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EDITORS' FOREWORD

Welcome to the Winter 2010 issue of Euphony. As we embark on a new decade, we remain dedicated to our tradition of integrating the work of writers both established and emerging. This issue offers poetry and prose from a wide range of authors, hailing from diverse walks of life and locations across the country. Readers will find in the pieces a variety of subjects and forms, from plays on language to serious explorations of relationships. At some moments looking back with nostalgia and at others carrying a bold resolve for the future, the works in this issue combine the reflective and forward-looking attitudes that surface for many of us as we go forth into the new year.

With the ongoing success of our website, last Fall we expanded our online offerings to include a series of literary blog posts from abroad. We are excited about this addition to the online content and expect to incorporate more of this emerging form of commentary as we proceed in the coming year. Our website continues to publish contributions year-round; visit it for web-exclusive poetry, fiction, and non-fiction and information on submitting writing and joining our staff. See euphonyjournal.com for more details.

THE EDITORS

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Euphony is a non-profit literary journal produced biannually at the University of Chicago. We are dedicated to publishing the finest work by writers and artists both accomplished and aspiring. We publish a variety of works including poetry, fiction, drama, essays, criticism, and translations. Visit our website for more information.

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Simon Perchik

B54

All that's left from the map
is this birdbath—you can't make out
the north, northeast or if the wind

is in the same place, skimming
lower and lower as shoreline
not sure you're still there

or did the water dry by itself
—you rely on it, need this landmark
to locate exactly where

and you make the sharp turn
deep into birdsong and the cries
that follow behind, end over end

with both hands and the ground
spills out its air; there's room
for you and in all directions.

Sheera Talpaz

Re: “you are a tsunami of feeling”

I was a child once, and it hurt so bad I never did it again.
On my little rocking chair I sat to watch the sea drain,

to listen to heat suck the last breath of water, shuck and salt,
its rocky anthology. An allegory of the body, I thought,

as rings of wet sand echoed from the esplanade: you will love me as I go.
All day I traced mortality along the watery veins

of my grandmother’s legs – Safta Rivka who forgot
the sea in herself, who wasn’t even aware of death

when it cleaned her out. It worked slowly, left her salty
many years, then sparkling on the sofa where she slept.

I was once a child with no use for ethics. I stole gems
set on plated rings and scattered them in the lands of my enemies.

I knew the swell of Mt. Hermon, the low Syrian divide. I knew
poisonous flower from health-granting root. I knew the value

of a wire fence, and I owned a small coin purse, empty
as the summer clouds. I prepared myself for love

with lipsticks discarded like refugees in my mother’s
shadowed drawers. Had I always been suspended,

harsh pink lips and advanced knowledge in tow?
I always knew sex would be unsavory, unnatural,

deflating. I knew I would lose something of myself, and I knew
it would close me hook-and-eye, because I would love

hands slightly bigger than my own, working against me
like the tide. And if I loved sex, then I hated death,

and all along I had been like the other kids, no literary divide.
I wanted a little love so hard against death. Mounting a wall

against the stir-crazy sea, the sex would be shameful,
and the men, a little afraid, would look me right in the face.

J.A. Tyler

& (sixty-six)

There in thin light of night or barely night the brother stands watching the sister sleep, quiet mouth hovering, limbs lank and to the sides. He watches her sleep, this brother, his sister, and begs himself on. He will, he will not. He will, he will not. Wavering.

She spoke in whispers when their father was at work, their father working all the time, her never speaking. The rain her imperfect speech, the stunts and gathered phrases, chains of looped leaves, ground cover of plants, ivy or her skin. Her, watching their father work, the trees he bent and toppled, the tangled trees he lurched out of the woods, the boxes he made. Hearts and fitting, always fitting hearts in them. White sheets and nails, boards and planks.

And a woman, their mother, not here, gone.

Arms that could have would have held the sister, his sister, the brother, the father. No one holds their father. The boy sometimes sneaks a finger to his belt-loop, a handhold, and the father moves then, turns to another board, another cut, another angle, line, shape. The sister too sometimes urging her head to his hip, when they stand beside one another, watching the clouds come in or the dirt go out, or the leaves. The change of colors as seasons, as the freckles on the girl's arms move and change, sink into her skin, stars. Her head craning to his bones, his hip, his side, and him, shifting out of range, automatic and disfigured. Not a father, no father. The shape of a father. The lines.

And the boy, his slick body and tight muscles, watching a sister sleep, his sister, her hair a mirror of their mother, the curve of new breasts, the horizon. A second coming, a new woman, a mother, the shape of a mother, a connection. The coughing, the exhale without inhale, the gone gone gone. Going back. No mother. They have no mother. Sees his sister move, turn, roll, her eyes closed and dreaming of a father. He will, he won't. He will, he won't. Stumbling.

Their father, the moniker of sawdust, teeth. Trees to planks to boards. Nails.

His shoulders, their father's shoulders, shouldering the weight of it, this, their living, sons and daughters going on without mothers. Lines in their fathers. His back the growing hunch of consistency, the forever bending stooping building. In wooden statues the heart of his son, his daughter, his wife. The long gone body shapes of people, the boxes, heavy, solid. Nothing comes out of coffins, boxes. Their hearts, removed from their chests, the chests sewn back up hollow, echoing the wind, the whispered hush it makes, gripping the world in cooling hands.

Boy hearts and girl hearts, feathers on birds outside his window,
outside the square of his window, where he sleeps, slept, where his
wife conceived their children, bore this boy and this girl, this son and
this daughter. His. The same shaped square that he looks out of now,
moving forward, this boy turned man, dying in his own death bed, his
own chest sewn empty and without a heart, his own box. The beds.
The beds the father and mother lay, the beds the boy turned man stops
breathing in, the beds he watches his sister roll in, turn in, watches her
hair float and tangle on. Beds and lines, boxes, hearts, motherless sons
and daughters and fathers.

Watching her.

He will, he won't. He will, he won't. He will, he won't. He does it as he
wavers, stumbles, goes on.

Ed Casey

Collecting

Without need of our effort
the bark peels itself away
releasing minute puffs of whispered heat;
a whole language falling to the forest floor
intermingles with its leaves and roots.

Always prepared
you remove the lid from a coffee can
and begin the process of recording
the cryptic silent conversation,
its six-legged words.

Later, sifting through it on the kitchen floor,
we laugh at its subtleties,
fill ourselves with its grief,
watch unmoving as whole sentences
scurry beneath the cabinets,
under the refrigerator, into the peeling walls.

Next week, you say,
we'll take the empty can to Sagamore Hill,
and listen to what's whispered
under the trunks of long fallen pines.

Claudia M. Stanek

Preservation

Light apostrophes water—
air is scooped up,
turns clear, drifts in front of you.
You try to yank
golden threads of sun
through the muck at your feet,
press their lengths
into the yellow pail
clutched in your capable hand.

William Doreski

Patience for Landscape

The passion of heat in the pipes
fails to arouse me. After months
traveling the Trans-Siberian
and walking the ice on Lake Baikal,
I come home to indifference gray
as a navy cruiser, the dog lean
and mean, the children listless,
and you with more new lovers
than Penelope.

All these pimply
young men doing nothing. Make them
cut and stack firewood, re-roof
the house, build a barn for the goats,
prune the grape vines, press the grapes.
Long days back and forth across Asia
taught me patience with landscape
slow to unfold. One rolling plateau,
one broad sluggish river, one cluster
of cement-brick housing looks much
like another.

So your lovers,
so the many lives we wasted
on each other. I'd thought our children
grown by now, but they've receded
in layers of fat, their expressions
blank as skinless chicken breasts.
No wonder I can't enter
your bedroom without shrinking
inside, the lamplight a bruise
discoloring the night.

The jolt
of that endless train ride lingers
even when I kneel in prayer,
trying to flatter your favorite god.
Tomorrow I'll get your lovers
working in the potato fields.
Let them sweat for whatever
they eat and drink in my household.

In the evening I'll read them pages
of my journal, lists of stations
and iron and coal mines, descriptions
of peasant costumes, measurements
of the many great steel bridges
over rivers that all flow north,
draining a land no one can love
and no one can live without.

Mary Ann Honaker

World-shaker

Sidewalks make a poor substitute for damp soft earth
and ragged grass, fresh cut, the morning mist
full of the scent of its blood.

The rough edges of building tops
cannot compare to the scrawl and scribble
of tree branches against the warming sky.
Feeling in a box today, I am unsure

of the smooth, silent ease of women in long coats
wrapping their scarves over chins and noses.
Of the sound of heels on sidewalks, so much
sharp slapping. Of an aunt in Europe
and a sister in Montana, rather than at one table,
sipping Folgers, trading photos and recipes
and local gossip of local names that fall
smoothly on the ear, silken and familiar.

So it is little wonder that here I fall
back in love with you, high school crush.
You are plain. Your shirt smells of the Marlboros
that you often stand on the back porch and smoke,
gazing over tall grasses of fenced-in fields.
You are accustomed to your cash register.
You know the rattling of your truck,
the shimmy at stop signs and streetlights.
You are accustomed to the road home,
and every roadside weed droops heavy
with old memories. You do not mind. You layer on
more, morning after morning, like new paint
over a smoke-stained living room wall.

So I fall into the soft pillow of your voice,
your habitual flinging of a hand for emphasis,
that ceaseless running of your fingers
through your long hair. The coughing chuckle,
the diverted eyes. You do not answer important questions.
They make the foundations shake, the trees dance,
the road a moonlit path of wonder, they are
paint remover, stringent and heady.
Who needs all that? World-shaker,

this strange city is trembling already,
soothe it with your large hand, that hand
that can clasp the moon in palm, soothe it
as one soothes a shaking young dog
when the sky growls and rattles
the screen door, spitting fire
from blackened lips.

Jonathan Maricle

The Birth of a Thing

I was born wild
in a diner car
in-between dinner
and a Sunday brunch.
Propped up on leather
luggage and bankers'
napkins, I arrived with
the click-and-the-clack,
the click-and-the-clack,
the-metal-on-same,
pregnant with a dissonant,
sustaining sound.

Born, on the spiny back
of a graveled pack mule,
all colicky and blue.
The boy's all teeth, they hissed.
My mother gave me up,
let me take the bottle
on my own. All winter,
I was bottled, irate.
But in the spring, it's the letting go
that's always the dangerous thing.

Hilary Vaughn Dobel

Return to Sender

Don't you remember
the day it froze,
nothing in the pantry
but oranges?
We broke the ice
crust on top of the
morning's snow, ate it
in slices like bread.
Everything tastes
out of season now,
and there are hunched
little women outside,
scattering handfuls of blue
salt onto the street.
In another pastoral,
they are peasants
feeding geese, and you
would laugh at me
for writing this down.
My footsteps are louder
with you gone. If you
receive this in time,
come back.
I'll be waiting by the stained
glass windows.

Welcome to Historic Elizabeth

Downtown was my high-school calculus textbook,
graffiti'd and unloved. Passing through the suburbs,
I saw two sisters kicking a deflated soccer ball,
a swimming pool sunken with cans of peaches
and railroad spikes, yellow houses close enough to reach
out and peel down the walls. It's the only way to know—
are they onion-houses, acrid and infinite,
or bird-bone hollow? Will they float? And is it morning
yet? Light waltzes fractal across the floorboards,
and the sheets have wrinkled my face—the day is new,
and has not folded me into its pocket, not yet.
A cardinal is at the window, raps at the glass
with her beak, her dry claws. I don't know
what she wants. Like me, she will not listen to reason.
I am afraid that she will break the glass and scratch
off my clothes, that if I leave, she will nest
in my bed. I am afraid that if I knew all I had taken,
I would empty my purse and pull out my hair,
fling it away in handfuls on the March wind.

Rod Dixon

Down in the Earth

Jimmy Baker returned from Korea in the summer of '53. He got a job as a line cook for the Seelbach Hotel, in the shopping district of downtown Louisville. He had always dreamed of moving upstate into the city ever since he was a boy, but city life was less glamorous now that he was living it. Louisville was crowded compared to his hometown in the mountains, and the contrast between classes was starker than he had ever seen—at least in America. He entered work everyday through a back door. “Through these doors walk the finest hotel employees in the South,” it read. He knew the words were probably meant to pick up spirits, but they only reminded Baker of the difference between the people who came to eat and sleep at the hotel, and those who came in unseen through the back.

At the start of the Korean War Jimmy was an ordnance handler with the 8th army, loading and unloading crates of lipstick-shaped 105 mm artillery shells, pineapple grenades, and canisters filled with .30 caliber ammunition.

He hated the job.

While stationed in Japan, an NCO named Stevens—who was drunk and angry from losing a game of poker—had pumped several rounds from his .38 service revolver into a gasoline-filled drum, burning down half of the post's automobile garage. Whenever Baker lifted a load of explosives, or held a box of bullets in his hand, he'd sweat and worry that at any moment some crazy mistake would get him blown into pieces. A few times he had nightmares where a whiskey-fueled Stevens rushed the munitions tent, jerked at the trigger of his sidearm and screamed, “Here's your full house!” These dreams usually ended with a bright billowy mushroom cloud sprouting up toward the sky and a gleaming black sedan pulling up to his mother's house, just like the one that had come to his grandmother's when Uncle Lou got killed in France in '44.

Baker finally got his chance to escape this ordnance job, which as he saw it would be the death of him, when his XO, a 2nd lieutenant named Park, showed up one evening outside the large canvas ammunition tents. The conversation between the soldiers died when the officer walked in, brushing his pencil-thin mustache with the edge of his thumb. The enlisted men quickly put down what they were moving and saluted. He had a cocky look in his eyes that reminded Jimmy of the cavalier fighter pilots he had loved to watch so much in the few movies he caught back

home. Lt. Park did not salute or put them at ease.

“Any of you men hate your job?” the officer asked loudly, hiding his hands behind his back and looking around the room.

When no one answered Baker shouted, “Hell yes, sir, me.”

The Lieutenant smiled, or sneered—it was hard to tell which. “We need someone to help out with mess duty. As of this moment that man is you. Report there first thing tomorrow morning.” Lt. Park saluted, “As you were.”

The way he threw back his shoulders as he walked off told Baker that the man thought he had just dealt some horrible kind of punishment, a demotion even, and that he was proud to have pissed on someone’s day. But Baker watched the pinched triangle of the officer’s back as he walked away—elated with the conviction that 2nd Lt. Park had saved his life.

The only relative Baker corresponded with, both during the war and in Louisville, was his aunt, June. She wanted to know what he planned to do after the war, begging him to come back to Letcher County. One of his uncles could get him work in the mines, she wrote. But Baker told her that he wasn’t going to die down in the earth under a collapsed slab of rock like his father had. Or like his grandfather—slowly suffocating from years of breathing mine dust, and dying with a handful of tar coughed up into his hand.

But more than return home, his aunt begged him to write his mother, who had been committed to a mental hospital two weeks before he finished Basic. Jimmy ignored this request, refusing even to offer an explanation why. It wasn’t that he had nothing to say to his mother, he just knew it wouldn’t do any good. The last time he wrote her—a brief description of the temples and the quiet seriousness of the locals in Japan—her response was a ripped up piece of paper doodled over in squiggles. The only line he could make sense of said, “Who will drag the coal now that the mule is dead?”

He knew his family thought him heartless for it, as if he had buried the memory of who his mother was before the onset of dementia, so as to forget that she had ever existed at all. But he remembered who she used to be. How she had made snapping and canning Blue Lake beans bearable by telling stories in which a young knight named Jimmy Baker was always the hero, and how beautiful her voice was coming through the windows when she sang “Caleb Meyer” on the porch. He had loved her then, and he loved her still.

He considered his distance an act of mercy. He heard the worry and concern—sometimes overt and sometimes subtle—in the letters of his bunkmates’ mothers that they read out loud. His own mother was too

far gone to understand the danger he was in, he reasoned, and there was no cause to educate her.

It was out of love that he didn't write his mother, he told himself. And by the time he was out of the army and working at Seelbach his silence had gone on so long it was easier to continue than break.

The hotel was different than the Army, but in a lot of ways it was the same. His boss was a large-gutted man named Ted, who had red ears and a flat top that was overrun by gray hair. Ted served under MacArthur in the Philippines and had tried to re-enlist when the UN had first gone into Korea back at the turn of the decade.

"I wrote to the General myself saying I would be happy to take up arms again," Ted beamed while Baker stuffed a game hen. "He wrote me back personally, saying I had risked enough for country, and to sit this one out." Ted told that story to anyone who would listen. Baker knew it was a lie, just like he knew Ted hadn't single handedly taken out a Jap machine gun nest, and then given most of the credit to a grunt who had gotten his legs blow off while storming the position. "I knew I just had to let 'em give that medal to that poor kid from Georgia," Ted would say. "At least then he could feel like a hero, even though he didn't have anything left below the knees."

Baker didn't want to get on his bad side, though: he saw how Ted treated Smith, one of the servers that had made the mistake of bad-mouthing Truman's presidency. Ted denounced him as a communist and made sure every chickenshit job in the kitchen found its way into Smith's workload.

Baker smiled when the boss was around, nodded at his requests, and laughed at every joke he made. The other workers stared at him when he did that, and Baker got the impression people were avoiding him.

"Of course no one wants to buddy up with you," a bartender named John told him when Jimmy confronted him about it while on a cigarette break. John had a scar running down his cheek to his chin that he said he'd gotten in an Indianapolis bar fight when another brawler took to him with a broken bottle. "Everybody knows you Army assholes stick together. They think you're Ted's rat."

"His rat?" Baker said.

"That's what they say."

"I heard you're the reason Smith got fired," a busboy that Jimmy didn't know added. He had large brown stains along his apron; it looked like someone had flung a cup of coffee at his chest. "You told the boss he was cheating the clock and talking bad about him behind his back."

"I never ratted on anyone," Baker protested. He stepped around

from behind the table he was leaning on, afraid that some of the other men on break might try to corner him and get revenge for a friend of theirs he had barely known, let alone gotten fired. The other workers broke up and went back to their jobs, refusing to look in his direction. Jimmy spent the rest of the night feeling like a failure, although not entirely sure why or what he had failed at. When the orders coming back to the kitchen slowed down he cooked a New York cut steak and brought it out to John behind the bar, who was pouring tonic water over a glass of ice and gin. Baker put the plate on one of the boards beneath the bar, so the customers couldn't see it.

"None of you could hate that man the way I do." Baker said, unsure of how else to express the bitterness that had grown inside of him because men like Ted Rumpert had breathed down his neck from Tokyo to Kumhwa.

Later that night, when Baker was prepping the kitchen for the breakfast cooks who would be in just before dawn, John came back through the swing doors with a highball glass filled to the lip with bourbon. "That was a good steak," he said, sitting the glass next to Baker's wrist.

Jimmy raised the gift up to his mouth slowly and took a sip. For some reason the flavor of it brought back a memory of his father wearing a floppy denim cap and pulling weeds out of the vegetable patch back home. The image held no emotional weight with Baker; he had never remembered it before. He gave John a nod, before taking another taste.

One Sunday night a month—an evening they got off early from work—Baker and John went to the singles dances held by the local Daughters of the American Revolution. Most of the girls were meek, straw-like things, whose fathers had uprooted their families for jobs at the General Electric plant. These girls stood along the walls in homemade cotton dresses, wringing their hands and refusing to dance unless it was a waltz.

"Geez," John complained, mopping sweat off his forehead with a handkerchief. "This place it always dull. We should go somewhere where there are colored girls, or at least find some people who don't think a jitterbug is going to bite them."

"It ain't so bad," Baker said, nodding his head along to a brassy old Glenn Miller tune.

"Well, it's good to know a man can see half the world and still come back a coal mining bumpkin."

They both found partners eventually that night. Baker's was a lanky girl in a navy and white polka dotted dress, who had tallow colored skin and plank sized teeth that made her seem clumsy and genuine whenever

she smiled. She had a robust friend with pink skin and naturally red cheeks that seemed happy with doing nothing more than holding John's elbow while they watched their two friends dance. Baker noticed John rolling his eyes several times when he spun his date out, and when the song was over suggested that the four of them go find an all night diner; he was hungry for poached eggs and toast.

The girls agreed, but Baker's said she needed to ask her father, who was waiting outside in the front seat of a '49 Ford Coupe, reading the Sunday copy of the Courier-Journal and chewing on a soggy toothpick. He sized up Baker and John with a quick flick of his eyes and asked if the two of them had jobs.

"We work for the Seelbach," Baker said. "I'm a cook and he's a bartender."

The father stared at the scar on John's face. "Go on and get in the car, Claudette. You too, Bess."

"Wait a minute, mister," Jimmy argued. "A job's a job. There's nothing wrong with what we do."

But the father started up the car and rolled up the window, refusing to look Baker in the eye. John came forward and asked the man if he was done with his newspaper. He cracked the window and handed it over. When the car drove off John waved the newspaper in the air, saying, "This'll be more entertainment than those girls could have been." He walked off in the direction of his apartment and called for Baker to follow. They made their way down 3rd to the efficiency John rented on the corner of Hill Street. He had pale green bottles of beer in the ice box, and handed one to Baker before unfolding the paper and sifting through the pages.

"That hits the spot," Baker said, smacking his lips after drinking half the beer. "My father used to bring beer along when we went fishing. He'd tie the bottles up in a potato sack that was tied to shore with a piece of twine and he would sink them into the pond, so the water would keep them cold."

"What does your old man do for a living?" John asked.

"He was a coal miner," Baker said. He picked at the streaky unfinished kitchen table with his fingernail, working a splinter out and then tossing it onto the floor. Above the stove was a pin-up poster, ragged along the edges from being torn out of a magazine. The woman in the print had on a wide strapped chemise that looked like it was made out of black gauze, and had her arms wrapped around her breasts so that the interesting parts of her were covered up. He wondered if his mother had to sleep in clothes that the hospital gave her, or if they let her wear her favorite nightgown. The muslin one with pink roses hand stitched

around the neck, which she wore all the time after the foreman from the mining company rode up to the house and told her about his father. In a way it didn't matter that she kept wearing that thing until it was so covered in dust and dried mud that her sisters had to wrestle it off of her, so they could wash it in the tub out back, because in a way she always asleep after that. At night she paced the floors of their house like she was in a dream she couldn't quite escape. "Better get your father's lantern," she told him two nights before he would catch the bus that took him to Basic, her toes clutching at the ground like claws. "It's bound to be dark down in the ocean."

John tapped at a page he was reading with one of his stubby fingers. "Hey, you should get in on this," he said showing Jimmy an ad for a barber's college. "GIs Welcome," the upper corner read.

"I don't know how to cut hair."

"I think that's what the school's for," John told him. "I knew a guy when I was living in Indiana that took welding classes at a trade school using his GI money. The rest of what was left over he paid his rent and groceries with. That's on top of the money he made at work."

"You can do that?" Baker asked.

"Sure, if you're willing to take advantage." John threw his empty bottle across the room in a flat arc that ended in the metal trash can at the corner of the kitchen. He leaned over toward Baker then, his face suddenly serious. "That's how you get ahead in life, by taking advantage."

Baker spent three days a week at the Louisville Barber College learning to cut hair. Afterwards, he caught a trolley down to the hotel where he still worked in the kitchen. Ted was happy to help a fellow soldier out by shortening Baker's shift, but couldn't understand why he didn't take some culinary classes to further his career.

"I figure if there's something I needed to know about cooking," Baker said puffing out his chest for effect, "then I'm positive the United States Army would have taught it to me."

Ted seemed satisfied and left it at that. The truth was that Baker couldn't stand the thought of being in a kitchen from eight in the morning until after midnight. Besides, he liked his classes at the college. Whenever he was working on a customer's hair he thought of his grandfather, who had passed time in the evenings by whittling replicas of songbirds. A head of hair was a lot like a block of wood: each individual piece had its own natural shape and snags—a grain, that is—and a good whittler or barber had to spot and keep his actions in tune with them. Baker saw the pleased look on the faces of the men whose hair he cut and took pride in his work. At the hotel he rarely had plates sent back to the kitchen, but

he also didn't get singled out for compliments either. He could cook, not terribly or wonderfully, but just good enough to create a dish that was praiseworthy in the blandest sort of way. At school he was one of the few students who received tips and had customers asking for him by name. There he was a man with skill.

His aunt wrote that the new profession he was pursuing was a good one. "Everybody's gotta get their haircut," she reminded him in a letter that also said his mother had asked about him. "She's having more good days than bad now, Jimmy. She thinks you died in the war and won't believe otherwise until she sees you."

The drive to the mental hospital in Lexington would have been an easy one now that Baker owned a truck: a black and blue '39 GMC half-ton pickup that he financed through a used car lot. Every Saturday he walked his weekly \$5 payment to the office in a white envelope that he handed to the secretary at the front desk. She was a brunette with siren red lipstick. He knew that she liked him because every time he would start a conversation with her about the latest jukebox hit, or the Colonels minor league team, she covered her wedding ring with her right hand. He waited for her outside one afternoon, to see if she wanted a soda and a ride home, but she politely refused, saying it wouldn't be proper.

He expected her to be cold and businesslike from that day on, but she was even more flirtatious the next weekend he walked his payment in. She rubbed her fingers down the length of his hand and commented on how beautiful she thought his eyes were.

"You should forget about her," John told him. They were eating cheeseburgers and sitting on the gate of Baker's truck, getting ready to go into a dance at the local VFW. "The last thing you need is some jealous husband coming after you, and besides, it's not you." The night air was cool and Baker pulled the collar of his jacket up. A man called a woman's name over and over in the distance, his voice a lonely ghost in the darkness. "Ruby," the voice called, "Ruby."

"What isn't me?" Baker asked.

"Seducing another man's wife away from him. Some people can do things like that—you're just not one of them."

"Well, we'll see. I might just do it to prove you wrong."

"How's your mother?" John asked.

Jimmy told him that she was still asking to see him from time to time.

"You going to see her?"

"I don't know," Baker said.

"I haven't seen my mother in four years," John told him. "She disowned me when I got arrested for stabbing that kid in the pool hall.

Said I wasn't no son of hers."

Baker could hear the man's voice moving down the streets now. Still calling the name Ruby, his voice almost sing-song. Baker wondered if his mother walked the grounds at night calling his own name like that, or his father's, hoping that somehow one of them would hear it and magically materialize on one of the garden benches. If they even had a garden at the hospital, he didn't know. Surely they had a place that was quiet and peaceful, where two people could just sit and talk like everything was normal and okay.

"Maybe she's forgiven you by now," Baker said.

"No," John insisted. "That's the sort of thing that isn't in her."

Every third Friday of the month, four of the hair cutting students went to the local orphanage named after Saint Joseph, who the Protestant Baker had simply known before as Joseph, the adoptive father of Jesus. The headmaster of the barber's college was very clear that he considered it a grave and esteemed responsibility that he could offer a service of charity to such a fine and needed institution. Baker thought of that word when he was there, institution. He watched how the orphans lined up in even rows, waiting for their turn under the electric clippers. It reminded him of the military, of being buzz-headed and alone in the barracks and wondering what would happen to his mother now that he was gone. Of waking up in the middle of a damp night and realizing he was surrounded by dozens of strangers with foreign smells and voices. One of the children snuck over into his line. The man to Baker's left was a poor cut—he went in too deep with the clippers—and the child must have noticed this. One of the nuns spotted the kid though, and dragged him by the lobe of his ear up to the front of his original line.

"You can cut his hair next," she told the poorly talented student, who nodded dumbly. Baker felt sorry for the kid—he felt sorry for all of them. Here were all these little guys who had nothing in the world but a few rule crazy nuns and each other. Just waiting for the hand of kindness to scoop them up and give them a place they could call a home. Abandoned and left to be cared for by something as cold and distant sounding as an institution.

His next weekend off Baker made the drive to Lexington. It was October, and still too early for all of the leaves to have turned. The hospital was a long brick rectangle with a single large tower that reminded him of the castle battlements he had seen in picture books, the sheer height and design of it giving the rest of the building a foreboding sense of presence and purpose. He parked his truck along the turnaround, his

tires just kissing the grass of the yard, and made his way slowly up the concrete steps and through the archways leading to heavy double oak doors. The receptionist at the gray marble desk was not as pretty as the one at the car lot—her face was droopy and there was a hairy growth on the side of her cheek. She buzzed for the doctor he had spoken to on the phone and told Baker to have a seat on one of the cushioned benches next to the desk. He sat down looking up at the ceiling, fidgeting with his arms and unsure of what to do with his hands.

A tall man with silver hair came and shook Baker's hand. He had kind eyes and perfectly square teeth and said his mother was waiting in the common room, where the patients often spent the mid-day hours playing checkers and listening to the radio. He asked if Baker knew that they had been treating her with electricity.

"Yes, my aunt told me. Is it working?"

"It's going fine. I must warn you, it's only been a week since her last ECT. She may seem more confused than usual."

Baker lied and told him that was fine and that it would be good just to see her. The common room was filled with damp-looking sunlight that came in through several tall windows, the panes making black crosses against the white tile floor. Several small tables were huddled together in the center of the room where people in bath robes played games or sat quietly. Some of them looked normal except for their dull eyes and perplexed faces, the way they looked around without really seeming to see anything. Others were physically deformed, with twisted bones and heads too big for their bodies. One man was missing the right half of his face and nodded his head to the rhythm of the radio announcer's voice. Maybe he had lost the flesh from his cheeks in some battle somewhere. Maybe a drunken NCO had shot up a gasoline can he had been sitting next to.

His mother was sitting at a table with four other women, playing pinochle. He pulled up a metal chair and sat close to her right arm.

"Mother," he said, touching her elbow.

"Excuse me?" she said, looking at him in confusion.

"Mom it's me, Jimmy."

"Jimmy?"

Baker stared at her and realized she had no idea who he was. The three other women in their card game continued their play as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on. One of them, a woman with a hooked nose, stared at Baker every few seconds, but said nothing.

"Your son, Jimmy," he said as calmly as he could.

His mother smiled. "Don't play tricks. My son drowned crossing the Pacific."

“Mom, I’m right here. I didn’t drown.”

She patted his arm and whistled a song he didn’t know. There was logic in her madness. His father had drowned in dirt and rock, her father in coal dust. It made sense that she would hallucinate a similar fate for her son—every man she ever loved, engulfed in darkness.

Jimmy stared out the window. His mother mentioned she was thirsty for iced tea. No, not his mother, her body, her features, but it wasn’t really her. The doctors thought she was hidden somewhere underneath all those muscles and nerves, but she wasn’t, just like he wasn’t floating dead at the bottom of the ocean. Baker got up and said he would get her a glass of tea. In the hall, he passed the doctor from earlier.

“Left my cigarettes outside,” he said.

He got in his truck and started the engine. He pulled out and headed north to Louisville. He didn’t look back.

To become a licensed barber Baker had to pass two tests. One was a physical demonstration of the skills he had learned, while the other was a written examination of the textbook material. One of the students, a mousy guy named Erwin, had miniaturized versions of the four pages to the test. Each page had the correct answers already written in. He was selling the answer keys for a dime apiece. None of the students were willing to risk cheating except for the ones that had been in the military. They jumped on the deal without hesitation, practically dumping coins out of their pockets. Jimmy bought the answers listing all the different sections of the human head, so he wouldn’t have to sit down and try and memorize them all. He taped the answers to a pack of Lucky Strikes that he kept in his chest pocket. Whenever he was stumped he pulled out the cigarettes. He passed both his tests and was officially licensed to cut hair.

Baker took a chair at a barbershop off Broadway where most of his clients were businessmen who came in for a quick trim and a straight edge shave. He lathered their pink-skinned cheeks and listened to stories about the money they lost, the accounts they won. These men were movers and shakers of the world, they told him so, and he smiled and agreed.

His aunt came up one weekend with his cousins. He gave all the boys haircuts and red sugary suckers with white paper loops for handles. Afterwards they stood outside watching all the traffic drive by, while his aunt tried to tell him about his mother.

“I’ll try and make time to go see her,” he told his aunt. He wasn’t sure if she believed him.

For a long time John came to have Baker cut his hair, but then one month went by, and another, and Baker walked the few blocks to the Seelbach to see what had become of his friend. The only face he recognized was Ted’s, who called John an absolute asshole.

“Just quit showing up for work one day,” his old boss told him. “One of the busboys heard he moved back north to work in a steel factory or something.”

Some nights Baker dreamed of his mother and woke up terrified that he had dreamed his whole life—that his memories were apparitions, constructs of his imagination. Maybe he really belonged by his mother’s side in Lexington. He went to his closet on those nights, pulling out pictures of himself in uniform, of the Korean countryside, and his old friend John. Everything in his life had happened just as he remembered it, and there was no reason to doubt that. He had proof it was real.

When he couldn’t go back to sleep, he walked the streets, looking for an all night joint where he could get a cup of coffee. He’d sit at the formica counter and wonder if his mother was finally at peace with the hardship of her life now that in a way she was gone. When he got tired of coffee he slipped into the shop early, so he could recline in his red- and cream-colored vinyl barber’s chair. Here he didn’t have to come in through the back, but could come through the front like everybody else. Sometimes he would turn on the clippers and let them lay there, vibrating dully in his hand. It was a sound he associated for some reason with the Earth’s core, something he had seen a model of recently in a picture encyclopedia at the local library.

He had read that the Earth was made of plates that were moving so slowly that no one up on the surface could feel it. He didn’t know if the core or these plates made a sound, but that’s what he imagined it as all the same. He closed his eyes and felt the weight of his body, the solidness of his flesh and bones. He imagined he was a stone, a piece of rock that fell off a ship, or maybe out of the sky, sinking through the darkness of the ocean to the humming, fiery center of the world. He would stay in this state as long as he could, which was usually until someone else opened the door, and a tinkling brass bell brought him back.

Lynn Gordon

Garden Wedding

I was attending Jennifer's wedding, for which they had chosen a peculiar setting—a walled garden at the community center. No indoor space at all. We were to sit, observe the solemnizing of the vows, pay in our good wishes and eat a lunch—all in this garden. Nevertheless, it promised to be an elevating occasion. I like to be in a crowd of people, and there was the prospect of a good champagne.

As I looked at our surroundings, there in the garden, I thought about other weddings. My parents, for instance, had married in 1916, soon after meeting at the Panama-Pacific Exposition. They had found themselves standing next to each other as they admired the Tower of Jewels. A wartime wedding, I understand, without much fuss—but indoors, with an organist. I have a photograph showing the two of them, she holding lilies to her chest and he looking very serious.

I let myself think, just for a moment, about my cousin Ida's wedding. She and Alfred Lehmer. Try though I might, I could not get a look at her eyes through the spangled veil that came halfway down her face.

My second cousin, Leslie, accompanied me to this wedding of Jennifer's. She means well, I suppose, but she takes over if you let her. She tried to insist on being the one to drive us in the Cadillac, but I put a stop to that. As soon as we arrived, she made sure to introduce me to people I already knew—my own relatives! Then she left me, as she thought, safely in their hands while she bustled off to check on the flowers and any other arrangements that might have been vulnerable to her probings.

I was dismayed when I encountered Leslie's sister, Carolyn, and her daughter, Molly. Carolyn has let herself grow stout, a terrible thing in a woman under fifty. She carried an enormous handbag, which accentuated her condition. When we sat down together for the ceremony, reserving a place on my right for Leslie, I saw that billows of her overflowed the seat of her folding chair.

"It seems like ages, Milton," she said. "When was the last time? You're looking more dashing than ever." I had on the light-grey suit, set off with a silk tie. Windsor knot; I always do a full Windsor. And the belt with the engraved silver buckle. That had been Wally's, of course.

I was at a loss to reciprocate Carolyn's remark. "I think it may have been Leslie's party. That was a charming occasion."

Molly has always been a quiet, droopy girl. Today she appeared all in black. "My dear," I said, "have you been to a funeral?" By such gentle

corrections I hope to have an improving effect on my young relatives.

A wedding is meant to be festive, and we should feel grateful when it is so.

A small group of people in blue robes had appeared at the front of the garden. A bald man, whom I took to be some sort of minister, stood to one side of them. He was not simply bald in the tonsure style, with hair still girdling the lower head—he was bald all the way. Then the groom came forth to take his place. He wore a tailcoat, in the daylight! Astonishing.

I wasn't wholly familiar with this person Jennifer was marrying. His name was Whitman, I believe, Ed or Ned. He wasn't from here. Leslie told me that he grew up in Omaha. One knows nothing about such a place. My family, you see, have been Californians for 140 years. Jennifer met him at Berkeley, where I took my own doctorate. It seems they both studied anthropology, which as a subject is neither here nor there. Physical anthropology, of course, that is a science, but this cultural anthropology is nothing but an excuse to nose into other people's affairs and betray confidences.

In any case, there he stood in readiness for Jennifer. The people in blue robes began to sing something that sounded like a hymn. It ranged no more than an octave, and ended with the characteristic plagal cadence. Whitman looked out over our heads, no doubt expecting to see Jennifer coming toward him at any moment. When she didn't, he adjusted his neck and looked away, as though this were all in the plans.

After a ripple of nudges, the robed group stiffened their posture and began over again on the same hymn. Ida—Jennifer's grandmother—would have deplored the repetition, especially of a religious piece. It would detract from the meaning, in her opinion. At least that is what I think she would say.

Another amen. Still no Jennifer. The sun brightened and reflected off the minister's scalp. The cartilage shone white in his unprotected ears.

There was a pause. A rustle of chatter went through our seated assemblage, during which Whitman and the minister seemed to speak a few words to each other.

Carolyn leaned toward me. "What's taking Jennifer so long?"

I could only shrug. Perhaps she needed last-minute alterations to her toilette. Surely she was not having hesitations. One does want her to be happy. With her mother and Ida both gone, she should have a family of her own.

Carolyn shifted herself, causing her chair to produce an alarming screech. I watched her for a moment to see that the entire arrangement—Carolyn, chair, and handbag—did not collapse onto the ground. If it had, of course, I would not have been able to stop it. I'd have watched her fall

and then held the memory of it for years. I still have years to go, it seems. At eighty, one can expect to reach eighty-seven, so say the actuarial tables.

It occurred to me to wonder whether two anthropologists, such investigators of the intimate practices of others, would soon be bearing children of their own. I don't mean to imply that Jennifer might have been already enceinte at her wedding. But she and Whitman had dawdled into their thirties just to reach the point of marriage; might they be planning to skip directly to an heirless dotage? There is no saying.

Wally was born at a timely interval after our parents married: in 1917. I came two years after. In those days, I have heard, women found it undignified to have pregnancies beyond a certain age. They married punctually, of course. They were considered old maids by twenty-three.

Such were the strictures of my natal era. In my adult life, I have met a different set of them. It began with Evelyn Waugh. Although it was not my preference, Louis Hibbertson, our department head at the Phelan Academy, assigned me to the English novel. Along with Austen and Forster I decided to teach *Brideshead Revisited*; those triumphant love stories need something to balance them. But eventually Hibbertson objected. We couldn't have our pupils reading so much about Catholicism and sexual affairs. It went on from there. I switched to *Heart of Darkness*, which seemed devoid of the offending elements. Hibbertson objected again. He said that Conrad wasn't English! Never mind that most of our colleagues took my part, he denied me my wish because of a technicality. Conrad was Polish and that was that. The effects of these disappointments lasted until my retirement.

Wally would have sympathized. Not that there hadn't been animosity between us. I suppose I was the proverbial younger brother, striving to distinguish myself against the family paragon. When I was little I sometimes chased him and tried to hit him, just because he was better at spinning a top or adding up numbers, or because our mother seemed to prefer him for his gentler behavior. I recall only too well the way I spoke to him. Once I asked him, didn't he find himself dull? Didn't he want to be daring and do interesting things? I can't think of how he replied, but I can still feel the way I pinched my face together, the way I twisted my mouth as I spoke to him.

Nevertheless, Wally would have sympathized with me over the clashes with Hibbertson.

The robed choir broke into a new song, "If Music Be the Food of Love." Twelfth Night, that would be. Hibbertson had taught the Shakespeare course. The singers' euphony was commendable, but the sound was thin. You can't have six women against only two basses and a tenor.

Carolyn was looking disturbed, either because the wedding was not going forward or because of her near-disaster with the chair.

I thought of our uneasiness when Wally declined to go east to Harvard. Even Ida urged him to go—we all heard her say it—but he insisted on staying in California. It galled me, his passing up the chance to study at a great university. I may have told him—I wish I could remember exactly—that he was being illogical, that it was useless to stay home. He went to work at our family’s clothing store downtown, in the leather goods department.

What had happened to Jennifer? The singers intoned their last notes. Leslie came hurrying forward, radiating indispensability, and said something to Whitman. Whitman turned to the minister, who wavered a moment before speaking to the closest soprano. After some to and fro, the singers embarked on “The Man I Love,” an odd choice for four-part harmony. I looked to Carolyn so that she might share my dismay. Molly appeared as bored as ever.

At Ida’s wedding I had failed at first to notice that Wally was missing. He had intended to come directly from the store, already dressed for the occasion. Perhaps Ida had noticed, had scanned the room through her glittery veil and found he was not among us.

*...I realize as well as you
It is seldom that a dream comes true
To me it's clear...*

I don’t think Ida was enchanted with blunt-nosed Alfred Lehmer. He ran a painting business on Mission Street, that his father had started after the earthquake. He had a stutter and did not speak much. But Ida was drawing near the old-maid age, even by 1939 standards. I suppose that was the choice she had. Surely her choice was better than Wally’s.

...I'm waiting for the man I love.

The closing line, thank goodness. But then a new turbulence slowly overtook us. It began with murmurs and progressed to louder speech, even a few exclamations and barks of laughter. Turnings of heads escalated to turnings of whole bodies. We were rewarded only by the sight of Leslie dashing for her seat. Appallingly, Molly stood up as though it were seventh-inning stretch at the ball game.

By the time Ida and Alfred Lehmer had completed the ceremony, mother and father and I were quite aware of Wally’s absence. Possibly, I thought, he had encountered trouble on his way from the store. It was

possible. But what was to be done? We all drank to the bridal couple and ate canapés from china plates. Ida had turned back her veil for the reception, but I did not catch her eye. I remember feeding a series of sugar-crusted grapes into my mouth, more than was polite.

The three of us, my parents and I, drove home together in the dusk. We didn't speak of the wedding and Ida's prospects. We maintained a silence that was like the surface tension on a bubble. Over the years I have returned to that moment many times, the three of us riding on our upholstered seats through the avenues of the city.

When we reached the house, I at once started down the hall to Wally's bedroom, pressing light switches as I went. I rapped on his door and then threw it open before he would have had time to answer. His bed and his desk stood empty—not a scrap of paper on his blotter, I remember noticing that.

I hurried on through the house, lighting up each room as I went. By the time I got to the garden behind the house, I was running. But then I saw him, and I stopped. I knew at once what I was seeing and I didn't go close. His body was tightly curled. I've been told since that poison will do that. He lay in his wedding clothes—minus the jacket—facing away from me. His shirt tail had come loose at the back. That fold of white fabric caught the moonlight in our darkened garden, the only sign of his struggle.

A soloist—I don't know where he came from—began a little trumpet voluntary, and the minister raised his head and smiled at Whitman. Most of us swiveled in our seats in order to catch sight of Jennifer, to oversee her progress toward the groom. To my relief, Carolyn did not try to alter her position in the chair, but she twisted her head as far as anyone could, I should think, and eventually obtained the same view that all of us had: Jennifer in a white drape, bare shouldered and coming forward all by herself in a nimbus of joy.

My father had an unexpected business success in 1940 and I came to be regarded as quite an eligible bachelor. Myopia and flat feet spared me from combat duty in those war years, and whenever another man was wanted at a dinner or a party, I was the one chosen. I escorted many charming young women at such occasions, including the daughter of the Belgian ambassador.

My parents themselves did not go out, and my mother continued to dress in black. I believe she went so far as to dispose of her other clothing. She paid little attention to my comings and goings; I have heard that is usual in such cases.

Whitman and Jennifer were embracing each other. I suppose I had let my attention lapse during the key moments. If it hadn't been a wedding,

I might not have noticed the gap at all. Still holding hands, they turned their eager faces to us and bowed.

All of a sudden we found the folding chairs being whisked from under us so that the catering staff could set up the tables for lunch. I offered Carolyn my arm in rising, as Molly had been quick to wander away. The bridal couple and their few family members had formed a reception party, and we joined the guests surging in their direction.

Carolyn leaned across me to ask Leslie the reason for Jennifer's tardiness.

Leslie was glad to answer; I don't think asking would have been strictly necessary. "One of the catering staff stepped on her hem!" she said. "...the last moment, opened a huge rent...someone to a drugstore for thread. Then I sewed it up! Jennifer thought...bigger stitches, but you can't...satin. It would pucker."

"Well, it didn't show at all!" said Carolyn.

The ironic part about Ida and Wally is this: They did not belong to different religions or social circles. On the contrary, they had too much in common. How curious, our conventions.

I shook Whitman's hand and moved on to kiss Jennifer's cheek.

"It's great of you to come, Cousin Milton," she said, looking nothing like Ida.

"My best wishes to you, dear." Perhaps it's no longer rude to congratulate the bride. We used to think it hinted of, "Finally, you snagged one." Perhaps no longer, but I didn't want to take a chance.

As I stood next to Carolyn, watching them set up the chairs, a man brought around a tray with flutes of champagne. We each took one, clinked, and drank. I felt the bubbles sting my throat. It was brut, not quite cold enough, possibly a blanc de noirs. I prefer it sweeter.

"Shall we find our place cards?" Carolyn asked. Leslie had left us, no doubt to retail the story of Jennifer's hem to all who had not heard it yet. I was looking toward Jennifer in the reception line at this wedding of weddings, the last family wedding of the century. Did she think, as she clasped hands with Whitman and smiled so ardently, that there might be someone missing from our gathering, or even someone among us within that walled garden, who might be heartbroken?

Keith Jamieson

Ars Notoria

Writers are weird people. J.D. Salinger has been hiding in a cave on the moon since the mid-1970s; H.P. Lovecraft was more afraid of women than of any of the monsters in his stories; Hemingway and hundreds of others have been unreachable drunks. There was a time when I considered these examples to be exceptions rather than instantiations of the rule, and that most authors were probably ordinary, undisturbed individuals who, like the rest of us, wrote when they could and lived normal lives around it. But the more I read about them, the more I think this isn't so. There seems to be some kind of craziness associated with the act of creation that requires its practitioners, the majority of the time, to be barely-reachable wrecks of human beings.

This may be because writing itself is more of a compulsion or a physical debility than an activity one engages in happily whenever one wants. (I once heard it compared to a peanut allergy.) I never sit down and think, "I think I'd enjoy writing a short story right now." Instead I'll be struck with a first sentence when walking or in the shower; I'll dash to my computer and start producing or lose it; and if the stars are so aligned after several hours of swearing and grappling I'll finally have something I can be reasonably proud of. I think the image of Jacob wrestling with the angel, from *Genesis*, is an apt metaphor. Jacob is the writer, of course, and the angel is the seemingly otherworldly inspiration that, at least in my case, compels me to write; but it doesn't appear in a form we can use. Within my head, it's just impulse and images. The inspiration has to be wrestled with, defeated, and forced violently onto the page so that other people can experience what otherwise would just rattle around in our heads.

I don't think that this is the way that the process of writing fiction works for everyone—I'm aware that J.M. Coetzee, for instance, sets aside an hour every morning to write, which if I did it would result in hours of staring at empty pages—but I do think the idea of the principle holds true. Most people who wrote fiction did so because they have the allergy, not because they choose or enjoy it. If they experience anything it's the same feeling of relief you get after finishing an exam: "Thank God that's over." You don't even care how it went, necessarily, just that it's in the past. The test itself is no less awful than the one for chemistry: writing fiction requires a great deal of you, putting yourself on the page, accepting that other people (or you yourself) might reject the printed version of your

innermost thoughts, surmounting the incredible frustration of never being able to find the perfect sentence you know is there. I would never do it if I didn't feel I had to.

My version of inspiration allows and forces me to write a short story or poem about once every three months. In this, I'm unusually active compared to most people—who probably write one or two stories in their lives, if that much, and feel content—but, obviously, much less productive compared to professional authors. I also write everything in one sitting. I have never finished a short story longer than eleven pages (because there's rarely time to write more before I'm driven from the computer), and don't revise my work. Once the inspiration is gone, it's gone. Professional writers manage to overcome these handicaps, too. How? In order to write more than I do, in more blocks, and with more willingness to alter what's written than I have, I think that bad writers induce the writing itch, while good writers simply feel it with greater frequency than I do.

What do I mean by a “bad writer?” Writing talent has such a broad range and nebulous definition that I think it's one of the things in life with the greatest possible range of variation. There are writers the world acclaims as brilliant (Nadine Gordimer, for instance) whose works I find mediocre-to-awful. I'm not so arrogant as to think that so many people are just wrong; the wonderful thing about writing, compared to science, is that we can both be right. Nonetheless, I do think that there are standards within that variation, and that in reading any written work levels of general talent can be glimpsed. I think Nadine Gordimer is a bad writer in a very different way from how I think Nora Roberts is a bad writer. I don't like Nadine Gordimer because I think her experiments, so to speak, shatter the test tubes: she has interesting ideas and some kind of clear literary talent that, for me, she just can't quite get onto the page. I would say she fails to emerge victorious over her angel of inspiration, but the angel is still there.

Not so with Nora Roberts, the romance novelist, an excellent example of the quintessential bad writer (the sort I really mean by the term; Gordimer would perhaps be better described by me as a weak writer). On the record as having said that authors “are going to be unemployed if [they] really think [they] just have to sit around and wait for the muse to land on [their] shoulder,” Roberts evidences the belief common to most romance novelists of writing being some kind of Taylorist assembly line. She writes eight hours a day, every day, regardless of circumstance; her over one hundred written works sport characters and “themes” as interchangeable as the titles of Soviet bureaucrats. They have no meaning, no depth, and no ethereality; the angel isn't even present. It's the written word as popcorn movie.

Forcing yourself to produce in order to earn a paycheck is, as Roberts proves, certainly possible, but it doesn't result in genuine creativity. Writing every day no matter what will get lines on the page, but the result isn't true writing any more than the work of an advertiser is true art. It's evidencing too much of what could probably be described, in Marx's terms, as the alienation of labor: the writer is being separated from their work. From being a labor of love, it just becomes, well, labor. Because writing fiction is, more than anything else, a personal endeavor—it's giving birth in print to our thoughts as words—alienating yourself from it through a bastardized creative process is inevitably going to result in a much lower quality of work, the nihilistic banality of most romance novels being an excellent example. Overcoming the inherent difficulties of "wait[ing] for the muse" in this way is the sole province of bad authors.

So how do good authors do it? By "good" authors, I mean writers who display real talent and, more importantly, personal honesty and commitment in the works they share with us; I mean writers who struggle to bring their writing to its fullest expression. (I might even mean Nadine Gordimer and just not like what she writes; contemporary examples I prefer would include Michael Chabon, Coetzee and Jhumpa Lahiri.) Forcing yourself to bring that level of creative integrity to a standard of productivity you can actually live upon can't be easy, and the only way I think great authors are able to do it is that I don't think they need to be forced. Good authors intrinsically feel the tap on the shoulder more than the rest of us. Coetzee sits at his typewriter for an hour every day, but he probably doesn't write every hour: some days perhaps he feels it, others not. In any case, though, I'm sure that he writes more than I do, because he has the inspiration more often than I or any mediocre author. And the reason that great writing can't, as is so often said, be taught, is because this type of creativity can't be induced. You can teach people to construct a sentence better, but you can't train them to feel the presence of that creative call from the beyond any more frequently. All you can encourage them to do is practice; they'll either hear it or they won't.

What I mean to emphasize with this conclusion is how different I think great authors are from ordinary people. I read an interview with Ian McEwan once where I was surprised what a shallow analysis of his own work and dull answers to questions about writing he was able to give. At the time I thought it must have been because he wasn't really a great author (which may also be true), but just as much now I think it's because he and I aren't operating on the same plane. It's as silly to ask an author how they write what they do as it is to ask Van Gogh why he paints the sky a certain way. It's just how it's supposed to work, and if they understand that, and you don't, it can't be explained to you. It seems to me that when

we talk about writing those who can do it with frequency roam in different worlds from those who can't, and when they're roaming around with us they never have quite the comfort or the relaxed presence that they would when striving with their personal muse. Hence why we who don't write look upon their lives with such bemused wonder; hence all the suicides and unexplained quirks and strangeness that writers must endure when they put down pen and travel far from their creative homes.

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