts, I had face-to-face conversations, “Did this happen?” And one of the most extraordinary things was discovering, when I would pin them down, how much fiction had been transmitted to me as truth, from inside my family. And it turns out there are back layers to some of those stories that I didn’t get to in *Two or Three Things*. The story about the dead baby and the car wreck. My God, that story must have grown over decades. By the time it was transmitted to us as kids, it was gospel. Then when I went looking for the clippings, for news reports, I discovered that it was all a fiction. But they had made up so many layers and textures. The story they told was a great story. And the aunt, the story about how he beat her up and she ran. That night, when the accident actually happened, she wasn’t running. But half

a dozen other times she was, with the kids, and terrible things happened, stories that I've only heard in the last couple of years.

The fiction that the family made up matches the reality, but they took it further, and they made a huge emotional point, and it also was a story they invented. I think they invented it in part for the younger girls so they wouldn't take up with a man who would drive them out into the night and have them lose their children because they were running. It's that lesson story that the family passes on. They shaped a story that was supposed to serve a purpose. Then they fell in love with the story. Then they embroidered it. And then they handed it to me.

**JD:** *Well when you write a memoir, and you're saying, "This is the story I was told," it's still true then, even if the story isn't.*

**DA:** The story really is your emotional response to what happened. There's a wonderful essay Mark Doty has done on that, and I love that essay. He basically wants there to be more narrative in which people acknowledge their interaction with story and what they know and don't know. "This is what I was told, this is how I felt. Now that I've heard this version this is how I felt." Because he's retelling stories and writing essays about years before. Now *that* in narrative nonfiction is completely respectable. But that doesn't sell the way James Frey does, or that woman up in Oregon with the gang story. Those stories, full of violence, sex, raw emotions, sensational aspects, those things will really make you some cash.

**JD:** *You've said that you don't write memoir. Could you talk about Two or Three Things I Know for Sure?*

**DA:** *Two or Three Things* is a meditation on storytelling. There are memoir elements in it. But one of the things that I do in the course of writing it is talk about what I can trust and what I can't. And in my family [laughs], a little iced tea and whiskey and you can't trust anything they tell you. And they're drinking all the time.

**JD:** *What about your early essay "Skin, Where She Touches Me." Is that memoir?*

**DA:** Yes, I suppose it is. The essay form is a step away from narrative that nevertheless uses storytelling techniques. It's cleaner. You can be much more specific. It's also dangerous because you're much more naked. Because you say, "This actually happened, and this is how it felt. I was an idiot." I think the best stance for a writer is to simply say, "I was a fool. I didn't know what I was doing, but this is what I did. I've got to live with it." That's a wonderful place, and it is a *memoir* place to begin.

**JD:** *Your autobiographical writing is often about your family.*

**DA:** Self-mythologizing stories work really well, and I loved them. I think from a very early age I was invested in mythologizing my family in a way that was positive and powerful, because we got so many messages of contempt,

and told ourselves so many messages of contempt. I was always trying to do the heroic version. We were not the good poor. [laughs] We were not even the good Southerners. We were the nasty Southerners. But there is a kind of glory in being nasty, and it does dovetail with what I see here. There's a kind of "You have made us criminals. Let us show you what criminals can get away with." That's what I love about "river trash." Mostly the crimes that get committed on the river are so minor, so minor, in terms of the injustices wreaked on these people.

**JD:** *You've talked about stereotypes—stereotypes of "poor white trash," stereotypes of incest victims, stereotypes of lesbians—and writing against stereotypes.*

**DA:** Terrible when you discover in yourself the roots of stereotype. That also means that you have to acknowledge when we in fact do shit that has become associated with the stereotype. You can't deny it.

**JD:** *Otherwise you're creating a false mythology.*

**DA:** You're creating a false mythology and you're putting in question the sense of truth in your narrative.

**JD:** *So are you aware then of audience, that the audience might make certain assumptions and you have to write against them? Are you thinking about that as you write?*

**DA:** Stories are long, and you're always questioning the story as you're writing the story. So, yes. You might set out to counter some myths that you see in a *Woman's Day* in the airport, but by the time you're three airports down, in another city, and you've had no sleep, the story will go in its own place and do something different. It's always changing. What I find astonishing is where stories stop. When it's finished and it has a complete shape. And it will have done what it's going to do and you've got to let go of it.

**JD:** *You mention writing in airport after airport. I've looked at the schedule on your website, and I can't believe how many teaching gigs, workshops, talks, readings you do.*

**DA:** I'm a self-employed, itinerant writer, who writes slow, and does not have as much money as people think.

**JD:** *So you have to catch time to write when you can and where you can. How does that work?*

**DA:** It's difficult.

**JD:** *So you write on the road? Do you do a lot of writing when you're away teaching?*

**DA:** When I'm actually teaching, it's really hard to write. It bleeds from the same place, is the phrase I use, it uses the same energy, the same emotional energy. It gets so exhausting working with young writers. If you really want to be a writer, get yourself an easy desk job. Because teaching is not an easy desk job. It engages you so much emotionally that it's hard to write. But then again, when you're working with young writers, huge amounts of energy come to you. So if you can get enough time to reclaim your energy, you can do some interesting work. A lot of it is their excitement in the story. Watching that spark hit. And watching them begin to give themselves permission lets me give myself

more permission.

**JD:** *I have a student who heard you at the San Francisco Queer Arts Festival, where you said that a friend of yours had just died and you were thinking about the meaning of poetry and how poetry renews you. Are you still writing poetry?*

**DA:** Yes. Not publishing it. But I've always written poetry. I'm a bad poet. I'm not a good poet. I'm excessive. I'm not disciplined enough.

**JD:** *Do you still use poems as the beginnings of stories? I've heard that "River of Names," and even Bastard Out of Carolina, started as poems.*

**DA:** Lots of times. Dialogue or poetry. And bad poetry's the best of all.

**JD:** *Why is that?*

**DA:** Because it's freer, and looser, and more emotional. Then, you know, to make it good poetry you've got to pare it down. But to make it good fiction you've got to let it run. [laughs] I go further in the direction of fiction with more satisfaction.

**JD:** *At Cal State you talked about using the "accordion method" when you write, repeatedly expanding and contracting. I'm interested in what you've said about paring down the manuscript of Bastard Out of Carolina by taking out a black character who befriended Bone.*

**DA:** Ninety-seven pages.

**JD:** *Ninety-seven pages in a juvenile detention center that you took out too. And you also removed a black character from Cavedweller, a gay black musician who took over seven chapters. You felt that somehow these characters, these voices, were haunting you to some degree ...*

**DA:** I'm a white Southerner. It seems reasonable to me that I should be haunted by this concept.

**JD:** *But also very interesting. That the characters are taking on life and intruding even.*

**DA:** Well, they don't intrude until they become so big that they want their own story.

**JD:** *Are there stories coming out of these two characters?*

**DA:** There are certainly stories, if I could just stay home. If I could get me one of them MacArthurs and not travel. There are filing cabinets full of stories. But it's tricky stuff. I always question my motives in creating black characters. Is it apology? Is it making amends? As a writer I've done fairly well. I can send you to some really fine black writers who are not doing well, barely surviving, so yes, some of it is that. There's that issue. And then there's the appropriation issue.

**JD:** *Do you worry that you're taking over someone else's voice?*

**DA:** Well, if I'm taking over, maybe. Although one of the things that I discovered in my early twenties when I was writing stories in Tallahassee, when I would try to write working-class figures, was I would write what I thought was a story about a working-class family and people would read it and think it was

a black story. That shared culture is that shared culture. There's a lot of the same language, a lot of the same themes.

**JD:** *Southern speech.*

**DA:** Especially the way you put it on the page. Or the way *I* was putting it on the page. I was trying to avoid all that Brer Rabbit bullshit dialect, and trying to find a way to put in inflection, rhythm, and timing. And that read to a lot of people as black.

**JD:** *You've talked a lot about the influence of Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, where she's exploring the beauty of black language.*

**DA:** And she goes right to poetry and the Bible. And that narrative I absolutely understand. Because I was raised in the Baptist Church, and it's the narrative of glory and redemption, you hear it all the time. A lot of it's shaped by music. And people's speech patterns, it seems to me, replicate that music. Gospel music, but also country western, folk, and rock and roll.

**JD:** *Gospel and country music, the emotions of that music, are everywhere in Bastard Out of Carolina.*

**DA:** There's also a language. And the language of a lot of early country is gospel. There's places where it's hard to tell the distinction between what is a gospel song and what is a country song. A lot of religious overtones in a lot of early country. But also tacky shit, which works really good. [sings] "The sign on the highway, the scene of the crash, the people pulled over, to let the hearse pass." That's a real song. There's a kind of wonderful tackiness to country music that some gospel has too.

**JD:** *There are moments in Bastard where gospel seems to go beyond music or lyrics. Bone describes the wail of Shannon Pearl's mother at her daughter's funeral as "pure gospel."*

**DA:** Isn't a scream a prayer? The most heartfelt gospel I ever heard was in a hospital, in New York—friend of mine dead, his lover just keening. And I'd never heard keening before. That was keening. Soon as I heard it I recognized it. It was like a song cut you in half. You can put it on the page and people ... if they've ever experienced it, it will echo. You don't need a lot to remind them what it was. There's also comfort, huge comfort in it. It's almost like it's balancing. The keening balances the grief. We're all sharing it together.

**JD:** *A kind of inner music that comes out in a time when you need to express something*

**DA:** We didn't do any singing at my mother's funeral. Pity. It's a great pity. My uncle had a great voice. He could have done an imitation Johnny Cash and we'd have all been right with him. That would have been a good moment, but none of them were capable. Some day I'll write it as if it happened. That's the other reason to write a story.

**JD:** *Does rewriting memory in fiction satisfy some deep desire we have to explore*

*something that should or could have happened but didn't?*

**DA:** To make a version that makes sense, which is what stories do. They don't explain. I don't believe in that. But they make a version that tracks, that makes sense. And if you've ever been in a horrific situation, like death, you get these flashes. [snaps her fingers several times] And a lot of the flashes you get are so horrific because you think the inappropriate thing, or these horrific images hit you in the eye and you can barely stand it. You know you're looking at someone you deeply love who has just died and all you can think about is whether she's turning to rot inside. Well you put that in the story and it's an act of forgiveness. It's human. Not monstrous. It's human. And it echoes everybody else who's ever had an inappropriate thought at a horrible moment. It's comforting, and wonderful. It remakes your shame and your horror at yourself. That's, I think, a good thing to do.

Sometimes it seems to me that all you do in a story is experience its presence. It's a sacrament. It's always so small when you say, "Well, this story meant," and you give a homily about what it meant. But in the presence of a great story, you're not thinking about what it meant, you're just trying to draw a breath in the presence of that story. Kind of wonderful.

Life goes so fast and we lose so much. We can barely even hang on to memory. But if you've got a story, a stunned moment story, that moment lives forever. It's not lost. It stays. So you create as many of those as you can. Our culture does it too. We pick certain stories to foreground, and then those stories live. And they become what we say about that decade or that period or that moment. Stories are the way we transmit what really happened, the way we transmit history. The stories we tell ourselves about what's going on, those are the things that will live. A lot of what we're getting now seems to me on some levels kind of shallow. The news stories that we're getting are really thin. Fiction once it sits in your head for a while becomes history. Tobias Wolff's stories make sense of Vietnam. Tim O'Brien's mystical stories reshape what we understand about Vietnam. We will talk about this period, the economic crash that happened last fall and everything that's happened since. But it's going to be the stories that get written that stay with us and shape what we think about it. Not just in terms of the actual details of what happened, but the feel of the period and what stays with us.

Bernie Madoff. Fuck me, Bernie Madoff. You know the Bernie Madoff story that registers with me? I was supposed to teach a program for young queer writers in L.A. this summer. I'd done it once before, we were doing it again, everybody was signed up. But the funding was with the foundation, the money was with Bernie Madoff. And when the foundation lost its funding, the program was cancelled. In the arts, a third of my paid income for this last year was cancelled because of Bernie Madoff. If it hits me, it hits everybody. And



then the kids who were going to go to that program in L.A. That program's gone. Will they find a way to write their stories without the community? That's my little slice of the story. And I can write that story. It's not going to be as powerful as the guy who killed his three kids and his wife because he lost his job and he couldn't tell her. Or the woman who has lost her apartment. The layers, the different stories are going to come out.

Someone is going to do it in such a way that it has the impact of a gospel song or a prayer, and then, then, that will dog Bernie Madoff, that will remake the culture and make them think a little more. But as it is, I don't know. We're still getting really thin versions. Stories are deeper versions, and they can do things on different levels. And it really is like a song or a prayer. A story has to be good enough that the reader starts doing the "what if," what comes after the story ends, or replaying certain lines that stay with them.

Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that we never know what the fuck is coming next.