

My
Auto-
biography
of Carson
McCullers

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My
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Jenn
Shapland



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For your Carson

*In the recognition of loving
lies an answer to despair.*

—AUDRE LORDE,
Zami: A New Spelling of My Name

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Author's Note

Due to copyright constraints, several documents, including letters, telegrams, and a set of transcripts made from Carson McCullers's recorded therapy sessions, have been referenced without direct quotations throughout this book.

Question

Reeves asked Carson if she was a lesbian on the front porch of Carson's house on Stark Avenue, after everyone had gone to bed. I picture them on a swing, though I know for a fact that no such swing exists. Carson answered with a swift denial, wished aloud that she wasn't one, then expressed plain uncertainty.

I was the only patron in a small university archive in Columbus, Georgia, when I came across this exchange in a typed transcript dated March 1958. The transcript records Carson's fifth therapy session with Dr. Mary Mercer, whom she visited for help with writer's block. I read the question again. In her recollection, Carson told Reeves that she had loved a woman named Vera, another named Mary Tucker, but she wasn't sure what he referred to when he said lesbians. She asked him, as though lesbians might be a club that she could consider joining, or an unfamiliar species she might study: How do lesbians behave? Where do they live? How do they interact?

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Despite Carson's status as maybe-lesbian, Reeves asked Carson when they would be married. She was nineteen.

Articulation

Carson McCullers, when she is remembered, is remembered as a novelist who grew up in Columbus, Georgia, moved to New York in her twenties, and spent the rest of her life writing about misfits in the American South. Her characters are mute or too tall or black or queer and almost always lonely and out of place in a conservative small town that looks a lot like her own. In 1940, her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, brought her fame at twenty-three. Her books were made into films and Broadway plays. One of her best friends was Tennessee Williams—she called him Tenn—and she feuded with copycat Truman Capote for years. She married the same man, Reeves McCullers, twice, and is rumored to have chased after women. She was often drunk, chronically ill, and, like so many of her era, she died young. If you've heard of her, you've probably heard some version of this.

To tell her own story, a writer must make herself a character. To tell another person's story, a writer must make that

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person some version of herself, must find a way to inhabit her. This book takes place in the fluid distance between the writer and her subject, in the fashioning of a self, in all its permutations, on the page.

Correspondence

I wasn't expecting love letters. The paper was browned with age and wrinkled at the edges. Annemarie's handwriting filled the page, bearing hard to the right and often spilling back up the left-hand margin with last additions. I read through clear Mylar sleeves, too intern-nervous to remove the pages from their housings.

April 10th, at night

Carson, child, my beloved, you know that, leaving the day after tomorrow, feeling half-afraid and proud, leaving behind me all I care for, once again, and a wave of love—

I looked up at the rows of manuscript boxes that surrounded me, mind humming, face flushed. Did that mean what I thought it meant? What did she mean, "love"? Instinctively, I listened for anyone who might be coming. Hearing only the ticking of the sliding electric shelves, I read on. To Carson, Annemarie recalled *talking as we did, you and I, at that*

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lunch time, you remember, at the corner near the Bedford Hotel, with milk and bread and butter, ages ago.

Four years before I visited the Georgia archives housing Carson's transcribed therapy sessions, before I knew much more of Carson than her name, I was an intern at the Harry Ransom Center, a giant collection of writers' and artists' books and papers on the University of Texas campus in Austin. The gig was a kind of coup: it got me out of teaching for two years while I was a graduate student and gave me unfettered access to the papers and belongings of major writers.

On each day of my two years at the center, I came into the shared intern office and answered queries from scholars about their research from a stack of mail by the door. Most were boring. About half of them were about either David Foster Wallace or Norman Mailer. (My favorite find was a series of letters one of Mailer's mistresses had written him with the salutation—summing up my own feelings—*Dear American Shithead.*) One day in early February 2012, a scholar wrote asking for letters between Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenbach, whose name was utterly unfamiliar, and Carson McCullers, whose book titles had always struck a chord with me. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Like, *same*. But I'd never gotten around to reading any. Books seem to find me when I'm ready for them, or else I abandon them. I took the freight elevator down to the icy basement manuscript

room, pulled the correspondence folder—it was 29.1, I still recall—and started reading it right there in the stacks.

Annemarie's language in her letters to Carson is intimate, suggestive, or I read it that way. *You remember*. I had received letters like these. I had written letters like these to the women I'd loved. It was very little to go on, and yet I felt an utter certainty: Carson McCullers had loved women. Or at least, this woman had loved her. Immediately, without articulating a reason, I wanted to know everything about them both. I brought the folder upstairs to my shelf in the intern office, hurried to my three o'clock reference-desk shift, and started Googling. This was research, I rationalized; part of the job. Annemarie, I discovered, was a Swiss writer, photographer, silk heiress, and known lady-killer who spent time in New York in the 1930s and early '40s.

In folder 29.4 I found eight letters from Annemarie to Carson, but none of Carson's replies. One has the heading *On the Congo River, Sept. 1941*, another *On the boat, from Portuguese Angola to Lisbon*. After counting the pages for the scholar and replying to his request, I took the folder downstairs and tucked it back into its box. Later, I would keep stacks of Carson's books and manuscripts on my shelf in the office, but at that moment I didn't feel entitled to have these letters so nearby. I had, however, transcribed some of them into an email that I sent to myself. The scholar never ordered the scans.

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Annemarie's handwriting is so small and insistent that the letters read long, though often they cover only the front and back sides of a single sheet. Her letters, like mine, are overwrought, wrung with feeling and a need to declare it in writing. In the first letter, it seems as if she is ending her relationship with Carson—gently, but firmly. She writes from Zurich, having already left the country:

Thank you forever . . . Carson, remember our moments of understanding, and how much I loved you. Don't forget the terrific obligation of work, be never seduced, write, and, darling, take care of yourself. As I will. (I wrote, in Sils. A few pages only, you would like them), and never forget, please, what has touched us deeply.

Your Annemarie, with all my loving affection.

The love she describes is bound up in writing, in creative work taken seriously by women. I think this part was just as striking to me as their romance, and now it reminds me of the feeling that Audre Lorde describes in her autobiography, *Zami*, when she first finds herself among a group of creative, queer women: "I felt myself pass beyond childhood, a woman connecting with other women in an intricate, complex, and ever-widening network of exchanging strengths." Like my own letters from my late teens and early twenties, Annemarie's letters are transmissions from one confused woman to another, an attempt to

articulate a self she had not yet fully become. Rereading the letters I wrote during this period, I can hear myself still believing that one day soon my identity might resolve into something firm, fixed. I was waiting for my face to thin out, my hands to age. Other than my own, I had never read love letters between women before. For all Annemarie's and Carson's unfamiliarity to me, and their separation from me in time and space, I deeply understood them on the page.

I found the letters at the tail end of the major, slow-burning catastrophe of my twenties: never quite breaking up with my first love, a woman from Texas I'd met our freshman year of college in Vermont, after six closeted years together. In my second year of a six-year PhD program, I was already bored sick of academia. I didn't want to be a literary critic, couldn't stand the institutional hoops as I was jumping through them, and only six months into my internship I could tell I wasn't cut out to be an archivist. I didn't have the patience, and I spent too much time trying to solve mysteries of my own creation. I got an email out of the blue from one of my professors admiring my writing, and I jumped at what felt like validation. The praise continued, along with a barrage of poems and pressure to sleep with him, which I did, unsure exactly how I got there. My six-year relationship dissolved, and I moved out of our apartment. I was twenty-five and, when I wasn't drunk on a porch smoking angry cigarettes with my friends, I was

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exquisitely alone for the first time in my life in a new, overpriced studio apartment I couldn't afford. The dishwasher was full of roaches. The roaches were judging me. I was perplexed by my own behavior. I didn't know if I wanted to date women—I never really had; my first love and I publicly remained “roommates” for all those years—but, on the heels of manipulation, dating men seemed pretty dismal. Like most twenty-five-year-olds, I couldn't figure out what came next.

What came next was Carson.

I tried to tell a few people—coworkers, friends—about the letters, but I couldn't explain why they were so significant to me. “She dated a woman,” they'd say. “So?” The years that followed were overtaken by my desire to understand the magnitude of this on-paper love. Within a week of finding the letters, I would chop my hair short. Within a year I would be more or less comfortably calling myself a lesbian for the first time. I would also catalog McCullers's collection of personal effects at the Ransom Center, her clothes and objects that had made their way into the archive only to sit for years, unprocessed. Four years later I would live in Carson's childhood home in Columbus for a month, and soon after I would move from Austin to Santa Fe with my new love, Chelsea—we met as interns—abandoning my academic job search to finish a book about Carson. Retrospect redefines everything in its path, and I am as hesitant to ascribe steady

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narrative meaning to my own life as to any other's. But I suppose we could call those letters a turning point.

The Soul's Particular Territories

Carson's therapy transcripts surfaced in 2014, after Dr. Mary Mercer's death, at the tiny third-floor archive of Columbus State University. I spent slow spring afternoons there in 2016, scanning and photocopying typo-strewn letters from Carson's post-stroke years, when her left arm was paralyzed and she typed with one finger. I read a copy of Carson's will, in which she leaves her former therapist one-third of everything, and lots of her letters to Mary, which are goofy and sweet: *I kiss your little foot*, she signs them, and addresses Mary as *heartchild*, one word. Many of these I photographed with my phone and texted immediately to Chelsea, with a cloud of exclamation points.

Martha, an older archivist with cropped blonde hair and wide-set eyes ringed by glasses, was in the midst of a heated conversation about mustard gas with other archive workers gathered around her computer when I walked through the door. I informed her I was there to work on Mary and Carson's friendship—that's what I called it. She scoffed

performatively at the request, looking me up and down. Unfazed and already acquainted with her brand of aloofness, I handed her the long list of folders I wanted pulled. As I well know, archives can be grouchy, unapproachable places. It takes some effort on the part of a researcher to gain the staff's trust. They want to be sure you're serious. They guard a lot of secrets, the messy documents of often-messier lives. A few weeks later, I would think of these strained interactions as signs of Martha's, or the institution's, discomfort with the contents of the transcripts. I'm still not sure if that was just my queer researcher's paranoia talking.

Each of Carson's therapy transcripts is housed in a folder labeled "Experiment": "First Experiment," "Second Experiment." The transcripts themselves are maddeningly incomplete, sprinkled with ellipses and blanks that may or may not conceal additional details. Some begin or end midsentence. Carson speaks in all caps, interspersing poetry—her own and others'—with descriptions of her dreams, memories of childhood, and reflections on her life. It could seem especially violating to read the transcripts of a person's conversations with her therapist, as therapy ordinarily assumes confidentiality between counselor and patient. But the existence of these transcripts is anything but ordinary. Though they tell different versions of how this decision came about, both Mary and Carson describe these transcripts as an attempt at writing her autobiography.

Carson was skeptical of therapy at first and nervous about meeting Mary in 1958 at her practice in Nyack, New York, where Carson had lived on and off since 1944. Mary was forty-six, had been practicing psychiatry for over a decade, and had started a private practice in Nyack four years earlier. Carson's second autobiography, which, like the first, she never finished, was dictated from bed nine years after her therapy sessions and published posthumously in 1999 as *Illumination and Night Glare*. In it she writes that she feared "Dr. Mercer would be ugly, bossy, and try to invade my soul's particular territories." She was so worried she woke at three in the morning on the day of their first session. Egregiously early for the appointment, she walked up the path to the office with her cane, struggling to open the screen door, and saw Mary, who "was and is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

To approach her therapy as the writing of a memoir, Carson thought, was one of her real flashes of brilliance. At first, Mary was unsure and thought "it couldn't be done. It was contrary to the therapeutic 'contract.'" But eventually she was convinced. She told biographer Josyane Savigneau, "Against all reason and against the rules of my profession, I agreed to make the tapes—one copy for her and one copy for me—clearly stipulating that this material was not to be made public in its original form and would constitute only a resource for this book she planned to write." Mary got out the Dictaphone she used to record her correspondence

and notes on her patients, and the two started recording right away. Carson didn't feel shy about what the tapes contained—she aimed to publish them. Their agreement is the reason the transcripts still exist at all, and I think it's also the reason I felt comfortable reading them, parsing them for subtext. Mary recalled hearing from Carson's friends that she was playing the therapy tapes “for anyone and everyone,” before Mary took them back from her.

In the late '50s, having lost her mother, whom everyone called Bebe, and a close friend, Carson was unable to write. Her current novel, which would eventually become *Clock Without Hands*, had her completely stuck. She was often alone; she didn't have a lot of money. She didn't feel that therapy with Mary was an expense she could afford, but after a few sessions she recognized its benefits. “I not only liked Dr. Mercer immediately,” she writes, “I loved her, and just as important I knew I could trust her with my very soul. There was no difficulty in talking to her. All the rebellion and frustration of my life I handed over to her, for I knew that she knew what she was touching.” If they could produce from the sessions an autobiography that Carson could sell, she would be able to justify the cost. While this sounds at once practical and ludicrous, I wonder if perhaps she was also looking for a narrative, trying to find a story she could tell in which she fit.

Carson is forty-one when the transcripts begin, and it's clear enough that she, a writer renowned for her psychological

insight and emotional acuity on the page, is still at a loss as to how to articulate who she is. In April 1958, she tells Mary in a letter that her writing comes to her from a place of instinct, rather than analysis, and that she only comprehends what she writes after it is finished. When she first goes to see Mary, she feels so unable to interpret her own feelings and behaviors she compares herself to a person who has had a lobe of her brain surgically removed. So often a search for identity, for self-knowledge, is something we associate with youth. But in my own life, identity was slow to develop, and I didn't fully come into myself until my late twenties. Perhaps this is what I saw, from the start, in Carson: a familiarly protracted becoming.

Therapy has a lot in common with memoir: It's telling your story. I first visited a therapist the same spring I found the Annemarie letters. In the therapist's office, in the only dark corner of the fluorescent UT health center, I said over the gurgles of the cascading fountain on the table beside me, "I seem to have lost the narrative thread of my life." I said, "I just don't know what the narrative is anymore." What I was trying to say, I think, was that I didn't know how to talk my way through talk therapy without a story I could comprehend, a narrative logic into which I could insert my actions and my feelings. My behavior—the breakup, the roaches—felt illogical, self-destructive. And painfully naïve. "I was gawky and erratic and unmanageable to myself," as Jill Johnston, author of *Lesbian Nation*, describes her

experience of coming to terms with her identity. (Or Eileen Myles: “I still liked men. I mean I was trying to.”) That first therapist, a graduate student himself, didn’t have much to offer me. I spent a good part of our session meditating—sitting in silence—at his suggestion.

My next therapist, E, was three floors down in a sunlit office she shared with a woo-kitsch aficionado. For the next four years I sat surrounded by crystals, framed Rumi quotes, and praying Buddhas as E helped me shape a new narrative, one that wasn’t so strict and unforgiving. What I can tell you about my experience as a fledgling lesbian is that it took me a long time to accept and understand it, the identity, the word itself. Now I think of sexuality and identity, gender too, as processes of trial and error. You have to find what works for you. You need a narrative with room for messiness, one that can accommodate veering toward extremes.

As therapy, Carson and Mary’s sessions were life-changing. Carson’s quest for self-knowledge, which coincided with narrating her disastrous marriages and articulating her love for women, took place well into her adulthood. The tapes document a forty-one-year-old woman just figuring out who she is, dictating it in her soft southern purr. Carson’s letters to Mary after each session are awash in the joy of self-revelation, among other joys. But Carson never published her therapy transcripts. After reading them over, she was heartbroken to find them garbled and indecipherable.

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Yet I read them as if they were an unpublished manuscript, a draft tucked away in a drawer for a lifetime, only to find its way to a numbered folder in a numbered box in an archive. Carson may not have ultimately seen a book in them, but I do. I see the only story she ever wrote: a lonely misfit wrestles with her hidden self, unable to articulate her own longings.

According to Carson, after that first session, Mary invited her to lunch. They talked about books, though Mary had never read any of Carson's. Their post-session lunches, which continued through April 1958, were for Carson "the solace and high point" of the day. Insisting that theirs was a strictly doctor-patient relationship for the duration of Carson's therapy, Mary would later deny that these lunches ever took place.