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All We Do Not Say:
The Art of Leaving Out

The Mind's Idle Hour

It's maybe a Thursday, maybe a Tuesday, maybe it's a Sunday afternoon when I begin to write this down. Maybe I've been writing this for years, maybe it predates me, maybe it predates writing or recorded history or time; maybe what I'll find out I have to say is as old as earth, as tactile and self-evident as something of substance and heft, something elemental as sand and silt. Maybe this won't be an article at all but a little heap of thoughts I'll sweep together with my hands, bits of shell and skeleton, fossil and wrack, driftwood and the glint of black volcanic rock.

The writing process is one of investigation, of discovery, of accumulation; writing doesn't begin when I sit down at my desk. Instead, I wander around the house. The French have a language for aimless walking, and a word for men who aimlessly walk; they have the figure of the *flaneur*, whose purpose in walking is to walk without purpose, to amble, to idle, to approach perambulation without destination, to apprehend the world without fixed expectation of what they may come upon, what may become of them, what they themselves may become. This is the spirit in which I wander out of one room and into another, looking for something, I couldn't say what; who knows what I'll remember, what I'll forget, what I left one room intending to find or what I'll find once I've forgotten I was looking for something at all.

Mostly, when I wander around, I look at my books. Do I really see them, their shape and color, the titles on their spines? If I'm looking, what am I looking for? I don't know, and I won't know till I see it,

and when I see it, I won't know why it's what I want. This is the mind's idle hour; this is the place from which I write. Religion has language for this as well, perhaps most famously in the Catholic practice of *Lectio Divina*, the literal translation of which is "divine reading;" it's a form of passive prayer, in which the reader meditates upon a sacred text with the faith that divine inspiration will arrive; and from what I know of both reading and writing, I see no reason to believe it will not. Here in my city, in my third-floor walkup, in my monk's cell of sorts, I'll call the bookshelves my altar, the books and their pages my icons, and their contents—the language itself—will serve well enough for a window onto what I call the divine.

The clutter of books brings me joy, the surplus, the surfeit, the effusion, the absolute excess of books in my house brings me joy. I keep books; some would say I hoard books. I have enough of them that they form a kind of mad happy clutter in my house. I understand there's a trend of decluttering and minimalism, and that the process of decluttering is guided by the question of joy. As a guiding principle, I can't think of one better, since I am in favor of joy, and in favor, in theory at least, of holding the things in our lives, material or otherwise, up to the test of whether they bring us joy. The principle by which other people relate to books does not concern me; I see their point; it is efficient, they take out a book and bring it back. They buy a book and read it and give it away. I keep my books; I take them everywhere. They accrue and accrue. There are too many. I buy new bookcases; I build bookcases from crates. I stack books on the floor, on tables, in closets that were intended for linens, in cupboards intended for plates. I have no idea what became of the magenta fold-out couch of 1994, or the moss green velvet chairs I owned in 2002, or the pearls my grandmother left me or the sword my grandfather stole in the war, and for that matter I have no idea how I could possibly have lost a sword; but I did; and what remains are the books. We come and go from place to place in our lives, trailing chairs and couches, iron swords and strings of pearls.

This is the point: somewhere along the line I seem to have made a decision about what was worth keeping and what was not; I seem to have developed some kind of coherent internal logic, a guiding

principle, that allows me to know where the 1923 cloth-bound edition of *Faust* is at any given time, and also frees me up to neither know nor really care what ever became of husband number 2. Joan Didion wrote, "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means." The act of writing itself, of plucking a word, and then another word, out of the brackish marsh of my own head, and setting them down, and peering at them closely to see what meanings can be found or made by arranging them this way or that, is only the generative stage; it's messy, it's covered with wet, it tracks sand into the house and trails sea slime and strands of kelp. But that isn't even where we begin; we begin in a place of unknowing, a place that is almost primal, certainly pre-verbal, prior to language and possibly prior to thought. We don't set out with something to say but with a sense that something could be said, if we could just catch the scent of it, the shape of it, the faint strain of its sound; we begin without knowledge or even expectation of what the outcome will be.

As I write this, I do not know that this, whatever it is, will ever be published, will ever coalesce in any way, will ever be written at all. So what? Even idle, the mind mills about, picking things up and putting them down, adjusting a curtain, straightening a chair. Science calls this state "prepared serendipity;" notably, it is in this condition of unknowing, of absence, of missing pieces, that curiosity flourishes, fortuitous connections occur, and most major discoveries are made.

My thinking about the use of the unsaid in nonfiction is informed by a love of poetry, photography, and plainchant. In this article I will focus on the role of the unsaid in nonfiction craft, and refrain from wading into the weeds on the question of why the word 'nonfiction' is deeply inadequate to the task of describing what writers of factual literature create (for example, a great deal of poetry observes and describes aspects of fact, and documentary photography strives to represent, with both accuracy and innovation, the real), but as a starting point, consider Carolyn Forché's prose poem "The Colonel."

WHAT YOU HAVE HEARD is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house. On the television was a cop show. It was in English. Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything away. There was some talk then of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

There are two moments at which the speaker's consciousness enters this piece, and they not only change the effect of the work; they define it. Set against a larger whole, the speaker's point of view shifts our perspective: we become sharply aware of the smallness of the individual, the absurdity of the situation, of the speaker's inability to respond to it in any meaningful way. The line "There is no other way to say this," especially, implies that there might have been another way, that the author searched for one and none was found. That leaves the reader with what's unsaid: we become viscerally aware of the frailty of language in the face of experience. By referring the reader back to the inadequacy of the tools with which the speaker works, she creates a resonance that no words can match. Here Forché allows the unsaid to speak for itself.

I believe that's a deliberate choice. At the very least it's a shift, and a stark one, and whether she sat down with the intention to write this piece in just this way or whether she stumbled upon it by accident,

she chose to leave it in. She also chose not to elaborate; she chose not to write everything else she might have written about this moment; she chose the place where the piece begins, chose the heavily tactile image of the dried peach, and chose to end the piece with the almost audible silence created by a listening ear.

The Well-Wrought Urn

When we first come to writing as a practice and a craft, and when we start drafting any new work, we have an idea to explore, an image that shimmers, a bone to pick, a yarn to spin, something that's gotten stuck in our craw and has to get spit out. We have our pet concerns, our subject, our oeuvre, however you say that word; eventually we develop a sense of voice, a specificity of style. All of these things originate in and at first emerge from a desire to create—to make something, to add to the sum total of things in this world. The creative impulse appears, at first glance, to be generative, inherently additive in nature, or recombinant at least; and as such, the impulse to write at all seems in some ways to fly in the face of the statement that the unsaid, too, is an art.

But I would argue that writers are driven by our relationship with silence just as much as by a love of language and speech; we write out of a desire not to merely churn words but to choose them, and to do so deliberately. The stages of writing—from the sense of latent, formless expectation that something exists, within or without, to be written; to the sprawling, messy process of finding out what that something is, of what it consists, and with what words it might, at least initially, be said; to the point at which our monster of a draft comes lurching to life, and has to be brought under some kind of control—every one of these stages is made more or less effective by the extent to which we are writing with intent. What justifies the presence of a word, or suggests that word over another word, or dictates the inclusion or exclusion of that phrase or sentence, that specific detail, that fact, that character or subplot, that stanza,

scene, chapter, story, poem, essay, or that entire work? How do we determine when to say something, when to suggest it, and when to allow for the echo of white space, deflection, and what's left unsaid?

In the early 1990s, I enrolled in a seminar in Modernism with Professor Peter Firchow, who was extraordinarily tall and had hands so large a simple gesture seemed to send a slight but perceptible breeze through the small and too-warm room. I don't remember any of my frantic annotations in the annotated "Waste-Land" or what the bespectacled PhD candidate with the practice beard said about Pound's petals on a wet black bough. What I recall is that I became wholly consumed by the question of narrative time, the way time bends, speeds up, slows down, reverses, cuts crisscross patterns over and under the surface of a written work; this question consumes me still. The immediate reason for my concern was the fact that James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, who strongly disliked one another and one another's work, did the exact same "never before done" thing with a novel, on the same continent, at almost the same time: using a style that we now call "stream of consciousness," they both told the story of one unremarkable day in one unremarkable character's life from the deeply interior perspective of that character's mind. In modern editions of Joyce's *Ulysses*, the Homeric odyssey that is a day in the life of Leopold Bloom requires more than 750 pages; in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa manages to get herself from sunup to sundown in under 125.

What justified the publication of Leopold's every waking thought? Don't know. What justified Clarissa Dalloway's fear as she set out to buy the flowers herself? Don't know that either. Each author made their decision based on the rejection of every other decision they might have made; they chose this character, this fleeting idea, this shimmering image, this tangled syntax, to create the thing they wanted to create, to achieve the effect on the reader that they wanted to achieve. Did it work? In both cases, arguably, yes.

The question of necessity, of what is needed in a written work or what justifies the inclusion of an aspect of that work, can be answered by looking at the work in reverse. Rather than look at its impulse, at

what the writer seeks to gain by writing it, we can look at its intended effect. And intended effect—in fact, intention at all—implies a reader, an audience on whom that effect will play out. If you don't care about your reader, you don't need to worry about how deliberately you write, or how well, or for whom, or if your work will affect them in any way; and if you are that writer, this article is not intended for you. But, dearly beloved, I trust that we are gathered here today to think about this thing called craft; which leaves us to consider not *whether* we want to our writing to reach a reader and to have impact when it arrives, but rather *how*.

The effects we need to consider are in many ways not literary but emotional or intellectual. If you are a reader with tastes like mine, the full effect lies at the intersection of the intellect and the emotions, and is created when the author has chosen not only a powerful subject or idea, not focused merely on content, which is relatively easy and apparent, but has hit upon the language, shape, and structure that best serve the ends of the piece. Richard Rodriguez “Late Victorians,” Jo Ann Beard, “The Fourth State of Matter,” Maxine Hong Kingston, “No Name Woman,” Eula Biss, “The Pain Scale,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Gloria Anzaldúa, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Brian Doyle, “Joyas Voladoras,” Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Between the World and Me”—we read and teach these again and again because they are, in fact, well-wrought—form serving function, function elevating form. Draft by draft, these authors found their way to the voice and tone, the structure and shape, that would carry their intended meaning to us, the reader, barely spilling a drop. The well-made work of nonfiction reflects a deliberate authorial decision about each element of craft such that the intellectual strength of the work is equal to or greater than the emotional weight it inherently has; such that the form and formal aspects of the work precisely serve its function so that in its totality it is much greater than the sum of its parts.

I often think we know much more about craft than we are consciously aware, or else we have a terrific ability to forget everything we know as readers the minute we change hats and think of ourselves as writers instead. Hand me someone else's work and I can tell you quite quickly what's working well and

what's not, where to develop and where to cut, but sit me down in front of my own draft and suddenly I have the critical vocabulary of a toddler. Ask me to diagnose the structural issues and I'll offer something incisive like, *Well, it just seems sort of derfy.*

What are the things we don't even know that we know about how much to say, and where to leave things unsaid?

Ultimately these decisions are made according to individual taste and style, which Ben Yagoda has described as deriving from "a blend of instinct and intent." Some of this is a gut-level sense of what works for a given piece, what captures the mood or nails the tone or creates the right feel, whether that is beautiful or muscular or lyrical or bitten-off, staccato, elliptical, spare. As we become more fluent in what that is, what we like, what we're trying to do, and more comfortable in our own writerly skin, we become more adept at discerning what fits, what's ours. Taking a few passes through with at least some questions up front can help—we can start by getting rid of cliches, canned language, purple prose, right off the top. Beyond that, it's often a matter of balance, of a light touch or just the right touch, of knowing when to push it, and how far, before we pull back.

The decisions to watch out for are those that operate just below the surface of our work and our minds; and those are informed by what we've have been told, by what is convention, what is accepted, what's received wisdom, what someone—not necessarily us—considers "best." Many if not most of those maxims are garbage; the writer's first task is to weigh what she is taught against what she believes, what she thinks and feels, and above all else, what she intends.

One of the easiest mistakes we can make as writers is to confuse intention with control. We have an idea of what we want the reader to feel, to think, to receive and perceive then they encounter our work; we do not have the final say in whether that's what they'll get. We have to let the reader do some of the work; we have to allow for their interpretation, their interpolation of understanding, the meanings they will necessarily impose. Are we explaining too much, or too little? Are we assuming an intelligent reader, and

stepping aside to let the reader do the work of finding meaning in what we've said? Are we, contrariwise, assuming she can or wants to read our minds, pick her way through cluttered images, mixed metaphors, and tangled syntax, or get bogged down in obscure meanings, shifts of tense and voice, work that is unintentionally vague? Again, the question is one of intent.

Denis Johnson's short story "Emergency," for example, is deliberately vague and obfuscatory; it lacks context, setting, backstory; half the time the reader has no idea what's going on; it's missing the easy markers, the road signs that tell us this is the plot, this is the protagonist, this is a story, and this is what the story is "about." More famously, Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" is almost entirely composed of deflection and silence; the plot consists of an extremely detailed setting, elliptical dialogue that is deliberately and completely not about what the story is about, and almost no events. And even more famously than that, the central character in Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" is an absence, a cipher, a figment, a dream; Godot may or may not exist; almost certainly, Godot never comes.

Nonfiction needs to construct its deflections, misdirections, and obfuscations differently due to the limits of memory, or perception, or simple human decency; in many cases, the intent or ends of nonfiction differ from those of fiction and drama, so its means necessarily differ as well.

"It is the space within that makes it useful"

What we leave out also determines what we let in. Negative space is an element of artistic composition; formally speaking, it's the area of an image that is not the subject. The brain organizes perceptual experience into taxonomies according to what it believes is immediately important through a process that's called figure-ground reversal. Based on several factors, the brain discerns what we see when we're looking, what we hear when we're listening, what affects us at the autonomic and sensory level: in looking, the brain decides which item is the figure and which is the ground; in listening, it determines what is melody and what is harmony, what sound is the voice of a companion and what is the noise of a restaurant.

Attention to what's said or unsaid, stated or implied or suggested and left to linger in the reader's consciousness, is actually attention to how things relate: negative and positive space, figure and ground, a song versus white noise—their very existence depends upon the existence of their opposite and their relationship to it. In a Taoist sense, they create each other. Space is defined when you place an object into it; the object is equally defined by the space. Heidi Czerwiec points out that this process of discernment, particularly in the context of nonfiction writing, is more nuanced than simply noticing figure and ground, a work's primary topic and its secondary and tertiary themes; there must also be an intentional structure, deliberate juxtapositions of said and unsaid things, spaces to notice, silences to hear. Czerwiec writes, "There must be a path to follow, a negative capability inherent in the design...[S]pace must be meaningful—you want the reader to be a willing pilgrim within its patterns, not a prisoner."

I have a tattoo on my person that is sort of someone's name. That is to say, it is the name of an ex; this ex had, presumably still has, a tattoo of my name, in negative space. There is a dense block of black inked onto that person's arm; within that block is what's missing, which is to say, me, or at least the Hegelian representation of what I am—my absence, perhaps, spelled out in the letters of my name. What's left unsaid, in this case, is what makes it not just a block of black ink; it's what makes the tattoo a reminder, a memory, perhaps unwelcome, if not of me, then of the tattoo artist who insisted that we each include a very small, very tacky red inked heart to the right of the lover's name. The names endure, though likely the women who at one time went by those names do not; the small red hearts faded quickly and now can barely be seen.

In *The Art of Looking Sideways*, Alan Fletcher writes,

Space is substance. Cézanne painted and modelled space. Giacometti sculpted by 'taking the fat off space.' Mallarmé conceived poems with absences as well as words. Ralph Richardson asserted that acting lay in pauses...Isaac Stern described music as "that little bit between each note - silences

which give the form.' The Japanese have a word (*ma*) for this interval which gives shape to the whole. In the West we have neither word nor term. A serious omission.

It's the relational nature of negative space that interests me; as an organizing principle, the relationship between things informs everything we observe and perceive about structure and pattern—in the material world, in visual art, and also in writing. Juxtaposition, redaction, layering, mosaic, kintsugi, collage—in all of these instances, meaning, form, and function come from the relationship between things; the integrity of the whole depends upon the edges of the things, and not on the thing itself.

In "Segmenting: This Is What the Spaces Say," Robert Root compares the use of spaces (and I would expand what is meant by "spaces" beyond the use of physical white space on the page to include everything left unsaid, from authorial choices to exclude, rather than include, a detail, a storyline, an quote, an image, a fact, to careful syntactical choices that force an aural shift, a verbal stop, a breath, a pause), to the "intervals of silence between the elements" of a musical work.

This is what the spaces say: In this interval of silence hold onto what you have just heard; prepare yourself to hear something different; ponder the ways these separatenesses are part of a whole.

Like musical compositions, nonfiction need not be one uninterrupted melody, one movement, but can also be the arrangement of distinct and discrete miniatures, changes of tempo, sonority, melody, separated by silences.

Human perception is inexorably drawn to contrast; as a lesson in writing craft, then, we can pay greater attention to the elements of contrast, to the ways in which we direct the reader's attention, to the use of excess and absence, to decisions we make about syntax and word choice, to connotative and denotative language, to silences pregnant with hope and chatter that serves only to illustrate the existence of a void. Highlighting these edges, clarifying these relationships, can help us draw out an unexpected resonance, or create meanings that are entirely new. Consider the deliberately mimetic clutter and pell-mell pacing of Tom Wolfe's syntactical approach in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, used to evoke rather than

describe aspects of the chaotic journey the narrative undertakes, aspects that defied explicit description but were essential to the reader's understanding of the subject; the author inverts this technique to equally evocative effect in the clipped, bitten-off syntax of *The Right Stuff*. Maggie Nelson's lyrical meditation in *Bluets* on love, on ache, on having and losing, brings such surreal intensity of focus to the color blue that the shade lingers, hyper-saturated and indelible, in the reader's mind long after the putative story, the narrative throughline, has slipped away, in much the same way that the mind retains the felt imprint of a song, the associative implications of a tune, after the lyrics have been forgotten, if the words were ever known. The inescapable resonance of clearly articulated, singular images—the corpse under the narrator's cool, precise purview in Lia Purpura's "Autopsy Report," Tom Junod's "Falling Man," forever suspended first in the photograph about which Junod writes and then in the air of the essay itself—illustrate the lasting wisdom of Stanley Kunitz's advice to poets ("End with an image and don't explain") and remind me that more prose writers, especially nonfictionists, would do well to heed advice given to poets. And not just this image, in Lidia Yuknavitch's "Woven" ("In the year of our eleven-year marriage, my second husband emerged from the kitchen pointing a gun at me") but, more significantly, the moment at which the image comes: after a pause, after white space, opening the fourth segment of an essay, the preceding three segments of give no indication that the narrative will take this particular turn, embedded in what seemed to be an almost hypnotically beautiful piece on something else; the line itself, and its placement, and the contrast between that line and the preceding white space and the line that preceded that ("Many infant girls in Lithuania have the names of trees") feel the way real shock does: cold, clinical, inescapable, absolute.

One can, of course, make oneself insane in just this way—examining the fissures or borders or gaps between things, the awful juxtapositions, the irrevocable divides; the first time I noticed I did this I did not notice it at all; it exists as a story, a myth, it may not ever have happened at all. It goes like this.

I used to write poems.

Once—I can't remember the circumstances exactly—an old friend of mine happened to be in the city in which I happened to be, and so he dropped by for a drink. We discussed poems for what seemed a very long time, until long past the time when I wished for him to leave, and it became apparent he was not planning to leave at all, so I crawled into bed and left him sitting on the floor, reading my poems and talking to himself.

When I woke up, the room was a sea of strewn pages. I stood blinking, ankle deep in poems and notes. Every page was bilingual, multivalent, polyphonic, two-headed, forked of hoof and tongue: there was the neat typeface of the poem, the orderly progression of stanzas and lines; and laid over the poem was his childlike scrawl. He'd written something—a letter, it looked like, or a manifesto, a screed, a tirade, a memo, a joke, or for all I know it too was a poem, and the failure of imagination was mine.

*Whatever it was, it was now written, had gotten itself said, and he was asleep. I found him curled like a homunculus in a wash of paper, his lips and fingers blue with ink. He must have been gnawing a pen. (“Misc. Things an Essay is Not,” *Essay Daily*)*

There are several ways of thinking about it: the event itself or the whole situation, the context or its content, a given place at a given time, two people, a thick blue carpet, a double mattress, a thrift-store desk that tilted and a cheap chair pulled up to that thrift-store desk, a heap of loose-leaf pages that would scatter, would slide off the desk, would travel like blown snow all over the room, over the mattress, into the sheets, drifts of pages collecting in the corners of the room—but which is the story? What to include, what to leave out?

Is this the story of sediment, the way years and time and meaning and other stories gather, layer upon layer, such that there are strata of stories, each one at one time discreet, perhaps important, at that time, now so far buried under other stories that the first can no longer be discerned, and none of the others exist in themselves? Of all the stories that can be taken, mined, from the original situation, which is the story that should?

First, note: the situation is what exists; the situation is what happened, the facts of the matter, which no one will ever know for sure, no matter how thoroughly I wrack my brain, transcribe what was said, reference and cross-reference all those details lost to time. It was Oakland, California, but what house number, on what street? It was 1995, but what month, what day, and why was I there? How did it come to pass that a boy tracked me down, before cell phones, before Facebook, before any of us knew what the world was about to become? What did I say to him when he called, which he must have done, that led,

through some time-elapse process, to him sitting on the floor, on the cheap blue carpet, holding a sheaf of loose-leaf poems pressed against his knees? He was there. I was there. I do not remember when he arrived or under what pretext he left. It was the last time I saw him alive. Is that the story?

Say this is a piece about texts, about intersecting texts, about intertextuality, about the way I woke up and found myself adrift in a sea of strewn pages, my neatly typed poems buried under his childlike blue ballpoint scrawl.

Say this is, instead, a cultural critique: it is about the year I spent in Oakland, working the night shift at Kinko's so I could more easily steal reams of paper, boxes of paperclips and rubber bands, dumbly staring at the flashing light as the copier churned out copy after copy after copy of something someone said until dawn broke open and bled into the early shift at the coffee shop where I could not make a latte to save my life and the owners looked at me with a mixture of pity and scorn. Or perhaps it is the usual coming-of-age memoir: it is about the white-bright daylight hours of an East Bay summertime trying to live on nickel tips and less than minimum wage, keeping body and soul together with a carton of eggs, a loaf of white bread, a chunk of butter, a gallon of grocery store vodka, and 75-cent jugs of Sunny D.

Or perhaps it is just another tragic tale; it is the story of the last time I saw my first love alive before I learned he'd hanged himself, before I drove north for the funeral, and stood in the back of the room in a cheap blue dress and cheap white heels and watched as his mother, in a moment that crystalized everything god-awful about California all at once, did not weep or give a eulogy but did an interpretive dance.

None of these stories can be told without lugging the others in tow.

In determining what to include and what to leave out, we're back to the question of necessity: how much does the reader need to know for them to feel and think deeply about the subject or to situate the story we're trying to tell? What's relevant?

What writers think is relevant about a story is often not what is most affecting to the reader, or most memorable. It's not often the biggest or most dramatic moment; it's rarely our adorable childhood anecdotes; it's just never another run-through of the dirge of our pet griefs. What matters in our work is what is most resonant to the reader, and the writer doesn't always know what that is. Likewise, we frequently do not know how we'll get there; one can only outline for so long before one must hunker down and write. Maybe we'll get there by digression, maybe we'll meander. The beauty of jazz comes not from the familiar melody but from the riff, from the bent note, from the way the instrument is played that is unlike anyone else has ever played it before. Once I found the novel I was trying to write by walking away from the desk where I'd been staring at the same chapter for weeks, then months, then years, paralyzed by excess, convinced I had to write down every single thing that happened in every single scene—I was writing about an argument between two characters and I needed one of them to *leave* so the damn scene would *end* but all I could think was *How the hell do I get this dude across the room?* And I got up and took the cardboard banker's box containing several thousand manuscript pages out to the dumpster in the alley and I threw it out, just so I could get a little quiet, so that I could hear what the novel that did not yet exist had to say.

The elements of both fictional and nonfictional narrative—plot, subplot, pacing, setting, character, dialogue, etc.—are not really things in themselves, or if they are, that's not what makes them work. That's not how they come to life. What makes narrative work, and what I'm saying is what makes writing work, is the relationship between those things—not necessarily a balanced relationship, but one that is interesting, one that has texture and tension, one where characters reveal their internal contradictions, where time tangles up and doubles back, where structure and form are not always pleasing to the eye, where not every image is lovely and not everything people say is true or wise. Like him or not, David Foster Wallace's first-person nonfiction narrator was openly an impossible ass; the narrative arc of "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" traces his descent into depression and existential despair as he chronicles, for *Harper's*, a

pleasure cruise, scowling his way through formal dinners in a Spiderman stocking cap; the exacting record of dialogue in John McPhee's "Travels in Georgia" reveals the close and symbiotic relationship between two partners who make their living by collecting roadkill, selling most of it and keeping the less presentable items for their own needs. McPhee's focus is on the conversation between the partners in the front seat; his position in the back is as scribe, not critic, commentator, or judge. Sometimes what works in writing is that it's clunky. Sometimes it's the element of surprise, as Barrie Jean Borich writes in "Radical Surprise: The Subversive Art of the Uncertain," that allows a critical breakage to occur in the writer's, and thus the reader's, perception and comprehension of a thing: "I'm interested in...the disjunction between what *was* and what *is*...What we discern after displaces what came before. In the disjunction between what *was* and what *is* we come to new ideas." Sometimes it's the entire principle of the absurd—the inherent tension between our human desire for meaning and value, for beauty and sense, and our equally human inability to be certain, beyond any doubt, that meaning and value exist.

Camus would say that the Absurd arises directly out of the relationship between these warring factions within the self; it is not the desire for meaning or the absence of certainty that meaning exist that creates the absurd, but the internal contradiction of the fact that these things coexist in each of us. We want to write; we cannot write. We can't go on; we must go on. There is no way to say this, there is no other way to say this; we have to say this, and we have to say it this way.

The visual artist Yves Klein wrote in a letter to the gallerist who represented him, "Recently my work with color has led me, in spite of myself, to search little by little, with some assistance (from the observer, from the translator), for the realization of matter, and I have decided to end the battle. My paintings are now invisible and I would like to show them in a clear and positive manner, in my next Parisian exhibition at Iris Clert's."

For the practical souls among us, I offer a few rules of thumb.

Everything we decide to leave out ratchets up the importance of everything that stays in.

We can create parameters for our work and use them. We can learn formal structures, as in Mariá Isabel Álvarez' "Strawberry Girl" or Brenda Miller's "Pantomim for 1979." We can give ourselves arbitrary rules, make up guidelines within which we decide to work: Charles D'Ambrosio's "Documents" is a startling and powerful take on the use of primary sources, Édouard Levé's "When I Look at a Strawberry, I Think of a Tongue" defies the reader's efforts to impose redemptive interpretation; for that matter, Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" and "Notes on 'Camp'" both cut away literary pretense through their strict adherence to their internally consistent form; Zadie Smith's "Getting In and Out" utilizes a semi-ekphrastic framework to examine questions of aesthetics, artistic impulse and license, and the historicist effect of making art about race. Working within parameters forces us to pay attention; it heightens our attention to every level of the work, and helps us hone a more intentional process of decision making as we write.

We can spend time at the edges of our own writerly terrain. We can move away from what comes easily and push ourselves toward the unknown, the unexpected, the element of surprise. If we aren't pushing ourselves, our minds get bored, our work gets stale, and cliché rushes in to fill the void.

We can pay attention to the reader in our heads. If we are writing toward praise, or to please someone, or to prove a point, our work can readily become derivative, over-determined, and unlike anything we ourselves want to read.

We can develop our own language, our formal fluency, our taste. A passion for writing isn't particularly unusual; a desire to tell a story, to say our piece, to state our case, is enough to make us write, but not enough to make us write well.

We can be aware of the reader's expectations and demolish them. We can anticipate and preempt the assumptions the reader may have when she arrives at the work, though not to be clever; canned

cleverness is as predictable and overdone as any cliché. We can innovate by knowing what's already out there, and by knowing what makes our work unlike anything else.

We can bear in mind that there are limits to intention. We can have the humility to know that no matter how intentional we may be, we only control the work to the point at which it leaves our desks. What the reader does with it, how she reads or misreads, understands or misunderstands or perceives or feels or thinks about it, and especially how the shaping forces of culture and time will work and rework our work, cast it in new light, cast it at the feet of audiences who themselves are shaped and reshaped by those same forces—we can be aware that none of that is up to us. The work of creating something from nothing, of being deliberate and careful and intentional with every word, is also the work of letting it go, and letting the world do with our most treasured creation whatever the world will.

So the day on which I begin to write down what I want to say on the use of what's unsaid, I wander over to the bookcase to let some wind rush in, however cold, to clear out the musty basement smell and carry with it the scent of something, be that the soot of city or the smell of coming snow. My eye catches on a book—I've seen it thousands of times, packed and unpacked it, stacked it in its place and shelved it everywhere I've lived for who knows how long; I reach up and take it down. Have I read it? I don't remember doing so. I page through, noticing that some prior reader has made little notes, bracketed paragraphs, a few lines here and there, a phrase; I thumb through, not really noticing that I'm following this former reader's train of thought along the page, eye skimming the surface of the text like a hand over the side of the boat, lazily dipping into the water here and there. I begin to get a sense of what the reader was after, and a whole new text begins to coalesce, gathering like filaments to the magnet of the reader's idea, her query or thought; and then I turn a page. There, on the bottom left, is a tidy little star, in red ink, in a hand I recognize: Dear reader, that ghostly long-ago reader was me.

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