**Modern Rhetoric Reader:**

**AP Test Prep Guide**

**Dr. McCarney**

**2014-2015**

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### AP Test Prep Information

This course in Modern Rhetoric will adopt a multi-pronged approach. It will encourage further development of skills in close reading using essays recognized as among the best in their type. Successful students will devote a great deal of time and labor to writing, to thinking about writing, and to becoming highly attuned to their own rhetorical choices. The goal will be noticeable improvement in writing and analysis. Many students will choose to sit for the AP test in Language and Composition. This course will prepare students for this exam; students who do not sit for this exam will be better prepared for college composition and, one hopes, for more responsive citizenship.

To meet these many objectives, students are expected to invest in their own education. They must read the assigned work for the class day it is due. All written work must be submitted on time; this is especially important since many of these assignments will be used in the class. Students who fail to prepare for the class will be doubly disadvantaged in that they will receive a lower grade for the homework and will also be unprepared for the class activity.

All writing will be assessed using a rubric. Students will be expected to understand the rubric and work to meet their objectives. Many of these rubrics will be taken directly from the AP exam so that students can internalize the standards on which they will be assessed.

This course will incorporate a First Friday Forum discussion activity. These classes will be comparable to a seminar but will be slightly less structured. Students will practice speaking with each other in large and/or small groups on a variety of topics.

### AP English Language & Composition Standard Rubric

**8-9** (95-105)  These are well-organized and well-written essays. With apt and specific references to the passage, they will analyze the prompt in depth and with appropriate support.  While not without flaws, these papers demonstrate an understanding of the text and a consistent control over the elements of effective composition. These writers read with perception and express their ideas with clarity, skill and maturity.  Because a 9 is exceptional, it earns 5 points extra credit.

**6-7** (80-85) They are less incisive, developed, or aptly supported than papers in the highest ranges. They deal accurately with the prompt, but they are less effective or thorough than the 8-9 essays. These essays demonstrate the writer's ability to express ideas clearly but with less maturity and control than the better papers. Generally, essays scored a 7 present a more developed analysis and a more consistent command of the elements of effective exposition than essays scored a 6.

**5**(75) Customarily, these essays are superficial and unfocused.  The writing is adequate to convey the writer's thoughts, but these essays are typically ordinary, not as well conceived, organized or developed as upper-level papers. Often, they reveal simplistic thinking and/or immature writing.

**3-4**  (50-60) These lower-half essays may reflect an incomplete understanding of the passage and fail to respond adequately to part or parts of the prompt. The discussion may be inaccurate or unclear, and misguided or undeveloped; these essays may paraphrase or summarize rather than analyze. The treatment is likely to be meager and unconvincing. Generally, the writing demonstrates weak control of such elements as diction, organization, syntax, or grammar. These essays typically contain recurrent stylistic flaws and lack persuasive evidence from the text. Any essay that does not address the prompt can receive no higher than a 4.

**1-2** (30-40) These essays compound the weaknesses of the papers in the 3-4 range. They seriously misread the passage or fail to respond to the question. Frequently, they are unacceptably brief. Often poorly written on several counts, these essays may contain many distracting errors in grammar and mechanics. Although some attempt may have been made to answer the question, the writer's views typically are presented with little clarity, organization, coherence, or supporting evidence.

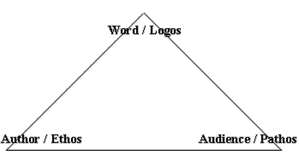
### AP English Language & Composition—What you must know to survive and succeed!

[insert printed copy]

### The Rhetorical Triangle

**Rhetoric**: Our textbook defines rhetoric as "the study and the art of using language effectively." It goes on to elaborate on the modern negative connotations of the term. However, the study of rhetoric is an essential component of many college-level composition courses. Rhetoric encompasses the art of analyzing the language choices authors and speakers (rhetors) use to create meaningful and persuasive texts, texts worth reading or hearing. Furthermore, rhetoric encompasses using those techniques to create meaningful texts. Simply stated, rhetoric makes persuasion possible.

**The Rhetorical Transaction**: According to Aristotle, the rhetorical transaction consists of three basic components: ***logos***- representing the author's ability to reveal logic and reason in the text; ***ethos*** - representing the author's ability to reveal his or her credibility in the text, and ***pathos*** - representing the author's ability to appeal to the audience through the text. These components are suggested by the rhetorical triangle or Aristotelian triad:



**The Reader's Rhetorical Triangle**

**Logos**

* Note the claims the author makes, the exigence.
* Note the data the author provides in support of the claims.
* Note the conclusions the author draws.

**Ethos**

* Note how the author establishes a persona
* Note how the author establishes credibility
* Note any revelation of the author's credentials or personal history

**Pathos**

* Note the primary audience for the text
* Note the emotional appeals the author makes
* Note the author's expectations of the audience

**When reading nonfiction, note the language the author uses to appeal to logos, ethos, and pathos.**

**The Writer's Rhetorical Triangle**

**Logos**

* Have I established the purpose for my text, and have I utilized the most effective genre?
* Have I established a clear, reasonable, and logical progression of my ideas?
* Have I addressed opposing arguments or perspectives?

**Ethos**

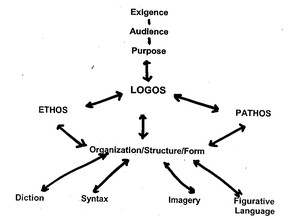
* Have I established the appropriate persona?
* Have I established my credibility?
* Have I expressed my knowledge and expertise of the topic?

**Pathos**

* Have I considered the primary audience, the background they have?
* Does my audience agree with me or will I have to persuade them of the validity of my argument?
* How will I make my text appeal to my audience?

**When crafting nonfiction, carefully consider the language choices you will use to appeal to logos, ethos, and pathos.**

**Here is the expanded triangle representing the aspects of the rhetorical transaction:**



Adapted from <http://ecr.lausd.k12.ca.us/staff/jfirestein/The%20Rhetorical%20Triangle.pdf>

**Adapted from** http://mrgunnar.net/ap.cfm?subpage=349041

### Peer and/or Proofreading Response

These questions guide group members as they discuss your draft. If group members do not perceive the meaning and purpose of your draft according to your intentions, then you will want to make revisions that will improve the text's rhetorical effectiveness. Using these questions to address your peers' drafts, will eventually lead to methodical proofreading of your own drafts.

1.     **Assignment/Topic:** Does the draft fulfill the requirements of the assignment? How might the writer better fulfill them?

2.     **Title and Introduction:** Is the title appropriate for the text? Does the introduction gain the reader's interest, establish common ground, and establish the writer's ethos? How specifically does it do so?

3.     **Thesis and Purpose:** Paraphrase the thesis as a promise: "In this essay, the author will . . . ." Does the draft fulfill that promise? Is the writer's purpose clear?

4.     **Audience:** Who seems to be the audience? How does the draft appeal to that audience? What does the writer expect from her or his audience? Are these appropriate to the assignment?

5.     **Persona:**Does the author successfully create an identifiable persona? Is the persona suitable for the text? Mark specific places where the writer's voice vividly emerges.

6.     **Rhetorical Stance:** Does the writer reveal an apparent stand on issues involved with this topic? What words or phrases in the draft indicate the values the writer holds with regard to this topic? How does the writer connect his or her cause to the interests of the audience?

7.     **Supporting Points:**Which point is the writer's strongest? Which points are of most interest to you? List the points in order of strength. Which of them require further elaboration? Which points require more evidence, examples, or details? Are any of the supporting points irrelevant or insignificant?

8.     **Paragraphs*:***Are the paragraphs clear and fully developed? Are transitions between sentences effective, providing cohesion?

9.   **Organization:**Is the form the most appropriate for the topic? Is the organization suitable and effective for the genre? Consider or discuss possible alternatives. Does the author place his or her points in the most effective and logical order (usually the strongest last)? Are the transitions between paragraphs effective?

10.   **Sentence Structure**: Has the writer incorporated a variety of sentence structures including the appropriate use of subordination and coordination? Does the writer employ loose and periodic sentences effectively? Does the writer achieve appropriate emphasis through diction and sentence structure? If the writer deviates from conventional structures, is the deviation rhetorically effective?

11.   **Style and Linguistic Choices:** Does the writer use the most appropriate style for the topic? Should it be formal or informal? Does the author employ a wide-ranging vocabulary, using more complex Latinate and simpler Anglo-Saxon words when appropriate for rhetorical effect? Does the writer primarily use active verbs? If the writer uses passive verbs for rhetorical effect, does he or she use them properly? Does the writer successfully utilize schemes and tropes to develop images and meaning? Are these choices purposeful rather than merely ornamental?

12.   **Tone:**What dominant impression does the draft create--serious, humorous, satirical, persuasive, argumentative, objective? Is the tone appropriate to the topic, persona, and audience? Is it consistent? Is this the tone the writer intended to convey?

13.   **Conclusion:**Is the conclusion powerful and memorable? Does it simply restate the introduction? How else might this draft end?

14.   **Overall:**What are the main strengths and weaknesses of this draft? As a reader, how have you been impacted by reading this paper? Are there things you want to know more about? Is this paper meaningful and purposeful? As a member of the audience, has this draft fulfilled the author's expectations?

### AP English Language and Composition Analysis Rubric Checklist

Directions: Place a check if the essay displays these qualities. These will help you provide the paper you are evaluating with a final score.

High-Range Essay (9-8)

\_\_\_\_ Indicates complete understanding of the prompt.

\_\_\_\_ Reveals full understanding of the ideas being developed in the piece.

\_\_\_\_ Addresses and/or analyzes the piece in depth; fully fleshes out the meaning.

\_\_\_\_ Identifies and fully analyzes rhetorical techniques, as appropriate, such as figurative language (tropes), diction, syntax (schemes), point of view, tone, imagery and style.

\_\_\_\_ Cites specific references to the passage.

\_\_\_\_ Does not generalize but cites specific evidence and develops that evidence fully and comprehensively; follows through; fully addresses “So what?” question.

\_\_\_\_ Is clear, well-organized, and coherent.

\_\_\_\_ Reflects the ability to manipulate language (stylistic maturity) at an advanced level.

\_\_\_\_ Contains very few errors or flaws, if any.

Tip: Rarely, a 7 essay can make a jump into the high range because of its more mature style and perception.

Middle-Range Essay (7-6-5)

–––– Refers accurately and completely to the prompt.

\_\_\_\_ Demonstrates some or considerable understanding of the complexity of the concepts being developed in the piece. Accurately fleshes out the meaning.

\_\_\_\_ Refers accurately to the rhetorical devices the writer uses, if appropriate.

\_\_\_\_ Transcends simple identification by analyzing their use in the development of meaning.

\_\_\_\_ Provides a less thorough analysis/less clarity and precision of thesis than a higher-rated paper; 5 papers may digress from the topic.

\_\_\_\_ Provides a sufficient body of evidence to be convincing; follows through.

\_\_\_\_ Is less adept at linking techniques to the purpose of the passage.

\_\_\_\_ Demonstrates writing that is adequate in conveying the author’s intent.

\_\_\_\_ May cite stylistic techniques without sufficiently supporting how they work in developing evidence.

\_\_\_\_ May not be aware of underlying implications. Doesn’t fully address the “So what?” question

\_\_\_\_ Contains only minor errors or flaws

Tips: The 7 paper demonstrates a more consistent command of college-level writing than does the 5 or 6 paper. A 5 paper does the minimum required by the prompt. It relies on generalizations and sketchy analysis. It is often sidetracked by summary, and the references may be limited or simplistic. It often loses focus and digresses from the topic.

Low-Range Essay (4-3-2-1)

\_\_\_\_ Does not respond adequately to the prompt.

\_\_\_\_ Demonstrates insufficient and/or inaccurate understanding of the passage.

\_\_\_\_ Does not weave in rhetorical devices, if appropriate. May only identify them instead of explaining their contribution to the meaning of the text.

\_\_\_\_ Fails to demonstrate an understanding of the passage, providing lack of discussion, evidence or support.

\_\_\_\_ Demonstrates weak control of the elements of diction, syntax, and organization.

\_\_\_\_ Is riddled with mechanical/grammatical/spelling errors

Tips: A 4 or 3 essay may do no more than paraphrase sections of the passage rather than analyze the passage. A 2 essay may merely summarize the passage. (No matter how well written, a summary can never earn more than a 2.) A 1-2 essay indicates a major lack of understanding and control. It fails to comprehend the prompt and/or the passage. It may also indicate severe writing problems

### The Synthesis Prompt

In most college courses that require substantial writing, you are called upon to write **researched arguments** in which you take a stand on a topic or an issue and then **enter into conversation** with what has already been written on it.  
  
The AP synthesis question provides you with a number of relatively brief sources on a topic--texts of no longer than one page, plus at least one source that is a graphic, a visual, a picture, or a cartoon. The prompt will call upon you to write a composition that develops a position on the issue and that synthesizes and incorporates perspectives from at least three of the provided sources. You may draw upon whatever you know about the issue as well, but you must make use of at least three of the provided sources to earn an upper-half score.  
  
What moves should a writer make to accomplish this task? Essentially, there are six: **read, analyze, generalize, converse, finesse**, and **argue**.  
  
**Read Closely, Then Analyze**  
**First**, you must read the sources carefully. There will be an extra 15 minutes of time allotted to the free-response section to do so. You will be permitted to read and write on the cover sheet to the synthesis question, which will contain some introductory material, the prompt itself, and a list of the sources. You will also be permitted to read and annotate the sources themselves. You will not be permitted to open your test booklet and actually begin writing the composition until after the 15 minutes has elapsed.  
  
**Second**, you must analyze the argument each source is making: What **claim** is the source making about the issue? What **data** or **evidence** does the source offer in support of that claim? What are the **assumptions** or **beliefs**(explicit or unspoken) that **warrant** using this evidence or data to support the claim? Note that you will need to learn how to perform such analyses of nontextual sources: graphs, charts, pictures, cartoons, and so on.  
  
**After Analysis: Finding and Establishing a Position**  
**Third**, you need to generalize about your own potential stands on the issue. You should ask, "What are two or three (or more) possible positions on this issue that I **could** take? Which of those positions do I really **want** to take? Why?" It's vital at this point for you to keep an open mind. A stronger, more mature, more persuasive essay will result if you resist the temptation to oversimplify the issue, to hone in immediately on an obvious thesis. All of the synthesis essay prompts will be based on issues that invite careful, critical thinking. The best responses will be those in which the thesis and development suggest clearly that the writer has given some thought to the nuances, the complexities of the assigned topic.  
  
**Fourth** – and this is the most challenging move – you need to imagine presenting **each** of your best positions on the issue to **each** of the authors of the provided sources. Role-playing the author or creator of each source, you need to create an imaginary conversation between yourself and the author/creator of the source. Would the author/creator agree with your position? Why? Disagree? Why? Want to qualify it in some way? Why and how?  
  
**Fifth**, on the basis of this imagined conversation, you need to finesse, to refine, the point that you would like to make about the issue so that it can serve as a central proposition, a thesis – as complicated and robust as the topic demands –  for your composition. This proposition or thesis should probably appear relatively quickly in the composition, after a sentence or two that contextualizes the topic or issue for the reader.  
  
**Sixth**, you need to argue your position. You must develop the case for the position by incorporating within your own thinking the conversations you have had with the authors/creators of the primary sources. You should feel free to say things like, "Source A takes a position similar to mine," or "Source C would oppose my position, but here's why I still maintain its validity," or "Source E offers a slightly different perspective, one that I would alter a bit."  
  
**A Skill for College**  
In short, on the synthesis question the successful writer is going to be able to show readers how he or she has thought through the topic at hand by considering the sources critically and creating a composition that draws conversations with the sources into his or her own thinking. It will be a task that the college-bound student should willingly pursue.

  From: Jolliffe, David.“Preparing for the 2007 Synthesis Question: Six Moves Toward Success.”  College Board: AP Central 28 November 2006

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| --- |
| From: <http://www3.baylor.edu/~Jesse_Airaudi/nothingwords.html>HOW TO SAY NOTHING IN FIVE HUNDRED WORDS Paul McHenry Roberts (1917-1967) taught college English for over twenty years, first at San Jose State College and later at Cornell University. He wrote numerous books on linguistics, including *Understanding Grammar* (1954), *Patterns of English* (1956), and *Understanding English* (1958).  *Freshman composition, like everything else, has its share of fashions. In the 195Os, when this article was written, the most popular argument raging among student essayists was the proposed abolition of college football. With the greater social consciousness of the early '60s, the topic of the day became the morality of capital punishment. Topics may change, but the core principles of good writing remain constant and this essay as become something of a minor classic in explaining them. Be concrete, says Roberts; get to the point; express your opinions colorfully. Refreshingly, he even practices what he preaches. His essay is humorous, direct, and almost salty in summarizing the working habits that all good prose writers must cultivate*. -- *Editors' note from JoRay McCuen & Anthony C. Winkler's Readings for Writers , 3rd ed., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980*    It's Friday afternoon, and you have almost survived another week of classes. You are just looking forward dreamily to the weekend when the English instructor says: "For Monday you will turn in a five hundred-word composition on college football."  Well, that puts a good hole in the weekend. You don't have any strong views on college football one way or the other. You get rather excited during the season and go to all the home games and find it rather more fun than not. On the other hand, the class has been reading Robert Hutchins in the anthology and perhaps Shaw's "Eighty-Yard Run," and from the class discussion you have got the idea that the instructor thinks college football is for the birds. You are no fool. You can figure out what side to take.  After dinner you get out the portable typewriter that you got for high school graduation. You might as well get it over with and enjoy Saturday and Sunday. Five hundred words is about two double-spaced pages with normal margins. You put in a sheet of paper, think up a title, and you're off:    **WHY COLLEGE FOOTBALL SHOULD BE ABOLISHED**  College football should be abolished because it's bad for the school and also for the players. The players are so busy practicing that they don't have any time for their studies.  This, you feel, is a mighty good start. The only trouble is that it's only thirty-two words. You still have four hundred and sixty-eight to go, and you've pretty well exhausted the subject. It comes to you that you do your best thinking in the morning, so you put away the typewriter and go to the movies. But the next morning you have to do your washing and some math problems, and in the afternoon you go to the game. The English instructor turns up too, and you wonder if you've taken the right side after all. Saturday night you have a date, and Sunday morning you have to go to church. (You can't let English assignments interfere with your religion.) What with one thing and another, it's ten o'clock Sunday night before you get out the typewriter again. You make a pot of coffee and start to fill out your views on college football. Put a little meat on the bones.  **WHY COLLEGE FOOTBALL SHOULD BE ABOLISHED**  In my opinion, it seems to me that college football should be abolished. The reason why I think this to be true is because I feel that football is bad for the colleges in nearly every respect. As Robert Hutchins says in his article in our anthology in which he discusses college football, it would be better if the colleges had race horses and had races with one another, because then the horses would not have to attend classes. I firmly agree with Mr. Hutchins on this point, and I am sure that many other students would agree too.  One reason why it seems to me that college football is bad is that it has become too commercial. In the olden times when people played football just for the fun of it, maybe college football was all right, but they do not play college football just for the fun of it now as they used to in the old days. Nowadays college football is what you might call a big business. Maybe this is not true at all schools, and I don't think it is especially true here at State, but certainly this is the case at most colleges and universities in America nowadays, as Mr. Hutchins points out in his very interesting article. Actually the coaches and alumni go around to the high schools and offer the high school stars large salaries to come to their colleges and play football for them. There was one case where a high school star was offered a convertible if he would play football for a certain college.  Another reason for abolishing college football is that it is bad for the players. They do not have time to get a college education, because they are so busy playing football. A football player has to practice every afternoon from three to six and then he is so tired that he can't concentrate on his studies. He just feels like dropping off to sleep after dinner, and then the next day he goes to his classes without having studied and maybe he fails the test.  (Good ripe stuff so far, but you're still a hundred and fifty-one words from home. One more push.)  Also I think college football is bad for the colleges and the universities because not very many students get to participate in it. Out of a college of ten thousand students only seventy-five or a hundred play football, if that many. Football is what you might call a spectator sport. That means that most people go to watch it but do not play it themselves.  (Four hundred and fifteen. Well, you still have the conclusion, and when you retype it, you can make the margins a little wider.)  These are the reasons why I agree with Mr. Hutchins that college football should be abolished in American colleges and universities.  On Monday you turn it in, moderately hopeful, and on Friday it comes back marked "weak in content" and sporting a big "D." This essay is exaggerated a little, not much. The English instructor will recognize it as reasonably typical of what an assignment on college football will bring in. He knows that nearly half of the class will contrive in five hundred words to say that college football is too commercial and bad for the players. Most of the other half will inform him that college football builds character and prepares one for life and brings prestige to the school. As he reads paper after paper all saying the same thing in almost the same words, all bloodless, five hundred words dripping out of nothing, he wonders how he allowed himself to get trapped into teaching English when he might have had a happy and interesting life as an electrician or a confidence man.  Well, you may ask, what can you do about it? The subject is one on which you have few convictions and little information. Can you be expected to make a dull subject interesting? As a matter of fact, this is precisely what you are expected to do. This is the writer's essential task. All subjects, except sex, are dull until somebody makes them interesting. The writer's job is to find the argument, the approach, the angle, the wording that will take the reader with him. This is seldom easy, and it is particularly hard in subjects that have been much discussed: College Football, Fraternities, Popular Music, Is Chivalry Dead?, and the like. You will feel that there is nothing you can do with such subjects except repeat the old bromides. But there are some things you can do which will make your papers, if not throbbingly alive, at least less insufferably tedious than they might otherwise be.  **AVOID THE OBVIOUS CONTENT**  Say the assignment is college football. Say that you've decided to be against it. Begin by putting down the arguments that come to your mind: it is too commercial, it takes the students' minds off their studies, it is hard on the players, it makes the university a kind of circus instead of an intellectual center,for most schools it is financially ruinous. Can you think of any more arguments, just off hand? All right. Now when you write your paper, make sure that youdon' t use any of the material on this list. If these are the points that leap to your mind, they will leap to everyone else's too, and whether you get a "C" or a "D" may depend on whether the instructor reads your paper early when he is fresh and tolerant or late, when the sentence "In my opinion, college football has become too commercial," inexorably repeated, has bought him to the brink of lunacy.  Be against college football for some reason or reasons of your own. If they are keen and perceptive ones, that's splendid. But even if they are trivial or foolish or indefensible, you are still ahead so long as they are not everybody else's reasons too. Be against it because the colleges don't spend enough money on it to make it worthwhile, because it is bad for the characters of the spectators, because the players are forced to attend classes, because the football stars hog all the beautiful women, because it competes with baseball and is therefore un-American and possibly Communist-inspired. There are lots of more or less unused reasons for being against college football.  Sometimes it is a good idea to sum up and dispose of the trite and conventional points before going on to your own. This has the advantage of indicating to the reader that you are going to be neither trite nor conventional. Something like this:  We are often told that college football should be abolished because it has become too commercial or because it is bad for the players. These arguments are no doubt very cogent, but they don't really go to the heart of the matter.  Then you go to the heart of the matter.  **TAKE THE LESS USUAL SIDE**  One rather simple way of getting into your paper is to take the side of the argument that most of the citizens will want to avoid. If the assignment is an essay on dogs, you can, if you choose, explain that dogs are faithful and lovable companions, intelligent, useful as guardians of the house and protectors of children, indispensable in police work -- in short, when all is said and done, man's best friends. Or you can suggest that those big brown eyes conceal, more often than not, a vacuity of mind and an inconstancy of purpose; that the dogs you have known most intimately have been mangy, ill-tempered brutes, incapable of instruction; and that only your nobility of mind and fear of arrest prevent you from kicking the flea-ridden animals when you pass them on the street.  Naturally personal convictions will sometimes dictate your approach. If the assigned subject is "Is Methodism Rewarding to the Individual?" and you are a pious Methodist, you have really no choice. But few assigned subjects, if any, will fall in this category. Most of them will lie in broad areas of discussion with much to be said on both sides. They are intellectual exercises, and it is legitimate to argue now one way and now another, as debaters do in similar circumstances. Always take the that looks to you hardest, least defensible. It will almost always turn out to be easier to write interestingly on that side.  This general advice applies where you have a choice of subjects. If you are to choose among "The Value of Fraternities" and "My Favorite High School Teacher" and "What I Think About Beetles," by all means plump for the beetles. By the time the instructor gets to your paper, he will be up to his ears in tedious tales about a French teacher at Bloombury High and assertions about how fraternities build character and prepare one for life. Your views on beetles, whatever they are, are bound to be a refreshing change.  Don't worry too much about figuring out what the instructor thinks about the subject so that you can cuddle up with him. Chances are his views are no stronger than yours. If he does have convictions and you oppose him, his problem is to keep from grading you higher than you deserve in order to show he is not biased. This doesn't mean that you should always cantankerously dissent from what the instructor says; that gets tiresome too. And if the subject assigned is "My Pet Peeve," do not begin, "My pet peeve is the English instructor who assigns papers on 'my pet peeve."' This was still funny during the War of 1812, but it has sort of lost its edge since then. It is in general good manners to avoid personalities.  **SLIP OUT OF ABSTRACTION**  If you will study the essay on college football [near the beginning of this essay], you will perceive that one reason for its appalling dullness is that it never gets down to particulars. It is just a series of not very glittering generalities: "football is bad for the colleges," "it has become too commercial," "football is big business," "it is bad for the players," and so on. Such round phrases thudding against the reader's brain are unlikely to convince him, though they may well render him unconscious.  If you want the reader to believe that college football is bad for the players, you have to do more than say so. You have to display the evil. Take your roommate, Alfred Simkins, the second-string center. Picture poor old Alfy coming home from football practice every evening, bruised and aching, agonizingly tired, scarcely able to shovel the mashed potatoes into his mouth. Let us see him staggering up to the room, getting out his econ textbook, peering desperately at it with his good eye, falling asleep and failing the test in the morning. Let us share his unbearable tension as Saturday draws near. Will he fail, be demoted, lose his monthly allowance, be forced to return to the coal mines? And if he succeeds, what will be his reward? Perhaps a slight ripple of applause when the third-string center replaces him, a moment of elation in the locker room if the team wins, of despair if it loses. What will he look back on when he graduates from college? Toil and torn ligaments. And what will be his future? He is not good enough for pro football, and he is too obscure and weak in econ to succeed in stocks and bonds. College football is tearing the heart from Alfy Simkins and, when it finishes with him, will callously toss aside the shattered hulk.  This is no doubt a weak enough argument for the abolition of college football, but it is a sight better than saying, in three or four variations, that college football (in your opinion) is bad for the players.  Look at the work of any professional writer and notice how constantly he is moving from the generality, the abstract statement, to the concrete example, the facts and figures, the illustrations. If he is writing on juvenile delinquency, he does not just tell you that juveniles are (it seems to him) delinquent and that (in his opinion) something should be done about it. He shows you juveniles being delinquent, tearing up movie theatres in Buffalo, stabbing high school principals in Dallas, smoking marijuana in Palo Alto. And more than likely he is moving toward some specific remedy, not just a general wringing of the hands.  It is no doubt possible to be too concrete, too illustrative or anecdotal, but few inexperienced writers err this way. For most the soundest advice is to be seeking always for the picture, to be always turning general remarks into seeable examples. Don't say, "Sororities teach girls the social graces." Say, "Sorority life teaches a girl how to carry on a conversation while pouring tea, without sloshing the tea into the saucer." Don't say, "I like certain kinds of popular music very much." Say, "Whenever I hear Gerber Sprinklittle play 'Mississippi Man' on the trombone, my socks creep up my ankles."  **GET RID OF OBVIOUS PADDING**  The student toiling away at his weekly English theme is too often tormented by a figure: five hundred words. How, he asks himself, is he to achieve this staggering total? Obviously by never using one word when he can somehow work in ten.  He is therefore seldom content with a plain statement like "Fast driving is dangerous." This has only four words in it. He takes thought, and the sentence becomes:  In my opinion, fast driving is dangerous.  Better, but he can do better still:  In my opinion, fast driving would seem to be rather dangerous.  If he is really adept, it may come out:  In my humble opinion. though I do not claim to be an expert on this complicated subject, test driving, in most circumstances, would seem to be rather dangerous in many respects, or at least so it would seem to me.         Thus four words have been turned into forty, and not an iota of content has been added.         Now this is a way to go about reaching five hundred words, and if you are content with a "D" grade, it is as good a way as any. But if you aim higher, you must work differently. Instead of stuffing your sentences with straw, you must try steadily to get rid of the padding, to make your sentences lean and tough. If you are really working at it, your first draft will greatly exceed the required total, and then you will work it down, thus:  It is thought in some quarters that fraternities do not contribute as much as might be expected to campus life.  Some people think that fraternities contribute little to campus life.  The average doctor who practices in small towns or in the country must toil night  and day to heal the sick.  Most country doctors work long hours.  When I was a little girl, I suffered from shyness and embarrassment in the presence of  others.  I was a shy little girl.  It is absolutely necessary for the person employed as a marine fireman to give the  matter of steam pressure  his undivided attention at all times.  The fireman has to keep his eye on the steam gauge.  You may ask how you can arrive at five hundred words at this rate. Simple. You dig up more real content. Instead of taking a couple of obvious points off the surface of the topic and then circling warily around them for six paragraphs, you work in and explore, figure out the details. You illustrate. You say that fast driving is dangerous, and then you prove it. How long does it take to stop a car at forty and at eighty? How far can you see at night? What happens when a tire blows? What happens in a head-on collision at fifty miles an hour? Pretty soon your paper will be full of broken glass and blood and headless torsos, and reaching five hundred words will not really be a problem.  **CALL A FOOL A FOOL**  Some of the padding in freshman themes is to be blamed not on anxiety about the word minimum but on excessive timidity. The student writes, "In my opinion, the principal of my high school acted in ways that I believe every unbiased person would have to call foolish." This isn't exactly what he means. What he means is, "My high school principal was a fool." If he was a fool, call him a fool. Hedging the thing about with "in-my-opinion's" and "it-seems-to-me's" and "as-I-see-it's" and "at-least-from-my-point-of-view's" gains you nothing. Delete these phrases whenever they creep into your paper.  The student's tendency to hedge stems from a modesty that in other circumstances would be commendable. He is, he realizes, young and inexperienced, and he half suspects that he is dopey and fuzzyminded beyond the average. Probably only too true. But it doesn't help to announce your incompetence six times in every paragraph. Decide what you want to say and say it as vigorously as possible, without apology and in plain words.  Linguistic diffidence can take various forms. One is what we call euphemism. This is the tendency to call a spade "a certain garden implement" or women's underwear "unmentionables." It is stronger in some eras than others and in some people than others but it always operates more or less in subjects that are touchy or taboo: death, sex, madness, and so on. Thus we shrink from saying "He died last night" but say instead "passed away," "left us," "joined his Maker," "went to his reward." Or we try to take off the tension with a lighter clich?"kicked the bucket," "cashed in his chips," "handed in his dinner pail." We have found all sorts of ways to avoid saying mad: "mentally ill," "touched," "not quite right upstairs," "feebleminded," "innocent," "simple," "off his trolley," "not in his right mind." Even such a now plain word as insane began as a euphemism with the meaning "not healthy."  Modern science, particularly psychology, contributes many polysyllables in which we can wrap our thoughts and blunt their force. To many writers there is no such thing as a bad schoolboy. Schoolboys are maladjusted or unoriented or misunderstood or in the need of guidance or lacking in continued success toward satisfactory integration of the personality as a social unit, but they are never bad. Psychology no doubt makes us better men and women, more sympathetic and tolerant, but it doesn't make writing any easier. Had Shakespeare been confronted with psychology, "To be or not to be" might have come out, "To continue as a social unit or not to do so. That is the personality problem. Whether 'tis a better sign of integration at the conscious level to display a psychic tolerance toward the maladjustments and repressions induced by one's lack of orientation in one's environment or -- " But Hamlet would never have finished the soliloquy.  Writing in the modern world, you cannot altogether avoid modern jargon. Nor, in an effort to get away from euphemism, should you salt your paper with four-letter words. But you can do much if you will mount guard against those roundabout phrases, those echoing polysyllables that tend to slip into your writing to rob it of its crispness and force.  **BEWARE OF PAT EXPRESSIONS**  Other things being equal, avoid phrases like "other things being equal." Those sentences that come to you whole, or in two or three doughy lumps, are sure to be bad sentences. They are no creation of yours but pieces of common thought floating in the community soup.  Pat expressions are hard, often impossible, to avoid, because they come too easily to be noticed and seem too necessary to be dispensed with. No writer avoids them altogether, but good writers avoid them more often than poor writers.  By "pat expressions" we mean such tags as "to all practical intents and purposes," "the pure and simple truth," "from where I sit," "the time of his life," "to the ends of the earth," "in the twinkling of an eye," "as sure as you're born," "over my dead body," "under cover of darkness," "took the easy way out," "when all is said and done," "told him time and time again," "parted the best of friends," "stand up and be counted," "gave him the best years of her life," "worked her fingers to the bone." Like other clich? these expressions were once forceful. Now we should use them only when we can't possibly think of anything else.  Some pat expressions stand like a wall between the writer and thought. Such a one is "the American way of life." Many student writers feel that when they have said that something accords with the American way of life or does not they have exhausted the subject. Actually, they have stopped at the highest level of abstraction. The American way of life is the complicated set of bonds between a hundred and eighty million ways. All of us know this when we think about it, but the tag phrase too often keeps us from thinking about it.  So with many another phrase dear to the politician: "this great land of ours," "the man in the street," "our national heritage." These may prove our patriotism or give a clue to our political beliefs, but otherwise they add nothing to the paper except words.  **COLORFUL WORDS**  The writer builds with words, and no builder uses a raw material more slippery and elusive and treacherous. A writer's work is a constant struggle to get the right word in the right place, to find that particular word that will convey his meaning exactly, that will persuade the reader or soothe him or startle or amuse him. He never succeeds altogether -- sometimes he feels that he scarcely succeeds at all -- but such successes as he has are what make the thing worth doing.  There is no book of rules for this game. One progresses through everlasting experiment on the basis of ever-widening experience. There are few useful generalizations that one can make about words as words, but there are perhaps a few.  Some words are what we call "colorful." By this we mean that they are calculated to produce a picture or induce an emotion. They are dressy instead of plain, specific instead of general, loud instead of soft. Thus, in place of "Her heart beat," we may write, "her heart pounded, throbbed, fluttered, danced." Instead of "He sat in his chair," we may say, "he ***lounged, sprawled, coiled***." Instead of "It was hot," we may say, "It was ***blistering, sultry, muggy, suffocating, steamy, wilting***."  However, it should not be supposed that the fancy word is always better. Often it is as well to write "Her heart beat" or "It was hot" if that is all it did or all it was. Ages differ in how they like their prose. The nineteenth century liked it rich and smoky. The twentieth has usually preferred it lean and cool. The twentieth century writer, like all writers, is forever seeking the exact word, but he is wary of sounding feverish. He tends to pitch it low, to understate it, to throw it away. He knows that if he gets too colorful, the audience is likely to giggle.  See how this strikes you: "As the rich, golden glow of the sunset died away along the eternal western hills, Angela's limpid blue eyes looked softly and trustingly into Montague's flashing brown ones, and her heart pounded like a drum in time with the joyous song surging in her soul." Some people like that sort of thing, but most modern readers would say, "Good grief," and turn on the television.  **COLORED WORDS**  Some words we would call not so much colorful as colored -- that is, loaded with associations, good or bad. All words -- except perhaps structure words -- have associations of some sort. We have said that the meaning of a word is the sum of the contexts in which it occurs. When we hear a word, we hear with it an echo of all the situations in which we have heard it before.  In some words, these echoes are obvious and discussible. The word ***mother***, for example, has, for most people, agreeable associations. When you hear ***mother***you probably think of home, safety, love, food, and various other pleasant things. If one writes, "She was like a mother to me," he gets an effect which he would not get in "She was like an aunt to me." The advertiser makes use of the associations of ***mother***by working it in when he talks about his product. The politician works it in when he talks about himself.  So also with such words as ***home, liberty, fireside, contentment, patriot, tenderness, sacrifice, childlike, manly, bluff, limpid***. All of these words are loaded with associations that would be rather hard to indicate in a straightforward definition. There is more than a literal difference between "They sat around the fireside" and "They sat around the stove." They might have been equally warm and happy around the stove, but ***fireside*** suggests leisure, grace, quiet tradition, congenial company, and ***stove*** does not.  Conversely, some words have bad associations. ***Mother*** suggests pleasant things, but ***mother-in-law*** does not. Many mothers-in-law are heroically lovable and some mothers drink gin all day and beat their children insensible, but these facts of life are beside the point. The point is that ***mother***sounds good and ***mother-in-law*** does not.  Or consider the word ***intellectual***. This would seem to be a complimentary term, but in point of fact it is not, for it has picked up associations of impracticality and ineffectuality and general dopiness. So also such words as ***liberal, reactionary, Communist, socialist, capitalist, radical, schoolteacher, truck driver; operator, salesman, huckster, speculator***. These convey meaning on the literal level, but beyond that -- sometimes, in some places -- they convey contempt on the part of the speaker.  The question of whether to use loaded words or not depends on what is being written. The scientist, the scholar, try to avoid them; for the poet, the advertising writer, the public speaker, they are standard equipment. But every writer should take care that they do not substitute for thought. If you write, "Anyone who thinks that is nothing but a Socialist (or Communist or capitalist)" you have said nothing except that you don't like people who think that, and such remarks are effective only with the most naive readers. It is always a bad mistake to think your readers more naive than they really are.  **COLORLESS WORDS**  But probably most student writers come to grief not with words that are colorful or those that are colored but with those that have no color at all. A pet example is ***nice***, a word we would find it hard to dispense with in casual conversation but which is no longer capable of adding much to a description. Colorless words are those of such general meaning that in a particular sentence they mean nothing. Slang adjectives like cool ("That's real cool") tend to explode all over the language. They are applied to everything, lose their original force, and quickly die.  Beware also of nouns of very general meaning, like ***circumstances, cases, instances, aspects, factors, relationships, attitudes, eventualities***, etc. In most circumstances you will find that those cases of writing which contain too many instances of words like these will in this and other aspects have factors leading to unsatisfactory relationships with the reader resulting in unfavorable attitudes on his part and perhaps other eventualities, like a grade of "D." Notice also what etc. means. It means "I'd like to make this list longer, but I can't think of any more examples." |

### [Joy by Zadie Smith Link Arrow](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/jan/10/joy/?pagination=false)

It might be useful to distinguish between pleasure and joy. But maybe everybody does this very easily, all the time, and only I am confused. A lot of people seem to feel that joy is only the most intense version of pleasure, arrived at by the same road—you simply have to go a little further down the track. That has not been my experience. And if you asked me if I wanted more joyful experiences in my life, I wouldn’t be at all sure I did, exactly because it proves such a difficult emotion to manage. It’s not at all obvious to me how we should make an accommodation between joy and the rest of our everyday lives.

Perhaps the first thing to say is that I experience at least a little pleasure every day. I wonder if this is more than the usual amount? It was the same even in childhood when most people are miserable. I don’t think this is because so many wonderful things happen to me but rather that the small things go a long way. I seem to get more than the ordinary satisfaction out of food, for example—any old food. An egg sandwich from one of these grimy food vans on Washington Square has the genuine power to turn my day around. Whatever is put in front of me, foodwise, will usually get a five-star review.

You’d think that people would like to cook for, or eat with, me—in fact I’m told it’s boring. Where there is no discernment there can be no awareness of expertise or gratitude for special effort. “Don’t say that was delicious,” my husband warns, “you say everything’s delicious.” “But it was delicious.” It drives him crazy. All day long I can look forward to a popsicle. The persistent anxiety that fills the rest of my life is calmed for as long as I have the flavor of something good in my mouth. And though it’s true that when the flavor is finished the anxiety returns, we do not have so many reliable sources of pleasure in this life as to turn our nose up at one that is so readily available, especially here in America. A pineapple popsicle. Even the great anxiety of writing can be stilled for the eight minutes it takes to eat a pineapple popsicle.

My other source of daily pleasure is—but I wish I had a better way of putting it—”other people’s faces.” A red-headed girl, with a marvelous large nose she probably hates, and green eyes and that sun-shy complexion composed more of freckles than skin. Or a heavyset grown man, smoking a cigarette in the rain, with a soggy mustache, above which, a surprise—the keen eyes, snub nose, and cherub mouth of his own eight-year-old self. Upon leaving the library at the end of the day I will walk a little more quickly to the apartment to tell my husband about an angular, cat-eyed teenager, in skinny jeans and stacked-heel boots, a perfectly ordinary gray sweatshirt, last night’s makeup, and a silky Pocahontas wig slightly askew over his own Afro. He was sashaying down the street, plaits flying, using the whole of Broadway as his personal catwalk. “Miss Thang, but off duty.” I add this for clarity, but my husband nods a little impatiently; there was no need for the addition. My husband is also a professional gawker.

The advice one finds in ladies’ magazines is usually to be feared, but there is something in that old chestnut: “shared interests.” It does help. I like to hear about the Chinese girl he saw in the hall, carrying a large medical textbook, so beautiful she looked like an illustration. Or the tall Kenyan in the elevator whose elongated physical elegance reduced every other nearby body to the shrunken, gnarly status of a troll. Usually I will not have seen these people—my husband works on the eighth floor of the library, I work on the fifth—but simply hearing them described can be almost as much a pleasure as encountering them myself. More pleasurable still is when we recreate the walks or gestures or voices of these strangers, or whole conversations—between two people in the queue for the ATM, or two students on a bench near the fountain.

And then there are all the many things that the dog does and says, entirely anthropomorphized and usually offensive, which express the universe of things we ourselves cannot do or say, to each other or to other people. “You’re being the dog,” our child said recently, surprising us. She is almost three and all our private languages are losing their privacy and becoming known to her. Of course, we knew she would eventually become fully conscious, and that before this happened we would have to give up arguing, smoking, eating meat, using the Internet, talking about other people’s faces, and voicing the dog, but now the time has come, she is fully aware, and we find ourselves unable to change. “Stop being the dog,” she said, “it’s very silly,” and for the first time in eight years we looked at the dog and were ashamed.

Occasionally the child, too, is a pleasure, though mostly she is a joy, which means in fact she gives us not much pleasure at all, but rather that strange admixture of terror, pain, and delight that I have come to recognize as joy, and now must find some way to live with daily. This is a new problem. Until quite recently I had known joy only five times in my life, perhaps six, and each time tried to forget it soon after it happened, out of the fear that the memory of it would dement and destroy everything else.

Let’s call it six. Three of those times I was in love, but only once was the love viable, or likely to bring me any pleasure in the long run. Twice I was on drugs—of quite different kinds. Once I was in water, once on a train, once sitting on a high wall, once on a high hill, once in a nightclub, and once in a hospital bed. It is hard to arrive at generalities in the face of such a small and varied collection of data. The uncertain item is the nightclub, and because it was essentially a communal experience I feel I can open the question out to the floor. I am addressing this to my fellow Britons in particular. Fellow Britons! Those of you, that is, who were fortunate enough to take the first generation of the amphetamine ecstasy and yet experience none of the adverse, occasionally lethal reactions we now know others suffered—yes, for you people I have a question. Was that joy?

I am especially interested to hear from anyone who happened to be in the Fabric club, near the old Smithfield meat market, on a night sometime in the year 1999 (I’m sorry I can’t be more specific) when the DJ mixed “Can I Kick It?” and then “Smells Like Teen Spirit” into the deep house track he had been seeming to play exclusively for the previous four hours. I myself was wandering out of the cavernous unisex (!) toilets wishing I could find my friend Sarah, or if not her, my friend Warren, or if not him, anyone who would take pity on a girl who had taken and was about to come up on ecstasy who had lost everyone and everything, including her handbag. I stumbled back into the fray.

Most of the men were topless, and most of the women, like me, wore strange aprons, fashionable at the time, that covered just the front of one’s torso, and only remained decent by means of a few weak-looking strings tied in dainty bows behind. I pushed through this crowd of sweaty bare backs, despairing, wondering where in a super club one might bed down for the night (the stairs? the fire exit?). But everything I tried to look at quickly shattered and arranged itself in a series of patterned fragments, as if I were living in a kaleidoscope. Where was I trying to get to anyway? There was no longer any “bar” or “chill-out zone”—there was only dance floor. All was dance floor. Everybody danced. I stood still, oppressed on all sides by dancing, quite sure I was about to go out of my mind.

Then suddenly I could hear Q-Tip—blessed Q-Tip!—not a synthesizer, not a vocoder, but Q-Tip, with his human voice, rapping over a human beat. And the top of my skull opened to let human Q-Tip in, and a rail-thin man with enormous eyes reached across a sea of bodies for my hand. He kept asking me the same thing over and over: You feeling it? I was. My ridiculous heels were killing me, I was terrified I might die, yet I felt simultaneously overwhelmed with delight that “Can I Kick It?” should happen to be playing at this precise moment in the history of the world, and was now morphing into “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” I took the man’s hand. The top of my head flew away. We danced and danced. We gave ourselves up to joy.

Years later, while listening to a song called “Weak Become Heroes” by the British artist The Streets I found this experience almost perfectly recreated in rhyme, and realized that just as most American children alive in 1969 saw the moon landings, nearly every Briton between sixteen and thirty in the 1990s met some version of the skinny pill head I came across that night in Fabric. The name The Streets gives him is “European Bob.” I suspect he is an archetypal figure of my generation. The character “Super Hans” in the British TV comedy Peep Show is another example of the breed, though it might be more accurate to say Super Hans is European Bob in “old” age (forty). I don’t remember the name of my particular pill head, but will call him “Smiley.” He was one of these strangers you met exclusively on dance floors, or else on a beach in Ibiza. They tended to have inexplicable nicknames, no home or family you could ever identify, a limitless capacity for drug-taking, and a universal feeling of goodwill toward all men and women, no matter their color, creed, or state of inebriation.

Their most endearing quality was their generosity. For the length of one night Smiley would do anything at all for you. Find you a cab, walk miles through the early morning streets looking for food, hold your hair as you threw up, and listen to you complain at great length about your parents and friends—agreeing with all your grievances—though every soul involved in these disputes was completely unknown to him. Contrary to your initial suspicions Smiley did not want to sleep with you, rob you, or con you in any way. It was simply intensely important to him that you had a good time, tonight, with him. “How you feeling?” was Smiley’s perennial question. “You feeling it yet? I’m feeling it. You feeling it yet?” And that you should feel it seemed almost more important to him than that he should.

Was that joy? Probably not. But it mimicked joy’s conditions pretty well. It included, in minor form, the great struggle that tends to precede joy, and the feeling—once one is “in” joy—that the experiencing subject has somehow “entered” the emotion, and disappeared. I “have” pleasure, it is a feeling I want to experience and own. A beach holiday is a pleasure. A new dress is a pleasure. But on that dance floor I was joy, or some small piece of joy, with all these other hundreds of people who were also a part of joy.

The Smileys, in their way, must have recognized the vital difference; it would explain their great concern with other people’s experience. For as long as that high lasted, they seemed to pass beyond their own egos. And it might really have been joy if the next morning didn’t always arrive. I don’t just mean the deathly headache, the blurred vision, and the stomach cramps. What really destroyed the possibility that this had been joy was the replaying in one’s mind of the actual events of the previous night, and the brutal recognition that every moment of sublimity—every conversation that had seemed to touch upon the meaning of life, every tune that had appeared a masterwork—had no substance whatsoever now, here, in the harsh light of the morning. The final indignity came when you dragged yourself finally from your bed and went into the living room. There, on your mother’s sofa—in the place of that jester spirit-animal savior person you thought you’d met last night—someone had left a crushingly boring skinny pill head, already smoking a joint, who wanted to borrow twenty quid for a cab.

It wasn’t all a waste of time though. At the neural level, such experiences gave you a clue about what joy not-under-the-influence would feel like. Helped you learn to recognize joy, when it arrived. I suppose a neuroscientist could explain in very clear terms why the moment after giving birth can feel ecstatic, or swimming in a Welsh mountain lake with somebody dear to you. Perhaps the same synapses that ecstasy falsely twanged are twanged authentically by fresh water, certain epidurals, and oxytocin. And if, while sitting on a high hill in the South of France, someone who has access to a phone comes dashing up the slope to inform you that two years of tension, tedious study, and academic anxiety have not been in vain—perhaps again these same synapses or whatever they are do their happy dance.

We certainly don’t need to be neuroscientists to know that wild romantic crushes—especially if they are fraught with danger—do something ecstatic to our brains, though like the pills that share the name, horror and disappointment are usually not far behind. When my wild crush came, we wandered around a museum for so long it closed without us noticing; stuck in the grounds we climbed a high wall and, finding it higher on its other side, considered our options: broken ankles or a long night sleeping on a stone lion. In the end a passerby helped us down, and things turned prosaic and, after a few months, fizzled out. What looked like love had just been teen spirit. But what a wonderful thing, to sit on a high wall, dizzy with joy, and think nothing of breaking your ankles.

Real love came much later. It lay at the end of a long and arduous road, and up to the very last moment I had been convinced it wouldn’t happen. I was so surprised by its arrival, so unprepared, that on the day it arrived I had already arranged for us to visit the Holocaust museum at Auschwitz. You were holding my feet on the train to the bus that would take us there. We were heading toward all that makes life intolerable, feeling the only thing that makes it worthwhile. That was joy. But it’s no good thinking about or discussing it. It has no place next to the furious argument about who cleaned the house or picked up the child. It is irrelevant when sitting peacefully, watching an old movie, or doing an impression of two old ladies in a shop, or as I eat a popsicle while you scowl at me, or when working on different floors of the library. It doesn’t fit with the everyday. The thing no one ever tells you about joy is that it has very little real pleasure in it. And yet if it hadn’t happened at all, at least once, how would we live?

A final thought: sometimes joy multiplies itself dangerously. Children are the infamous example. Isn’t it bad enough that the beloved, with whom you have experienced genuine joy, will eventually be lost to you? Why add to this nightmare the child, whose loss, if it ever happened, would mean nothing less than your total annihilation? It should be noted that an equally dangerous joy, for many people, is the dog or the cat, relationships with animals being in some sense intensified by guaranteed finitude. You hope to leave this world before your child. You are quite certain your dog will leave before you do. Joy is such a human madness.

The writer Julian Barnes, considering mourning, once said, “It hurts just as much as it is worth.” In fact, it was a friend of his who wrote the line in a letter of condolence, and Julian told it to my husband, who told it to me. For months afterward these words stuck with both of us, so clear and so brutal. It hurts just as much as it is worth. What an arrangement. Why would anyone accept such a crazy deal? Surely if we were sane and reasonable we would every time choose a pleasure over a joy, as animals themselves sensibly do. The end of a pleasure brings no great harm to anyone, after all, and can always be replaced with another of more or less equal worth.

http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html

### Notes On "Camp" by Susan Sontag

Published in 1964.

Many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described. One of these is the sensibility -- unmistakably modern, a variant of sophistication but hardly identical with it -- that goes by the cult name of "Camp."  
  
A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about; but there are special reasons why Camp, in particular, has never been discussed. It is not a natural mode of sensibility, if there be any such. Indeed the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric -- something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques. Apart from a lazy two-page sketch in Christopher Isherwood's novel *The World in the Evening* (1954), it has hardly broken into print. To talk about Camp is therefore to betray it. If the betrayal can be defended, it will be for the edification it provides, or the dignity of the conflict it resolves. For myself, I plead the goal of self-edification, and the goad of a sharp conflict in my own sensibility. I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it. That is why I want to talk about it, and why I can. For no one who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility can analyze it; he can only, whatever his intention, exhibit it. To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.  
  
Though I am speaking about sensibility only -- and about a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous -- these are grave matters. Most people think of sensibility or taste as the realm of purely subjective preferences, those mysterious attractions, mainly sensual, that have not been brought under the sovereignty of reason. They *allow* that considerations of taste play a part in their reactions to people and to works of art. But this attitude is naïve. And even worse. To patronize the faculty of taste is to patronize oneself. For taste governs every free -- as opposed to rote -- human response. Nothing is more decisive. There is taste in people, visual taste, taste in emotion - and there is taste in acts, taste in morality. Intelligence, as well, is really a kind of taste: taste in ideas. (One of the facts to be reckoned with is that taste tends to develop very unevenly. It's rare that the same person has good visual taste and good taste in people *and* taste in ideas.)  
  
Taste has no system and no proofs. But there is something like a logic of taste: the consistent sensibility which underlies and gives rise to a certain taste. A sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea . . .   
  
To snare a sensibility in words, especially one that is alive and powerful,[1](http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html#1) one must be tentative and nimble. The form of jottings, rather than an essay (with its claim to a linear, consecutive argument), seemed more appropriate for getting down something of this particular fugitive sensibility. It's embarrassing to be solemn and treatise-like about Camp. One runs the risk of having, oneself, produced a very inferior piece of Camp.  
  
These notes are for Oscar Wilde.  
  
"One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art."  
- *Phrases & Philosophies for the Use of the Young*  
  
1. To start very generally: Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization.  
  
2. To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized -- or at least apolitical.  
  
3. Not only is there a Camp vision, a Camp way of looking at things. Camp is as well a quality discoverable in objects and the behavior of persons. There are "campy" movies, clothes, furniture, popular songs, novels, people, buildings. . . . This distinction is important. True, the Camp eye has the power to transform experience. But not everything can be seen as Camp. It's not *all* in the eye of the beholder.  
  
4. Random examples of items which are part of the canon of Camp:  
  
    Zuleika Dobson  
    Tiffany lamps  
    Scopitone films  
    The Brown Derby restaurant on Sunset Boulevard in LA  
    *The Enquirer*, headlines and stories  
    Aubrey Beardsley drawings  
    *Swan Lake*  
    Bellini's operas  
    Visconti's direction of *Salome* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*  
    certain turn-of-the-century picture postcards  
    Schoedsack's *King Kong*  
    the Cuban pop singer La Lupe  
    Lynn Ward's novel in woodcuts, *God's Man*  
    the old Flash Gordon comics  
    women's clothes of the twenties (feather boas, fringed and beaded dresses, etc.)  
    the novels of Ronald Firbank and Ivy Compton-Burnett  
    stag movies seen without lust  
  
5. Camp taste has an affinity for certain arts rather than others. Clothes, furniture, all the elements of visual décor, for instance, make up a large part of Camp. For Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content. Concert music, though, because it is contentless, is rarely Camp. It offers no opportunity, say, for a contrast between silly or extravagant content and rich form. . . . Sometimes whole art forms become saturated with Camp. Classical ballet, opera, movies have seemed so for a long time. In the last two years, popular music (post rock-'n'-roll, what the French call yé yé) has been annexed. And movie criticism (like lists of "The 10 Best Bad Movies I Have Seen") is probably the greatest popularizer of Camp taste today, because most people still go to the movies in a high-spirited and unpretentious way.  
  
6. There is a sense in which it is correct to say: "It's too good to be Camp." Or "too important," not marginal enough. (More on this later.) Thus, the personality and many of the works of Jean Cocteau are Camp, but not those of André Gide; the operas of Richard Strauss, but not those of Wagner; concoctions of Tin Pan Alley and Liverpool, but not jazz. Many examples of Camp are things which, from a "serious" point of view, are either bad art or kitsch. Not all, though. Not only is Camp not necessarily bad art, but some art which can be approached as Camp (example: the major films of Louis Feuillade) merits the most serious admiration and study.  
  
"The more we study Art, the less we care for Nature."  
- *The Decay of Lying*  
  
7. All Camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice. Nothing in nature can be campy . . . Rural Camp is still man-made, and most campy objects are urban. (Yet, they often have a serenity -- or a naiveté -- which is the equivalent of pastoral. A great deal of Camp suggests Empson's phrase, "urban pastoral.")  
  
8. Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style -- but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the "off," of things-being-what-they-are-not. The best example is in Art Nouveau, the most typical and fully developed Camp style. Art Nouveau objects, typically, convert one thing into something else: the lighting fixtures in the form of flowering plants, the living room which is really a grotto. A remarkable example: the Paris Métro entrances designed by Hector Guimard in the late 1890s in the shape of cast-iron orchid stalks.  
  
9. As a taste in persons, Camp responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated. The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility. Examples: the swooning, slim, sinuous figures of pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry; the thin, flowing, sexless bodies in Art Nouveau prints and posters, presented in relief on lamps and ashtrays; the haunting androgynous vacancy behind the perfect beauty of Greta Garbo. Here, Camp taste draws on a mostly unacknowledged truth of taste: the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists in going against the grain of one's sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine. . . . Allied to the Camp taste for the androgynous is something that seems quite different but isn't: a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms. For obvious reasons, the best examples that can be cited are movie stars. The corny flamboyant female-ness of Jayne Mansfield, Gina Lollobrigida, Jane Russell, Virginia Mayo; the exaggerated he-man-ness of Steve Reeves, Victor Mature. The great stylists of temperament and mannerism, like Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, Tallulah Bankhead, Edwige Feuillière.  
  
10. Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.  
  
11. Camp is the triumph of the epicene style. (The convertibility of "man" and "woman," "person" and "thing.") But all style, that is, artifice, is, ultimately, epicene. Life is not stylish. Neither is nature.  
  
12. The question isn't, "Why travesty, impersonation, theatricality?" The question is, rather, "When does travesty, impersonation, theatricality acquire the special flavor of Camp?" Why is the atmosphere of Shakespeare's comedies (*As You Like It*, etc.) not epicene, while that of *Der Rosenkavalier* is?  
  
13. The dividing line seems to fall in the 18th century; there the origins of Camp taste are to be found (Gothic novels, Chinoiserie, caricature, artificial ruins, and so forth.) But the relation to nature was quite different then. In the 18th century, people of taste either patronized nature (Strawberry Hill) or attempted to remake it into something artificial (Versailles). They also indefatigably patronized the past. Today's Camp taste effaces nature, or else contradicts it outright. And the relation of Camp taste to the past is extremely sentimental.  
  
14. A pocket history of Camp might, of course, begin farther back -- with the mannerist artists like Pontormo, Rosso, and Caravaggio, or the extraordinarily theatrical painting of Georges de La Tour, or Euphuism (Lyly, etc.) in literature. Still, the soundest starting point seems to be the late 17th and early 18th century, because of that period's extraordinary feeling for artifice, for surface, for symmetry; its taste for the picturesque and the thrilling, its elegant conventions for representing instant feeling and the total presence of character -- the epigram and the rhymed couplet (in words), the flourish (in gesture and in music). The late 17th and early 18th century is the great period of Camp: Pope, Congreve, Walpole, etc, but not Swift; *les précieux* in France; the rococo churches of Munich; Pergolesi. Somewhat later: much of Mozart. But in the 19th century, what had been distributed throughout all of high culture now becomes a special taste; it takes on overtones of the acute, the esoteric, the perverse. Confining the story to England alone, we see Camp continuing wanly through 19th century aestheticism (Bume-Jones, Pater, Ruskin, Tennyson), emerging full-blown with the Art Nouveau movement in the visual and decorative arts, and finding its conscious ideologists in such "wits" as Wilde and Firbank.  
  
15. Of course, to say all these things are Camp is not to argue they are simply that. A full analysis of Art Nouveau, for instance, would scarcely equate it with Camp. But such an analysis cannot ignore what in Art Nouveau allows it to be experienced as Camp. Art Nouveau is full of "content," even of a political-moral sort; it was a revolutionary movement in the arts, spurred on by a Utopian vision (somewhere between William Morris and the Bauhaus group) of an organic politics and taste. Yet there is also a feature of the Art Nouveau objects which suggests a disengaged, unserious, "aesthete's" vision. This tells us something important about Art Nouveau -- and about what the lens of Camp, which blocks out content, is.  
  
16. Thus, the Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice.  
  
17. This comes out clearly in the vulgar use of the word Camp as a verb, "to camp," something that people do. To camp is a mode of seduction -- one which employs flamboyant mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity, with a witty meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders. Equally and by extension, when the word becomes a noun, when a person or a thing is "a camp," a duplicity is involved. Behind the "straight" public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing.  
  
"To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up."  
- *An Ideal Husband*  
  
18. One must distinguish between naïve and deliberate Camp. Pure Camp is always naive. Camp which knows itself to be Camp ("camping") is usually less satisfying.  
  
19. The pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious. The Art Nouveau craftsman who makes a lamp with a snake coiled around it is not kidding, nor is he trying to be charming. He is saying, in all earnestness: Voilà! the Orient! Genuine Camp -- for instance, the numbers devised for the Warner Brothers musicals of the early thirties (*42nd Street*; *The Golddiggers of 1933*; ... *of 1935*; ... *of 1937*; etc.) by Busby Berkeley -- does not mean to be funny. Camping -- say, the plays of Noel Coward -- does. It seems unlikely that much of the traditional opera repertoire could be such satisfying Camp if the melodramatic absurdities of most opera plots had not been taken seriously by their composers. One doesn't need to know the artist's private intentions. The work tells all. (Compare a typical 19th century opera with Samuel Barber's *Vanessa*, a piece of manufactured, calculated Camp, and the difference is clear.)  
  
20. Probably, intending to be campy is always harmful. The perfection of *Trouble in Paradise* and *The Maltese Falcon*, among the greatest Camp movies ever made, comes from the effortless smooth way in which tone is maintained. This is not so with such famous would-be Camp films of the fifties as *All About Eve* and *Beat the Devil*. These more recent movies have their fine moments, but the first is so slick and the second so hysterical; they want so badly to be campy that they're continually losing the beat. . . . Perhaps, though, it is not so much a question of the unintended effect versus the conscious intention, as of the delicate relation between parody and self-parody in Camp. The films of Hitchcock are a showcase for this problem. When self-parody lacks ebullience but instead reveals (even sporadically) a contempt for one's themes and one's materials - as in *To Catch a Thief*, *Rear Window*, *North by Northwest* -- the results are forced and heavy-handed, rarely Camp. Successful Camp -- a movie like Carné's Drôle de Drame; the film performances of Mae West and Edward Everett Horton; portions of the Goon Show -- even when it reveals self-parody, reeks of self-love.  
  
21. So, again, Camp rests on innocence. That means Camp discloses innocence, but also, when it can, corrupts it. Objects, being objects, don't change when they are singled out by the Camp vision. Persons, however, respond to their audiences. Persons begin "camping": Mae West, Bea Lillie, La Lupe, Tallulah Bankhead in Lifeboat, Bette Davis in All About Eve. (Persons can even be induced to camp without their knowing it. Consider the way Fellini got Anita Ekberg to parody herself in *La Dolce Vita.*)  
  
22. Considered a little less strictly, Camp is either completely naive or else wholly conscious (when one plays at being campy). An example of the latter: Wilde's epigrams themselves.  
  
"It's absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious."  
- *Lady Windemere's Fan*  
  
23. In naïve, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails. Of course, not all seriousness that fails can be redeemed as Camp. Only that which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve.  
  
24. When something is just bad (rather than Camp), it's often because it is too mediocre in its ambition. The artist hasn't attempted to do anything really outlandish. ("It's too much," "It's too fantastic," "It's not to be believed," are standard phrases of Camp enthusiasm.)  
  
25. The hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance. Camp is a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers. Camp is the paintings of Carlo Crivelli, with their real jewels and *trompe-l'oeil* insects and cracks in the masonry. Camp is the outrageous aestheticism of Steinberg's six American movies with Dietrich, all six, but especially the last, *The Devil Is a Woman*. . . . In Camp there is often something démesuré in the quality of the ambition, not only in the style of the work itself. Gaudí's lurid and beautiful buildings in Barcelona are Camp not only because of their style but because they reveal -- most notably in the Cathedral of the Sagrada Familia -- the ambition on the part of one man to do what it takes a generation, a whole culture to accomplish.  
  
26. Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is "too much." *Titus Andronicus* and *Strange Interlude* are almost Camp, or could be played as Camp. The public manner and rhetoric of de Gaulle, often, are pure Camp.  
  
27. A work can come close to Camp, but not make it, because it succeeds. Eisenstein's films are seldom Camp because, despite all exaggeration, they do succeed (dramatically) without surplus. If they were a little more "off," they could be great Camp - particularly *Ivan the Terrible I* & *II*. The same for Blake's drawings and paintings, weird and mannered as they are. They aren't Camp; though Art Nouveau, influenced by Blake, is.  
  
What is extravagant in an inconsistent or an unpassionate way is not Camp. Neither can anything be Camp that does not seem to spring from an irrepressible, a virtually uncontrolled sensibility. Without passion, one gets pseudo-Camp -- what is merely decorative, safe, in a word, chic. On the barren edge of Camp lie a number of attractive things: the sleek fantasies of Dali, the haute couture preciosity of Albicocco's *The Girl with the Golden Eyes*. But the two things - Camp and preciosity - must not be confused.  
  
28. Again, Camp is the attempt to do something extraordinary. But extraordinary in the sense, often, of being special, glamorous. (The curved line, the extravagant gesture.) Not extraordinary merely in the sense of effort. Ripley's Believe-It-Or-Not items are rarely campy. These items, either natural oddities (the two-headed rooster, the eggplant in the shape of a cross) or else the products of immense labor (the man who walked from here to China on his hands, the woman who engraved the New Testament on the head of a pin), lack the visual reward - the glamour, the theatricality - that marks off certain extravagances as Camp.  
  
29. The reason a movie like *On the Beach*, books like *Winesburg*, *Ohio* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* are bad to the point of being laughable, but not bad to the point of being enjoyable, is that they are too dogged and pretentious. They lack fantasy. There is Camp in such bad movies as *The Prodigal* and *Samson and Delilah*, the series of Italian color spectacles featuring the super-hero Maciste, numerous Japanese science fiction films (*Rodan*, *The Mysterians*, *The H-Man*) because, in their relative unpretentiousness and vulgarity, they are more extreme and irresponsible in their fantasy - and therefore touching and quite enjoyable.  
  
30. Of course, the canon of Camp can change. Time has a great deal to do with it. Time may enhance what seems simply dogged or lacking in fantasy now because we are too close to it, because it resembles too closely our own everyday fantasies, the fantastic nature of which we don't perceive. We are better able to enjoy a fantasy as fantasy when it is not our own.  
  
31. This is why so many of the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned, out-of-date, démodé. It's not a love of the old as such. It's simply that the process of aging or deterioration provides the necessary detachment -- or arouses a necessary sympathy. When the theme is important, and contemporary, the failure of a work of art may make us indignant. Time can change that. Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility. . . . Another effect: time contracts the sphere of banality. (Banality is, strictly speaking, always a category of the contemporary.) What was banal can, with the passage of time, become fantastic. Many people who listen with delight to the style of Rudy Vallee revived by the English pop group, The Temperance Seven, would have been driven up the wall by Rudy Vallee in his heyday.  
  
Thus, things are campy, not when they become old - but when we become less involved in them, and can enjoy, instead of be frustrated by, the failure of the attempt. But the effect of time is unpredictable. Maybe Method acting (James Dean, Rod Steiger, Warren Beatty) will seem as Camp some day as Ruby Keeler's does now - or as Sarah Bernhardt's does, in the films she made at the end of her career. And maybe not.  
  
32. Camp is the glorification of "character." The statement is of no importance - except, of course, to the person (Loie Fuller, Gaudí, Cecil B. De Mille, Crivelli, de Gaulle, etc.) who makes it. What the Camp eye appreciates is the unity, the force of the person. In every move the aging Martha Graham makes she's being Martha Graham, etc., etc. . . . This is clear in the case of the great serious idol of Camp taste, Greta Garbo. Garbo's incompetence (at the least, lack of depth) as an *actress* enhances her beauty. She's always herself.  
  
33. What Camp taste responds to is "instant character" (this is, of course, very 18th century); and, conversely, what it is not stirred by is the sense of the development of character. Character is understood as a state of continual incandescence - a person being one, very intense thing. This attitude toward character is a key element of the theatricalization of experience embodied in the Camp sensibility. And it helps account for the fact that opera and ballet are experienced as such rich treasures of Camp, for neither of these forms can easily do justice to the complexity of human nature. Wherever there is development of character, Camp is reduced. Among operas, for example, *La Traviata* (which has some small development of character) is less campy than *Il Trovatore* (which has none).  
  
"Life is too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it."  
- *Vera, or The Nihilists*  
  
34. Camp taste turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment. Camp doesn't reverse things. It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different -- a supplementary -- set of standards.  
  
35. Ordinarily we value a work of art because of the seriousness and dignity of what it achieves. We value it because it succeeds - in being what it is and, presumably, in fulfilling the intention that lies behind it. We assume a proper, that is to say, straightforward relation between intention and performance. By such standards, we appraise *The Iliad*, Aristophanes' plays, The Art of the Fugue, *Middlemarch*, the paintings of Rembrandt, Chartres, the poetry of Donne, *The Divine Comedy*, Beethoven's quartets, and - among people - Socrates, Jesus, St. Francis, Napoleon, Savonarola. In short, the pantheon of high culture: truth, beauty, and seriousness.  
  
36. But there are other creative sensibilities besides the seriousness (both tragic and comic) of high culture and of the high style of evaluating people. And one cheats oneself, as a human being, if one has *respect* only for the style of high culture, whatever else one may do or feel on the sly.  
  
For instance, there is the kind of seriousness whose trademark is anguish, cruelty, derangement. Here we do accept a disparity between intention and result. I am speaking, obviously, of a style of personal existence as well as of a style in art; but the examples had best come from art. Think of Bosch, Sade, Rimbaud, Jarry, Kafka, Artaud, think of most of the important works of art of the 20th century, that is, art whose goal is not that of creating harmonies but of overstraining the medium and introducing more and more violent, and unresolvable, subject-matter. This sensibility also insists on the principle that an oeuvre in the old sense (again, in art, but also in life) is not possible. Only "fragments" are possible. . . . Clearly, different standards apply here than to traditional high culture. Something is good not because it is achieved, but because another kind of truth about the human situation, another experience of what it is to be human - in short, another valid sensibility -- is being revealed.  
  
And third among the great creative sensibilities is Camp: the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience. Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness, and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling.  
  
37. The first sensibility, that of high culture, is basically moralistic. The second sensibility, that of extreme states of feeling, represented in much contemporary "avant-garde" art, gains power by a tension between moral and aesthetic passion. The third, Camp, is wholly aesthetic.  
  
38. Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of "style" over "content," "aesthetics" over "morality," of irony over tragedy.  
  
39. Camp and tragedy are antitheses. There is seriousness in Camp (seriousness in the degree of the artist's involvement) and, often, pathos. The excruciating is also one of the tonalities of Camp; it is the quality of excruciation in much of Henry James (for instance, *The Europeans*, *The Awkward Age*, *The Wings of the Dove*) that is responsible for the large element of Camp in his writings. But there is never, never tragedy.  
  
40. Style is everything. Genet's ideas, for instance, are very Camp. Genet's statement that "the only criterion of an act is its elegance"[2](http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html#2) is virtually interchangeable, as a statement, with Wilde's "in matters of great importance, the vital element is not sincerity, but style." But what counts, finally, is the style in which ideas are held. The ideas about morality and politics in, say, *Lady Windemere's Fan* and in *Major Barbara* are Camp, but not just because of the nature of the ideas themselves. It is those ideas, held in a special playful way. The Camp ideas in *Our Lady of the Flowers* are maintained too grimly, and the writing itself is too successfully elevated and serious, for Genet's books to be Camp.  
  
41. The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to "the serious." One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.  
  
42. One is drawn to Camp when one realizes that "sincerity" is not enough. Sincerity can be simple philistinism, intellectual narrowness.  
  
43. The traditional means for going beyond straight seriousness - irony, satire - seem feeble today, inadequate to the culturally oversaturated medium in which contemporary sensibility is schooled. Camp introduces a new standard: artifice as an ideal, theatricality.  
  
44. Camp proposes a comic vision of the world. But not a bitter or polemical comedy. If tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment.  
  
"I adore simple pleasures, they are the last refuge of the complex."  
- *A Woman of No Importance*  
  
45. Detachment is the prerogative of an elite; and as the dandy is the 19th century's surrogate for the aristocrat in matters of culture, so Camp is the modern dandyism. Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture.  
  
46. The dandy was overbred. His posture was disdain, or else ennui. He sought rare sensations, undefiled by mass appreciation. (Models: Des Esseintes in Huysmans' *À Rebours*, *Marius the Epicurean*, Valéry's*Monsieur Teste*.) He was dedicated to "good taste."  
  
The connoisseur of Camp has found more ingenious pleasures. Not in Latin poetry and rare wines and velvet jackets, but in the coarsest, commonest pleasures, in the arts of the masses. Mere use does not defile the objects of his pleasure, since he learns to possess them in a rare way. Camp -- Dandyism in the age of mass culture -- makes no distinction between the unique object and the mass-produced object. Camp taste transcends the nausea of the replica.  
  
47. Wilde himself is a transitional figure. The man who, when he first came to London, sported a velvet beret, lace shirts, velveteen knee-breeches and black silk stockings, could never depart too far in his life from the pleasures of the old-style dandy; this conservatism is reflected in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. But many of his attitudes suggest something more modern. It was Wilde who formulated an important element of the Camp sensibility -- the equivalence of all objects -- when he announced his intention of "living up" to his blue-and-white china, or declared that a doorknob could be as admirable as a painting. When he proclaimed the importance of the necktie, the boutonniere, the chair, Wilde was anticipating the democratic *esprit* of Camp.  
  
48. The old-style dandy hated vulgarity. The new-style dandy, the lover of Camp, appreciates vulgarity. Where the dandy would be continually offended or bored, the connoisseur of Camp is continually amused, delighted. The dandy held a perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils and was liable to swoon; the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves.  
  
49. It is a feat, of course. A feat goaded on, in the last analysis, by the threat of boredom. The relation between boredom and Camp taste cannot be overestimated. Camp taste is by its nature possible only in affluent societies, in societies or circles capable of experiencing the psychopathology of affluence.  
  
"What is abnormal in Life stands in normal relations to Art. It is the only thing in Life that stands in normal relations to Art."  
- *A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated*  
  
50. Aristocracy is a position vis-à-vis culture (as well as vis-à-vis power), and the history of Camp taste is part of the history of snob taste. But since no authentic aristocrats in the old sense exist today to sponsor special tastes, who is the bearer of this taste? Answer: an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste.  
  
51. The peculiar relation between Camp taste and homosexuality has to be explained. While it's not true that Camp taste *is* homosexual taste, there is no doubt a peculiar affinity and overlap. Not all liberals are Jews, but Jews have shown a peculiar affinity for liberal and reformist causes. So, not all homosexuals have Camp taste. But homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard -- and the most articulate audience -- of Camp. (The analogy is not frivolously chosen. Jews and homosexuals are the outstanding creative minorities in contemporary urban culture. Creative, that is, in the truest sense: they are creators of sensibilities. The two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony.)  
  
52. The reason for the flourishing of the aristocratic posture among homosexuals also seems to parallel the Jewish case. For every sensibility is self-serving to the group that promotes it. Jewish liberalism is a gesture of self-legitimization. So is Camp taste, which definitely has something propagandistic about it. Needless to say, the propaganda operates in exactly the opposite direction. The Jews pinned their hopes for integrating into modern society on promoting the moral sense. Homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness.  
  
53. Nevertheless, even though homosexuals have been its vanguard, Camp taste is much more than homosexual taste. Obviously, its metaphor of life as theater is peculiarly suited as a justification and projection of a certain aspect of the situation of homosexuals. (The Camp insistence on not being "serious," on playing, also connects with the homosexual's desire to remain youthful.) Yet one feels that if homosexuals hadn't more or less invented Camp, someone else would. For the aristocratic posture with relation to culture cannot die, though it may persist only in increasingly arbitrary and ingenious ways. Camp is (to repeat) the relation to style in a time in which the adoption of style -- as such -- has become altogether questionable. (In the modem era, each new style, unless frankly anachronistic, has come on the scene as an anti-style.)  
  
"One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing."  
- *In conversation*  
  
54. The experiences of Camp are based on the great discovery that the sensibility of high culture has no monopoly upon refinement. Camp asserts that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste. (Genet talks about this in *Our Lady of the Flowers*.) The discovery of the good taste of bad taste can be very liberating. The man who insists on high and serious pleasures is depriving himself of pleasure; he continually restricts what he can enjoy; in the constant exercise of his good taste he will eventually price himself out of the market, so to speak. Here Camp taste supervenes upon good taste as a daring and witty hedonism. It makes the man of good taste cheerful, where before he ran the risk of being chronically frustrated. It is good for the digestion.  
  
55. Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation - not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. It only seems like malice, cynicism. (Or, if it is cynicism, it's not a ruthless but a sweet cynicism.) Camp taste doesn't propose that it is in bad taste to be serious; it doesn't sneer at someone who succeeds in being seriously dramatic. What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures.  
  
56. Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of "character." . . . Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as "a camp," they're enjoying it. Camp is a *tender* feeling.  
  
(Here, one may compare Camp with much of Pop Art, which -- when it is not just Camp -- embodies an attitude that is related, but still very different. Pop Art is more flat and more dry, more serious, more detached, ultimately nihilistic.)  
  
57. Camp taste nourishes itself on the love that has gone into certain objects and personal styles. The absence of this love is the reason why such kitsch items as *Peyton Place* (the book) and the Tishman Building aren't Camp.  
  
58. The ultimate Camp statement: it's good *because* it's awful . . . Of course, one can't always say that. Only under certain conditions, those which I've tried to sketch in these notes.  
  
  
**1** The sensibility of an era is not only its most decisive, but also its most perishable, aspect. One may capture the ideas (intellectual history) and the behavior (social history) of an epoch without ever touching upon the sensibility or taste which informed those ideas, that behavior. Rare are those historical studies -- like Huizinga on the late Middle Ages, Febvre on 16th century France -- which do tell us something about the sensibility of the period.  
  
**2** Sartre's gloss on this in *Saint Genet* is: "Elegance is the quality of conduct which transforms the greatest amount of being into appearing."

### VIEWS OF SPORT; The Story Of Baseball: You Can Go Home Again

By A. BARTLETT GIAMATTI; A. Bartlett Giamatti is the new commissioner of major league baseball. This essay is excerpted from ''Americans and Their Games,'' to be published by Summit Books early next year.  
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If baseball is a narrative, it is like others - a work of imagination whose deeper structures and patterns of repetition force a tale, oft-told, to fresh and hither-to-unforeseen meaning. But what is the nature of the tale oft-told that recommences with every pitch, with every game, with every season? That patiently accrues its tension and new meaning with every iteration? It is the story we have hinted at already, the story of going home after having left home; the story of how difficult it is to find the origins one so deeply needs to find. It is the literary mode called Romance.

While it may be fanciful to construe the cluster around the plate as a family, it is certainly not a fancy to call that place ''home.'' That is the name of the odd-shaped pentagram. Home plate or home base. I do not know where it acquired that name. I know that the earliest accounts of the game, or an early version of it, in children's books of games in the early 19th century, call the points around the field - often marked by posts -''bases.'' The game was called ''base,'' though in his diary a soldier at Valley Forge with Washington called it ''baste.'' I know Jane Austen tells us at the beginning of ''Northanger Abbey'' that Catherine Moreland played ''baseball'' as well as cricket, thus distinguishing them. But none of these early references clarifies whence came the name for ''home.'' Why is not home plate called fourth base? As far as I can tell, it has ever been thus.

And why not? Meditate upon the name. ''Home'' is an English word virtually impossible to translate into other tongues. No translation catches the associations, the mixture of memory and longing, the sense of security and autonomy and accessibility, the aroma of inclusiveness, of freedom from wariness, that cling to the word ''home'' and are absent from ''house'' or even ''my house.'' Home is a concept, not a place; it is a state of mind where self-definition starts; it is origins - the mix of time and place and smell and weather wherein one first realizes one is an original, perhaps like others, especially those one loves, but discrete, distinct, not to be copied. Home is where one first learned to be separate and it remains in the mind as the place where reunion, if it ever were to occur, would happen.

So home drew Odysseus, who then set off again because it is not necessary to be in a specific place, in a house or town, to be one who has gone home. So home is the goal - rarely glimpsed, almost never attained - of all the heroes descended from Odysseus. All literary romance derives from the ''Odyssey'' and is about rejoining - rejoining a beloved, rejoining parent to child, rejoining a land to its rightful owner or rule. Romance is about putting things aright after some tragedy has put them asunder. It is about restoration of the right relations among things - and going home is where that restoration occurs because that is where it matters most.

### Shooting Dad by Sarah Vowell

[insert pdf]

<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91d/chapter1.html>

### Death of the Moth by Virginia Woolf

Moths that fly by day are not properly to be called moths; they do not excite that pleasant sense of dark autumn nights and ivy-blossom which the commonest yellow-underwing asleep in the shadow of the curtain never fails to rouse in us. They are hybrid creatures, neither gay like butterflies nor sombre like their own species. Nevertheless the present specimen, with his narrow hay-coloured wings, fringed with a tassel of the same colour, seemed to be content with life. It was a pleasant morning, mid–September, mild, benignant, yet with a keener breath than that of the summer months. The plough was already scoring the field opposite the window, and where the share had been, the earth was pressed flat and gleamed with moisture. Such vigour came rolling in from the fields and the down beyond that it was difficult to keep the eyes strictly turned upon the book. The rooks too were keeping one of their annual festivities; soaring round the tree tops until it looked as if a vast net with thousands of black knots in it had been cast up into the air; which, after a few moments sank slowly down upon the trees until every twig seemed to have a knot at the end of it. Then, suddenly, the net would be thrown into the air again in a wider circle this time, with the utmost clamour and vociferation, as though to be thrown into the air and settle slowly down upon the tree tops were a tremendously exciting experience.

The same energy which inspired the rooks, the ploughmen, the horses, and even, it seemed, the lean bare-backed downs, sent the moth fluttering from side to side of his square of the window-pane. One could not help watching him. One was, indeed, conscious of a queer feeling of pity for him. The possibilities of pleasure seemed that morning so enormous and so various that to have only a moth’s part in life, and a day moth’s at that, appeared a hard fate, and his zest in enjoying his meagre opportunities to the full, pathetic. He flew vigorously to one corner of his compartment, and, after waiting there a second, flew across to the other. What remained for him but to fly to a third corner and then to a fourth? That was all he could do, in spite of the size of the downs, the width of the sky, the far-off smoke of houses, and the romantic voice, now and then, of a steamer out at sea. What he could do he did. Watching him, it seemed as if a fibre, very thin but pure, of the enormous energy of the world had been thrust into his frail and diminutive body. As often as he crossed the pane, I could fancy that a thread of vital light became visible. He was little or nothing but life.

Yet, because he was so small, and so simple a form of the energy that was rolling in at the open window and driving its way through so many narrow and intricate corridors in my own brain and in those of other human beings, there was something marvellous as well as pathetic about him. It was as if someone had taken a tiny bead of pure life and decking it as lightly as possible with down and feathers, had set it dancing and zig-zagging to show us the true nature of life. Thus displayed one could not get over the strangeness of it. One is apt to forget all about life, seeing it humped and bossed and garnished and cumbered so that it has to move with the greatest circumspection and dignity. Again, the thought of all that life might have been had he been born in any other shape caused one to view his simple activities with a kind of pity.

After a time, tired by his dancing apparently, he settled on the window ledge in the sun, and, the queer spectacle being at an end, I forgot about him. Then, looking up, my eye was caught by him. He was trying to resume his dancing, but seemed either so stiff or so awkward that he could only flutter to the bottom of the window-pane; and when he tried to fly across it he failed. Being intent on other matters I watched these futile attempts for a time without thinking, unconsciously waiting for him to resume his flight, as one waits for a machine, that has stopped momentarily, to start again without considering the reason of its failure. After perhaps a seventh attempt he slipped from the wooden ledge and fell, fluttering his wings, on to his back on the window sill. The helplessness of his attitude roused me. It flashed upon me that he was in difficulties; he could no longer raise himself; his legs struggled vainly. But, as I stretched out a pencil, meaning to help him to right himself, it came over me that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death. I laid the pencil down again.

The legs agitated themselves once more. I looked as if for the enemy against which he struggled. I looked out of doors. What had happened there? Presumably it was midday, and work in the fields had stopped. Stillness and quiet had replaced the previous animation. The birds had taken themselves off to feed in the brooks. The horses stood still. Yet the power was there all the same, massed outside indifferent, impersonal, not attending to anything in particular. Somehow it was opposed to the little hay-coloured moth. It was useless to try to do anything. One could only watch the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an oncoming doom which could, had it chosen, have submerged an entire city, not merely a city, but masses of human beings; nothing, I knew, had any chance against death. Nevertheless after a pause of exhaustion the legs fluttered again. It was superb this last protest, and so frantic that he succeeded at last in righting himself. One’s sympathies, of course, were all on the side of life. Also, when there was nobody to care or to know, this gigantic effort on the part of an insignificant little moth, against a power of such magnitude, to retain what no one else valued or desired to keep, moved one strangely. Again, somehow, one saw life, a pure bead. I lifted the pencil again, useless though I knew it to be. But even as I did so, the unmistakable tokens of death showed themselves. The body relaxed, and instantly grew stiff. The struggle was over. The insignificant little creature now knew death. As I looked at the dead moth, this minute wayside triumph of so great a force over so mean an antagonist filled me with wonder. Just as life had been strange a few minutes before, so death was now as strange. The moth having righted himself now lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed. O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am.

### In Cold Blood excerpt by Truman Capote

The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call "out there." Some seventy miles east of the Colorado border, the countryside, with its hard blue skies and desert-clear air, has an atmosphere that is rather more Far West than Middle West. The local accent is barbed with a prairie twang, a ranch-hand nasalness, and the men, many of them, wear narrow frontier trousers, Stetsons, and high-heeled boots with pointed toes. The land is flat, and the views are awesomely extensive; horses, herds of cattle, a white cluster of grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples are visible long before a traveler reaches them.

Holcomb, too, can be seen from great distances. Not that there's much to see - simply an aimless congregation of buildings divided in the center by the main-line tracks of the Santa Fe Rail-road, a haphazard hamlet bounded on the south by a brown stretch of the Arkansas (pronounced "Ar-kan-sas") River, on the north by a highway, Route 50, and on the east and west by prairie lands and wheat fields. After rain, or when snowfalls thaw, the streets, unnamed, unshaded, unpaved, turn from the thickest dust into the direst mud. At one end of the town stands a stark old stucco structure, the roof of which supports an electric sign - dance - but the dancing has ceased and the advertisement has been dark for several years. Nearby is another building with an irrelevant sign, this one in flaking gold on a dirty window - Holcomb bank. The bank closed in 1933, and its former counting rooms have been converted into apartments. It is one of the town's two "apartment houses," the second being a ramshackle mansion known, because a good part of the local school's faculty lives there, as the Teacherage.

But the majority of Holcomb's homes are one-story frame affairs, with front porches. Down by the depot, the postmistress, a gaunt woman who wears a rawhide jacket and denims and cowboy boots, presides over a falling-apart post office. The depot itself, with its peeling sulphur-colored paint, is equally melancholy; the Chief, the Super-Chief, the El Capitan go by every day, but these celebrated expresses never pause there. No passenger trains do - only an occasional freight. Up on the highway, there are two filling stations, one of which doubles as a meagerly supplied grocery store, while the other does extra duty as a cafe - Hartman's Cafe, where Mrs. Hartman, the proprietress, dispenses sandwiches, coffee, soft drinks, and 3 .2 beer. (Holcomb, like all the rest of Kansas, is "dry.")

And that, really, is all. Unless you include, as one must, the Holcomb School, a good-looking establishment, which reveals a circumstance that the appearance of the community otherwise camouflages: that the parents who send their children to this modern and ably staffed "consolidated" school - the grades go from kindergarten through senior high, and a fleet of buses transport the students, of which there are usually around three hundred and sixty, from as far as sixteen miles away - are, in general, a prosperous people. Farm ranchers, most of them, they are outdoor folk of very varied stock - German, Irish, Norwegian, Mexican, Japanese. They raise cattle and sheep, grow wheat, milo, grass seed, and sugar beets. Farming is always a chancy business, but in west-era Kansas its practitioners consider themselves "born gamblers," for they must contend with an extremely shallow precipitation (the annual average is eighteen inches) and anguishing irrigation problems. However, the last seven years have been years of droughtless beneficence. The farm ranchers in Finney County, of which Holcomb is a part, have done well; money has been made not from farming alone but also from the exploitation of plentiful natural-gas resources, and its acquisition is reflected in the new school, the comfortable interiors of the farmhouses, the steep and swollen grain elevators.

Until one morning in mid-November of 1959, few American - in fact, few Kansans - had ever heard of Holcomb. Like the waters of the river, like the motorists on the highway, and like the yellow trains streaking down the Santa Fe tracks, drama, in the shape of exceptional happenings, had never stopped there. The inhabitants of the village, numbering two hundred and seventy, were satisfied that this should be so, quite content to exist inside ordinary life - to work, to hunt, to watch television, to attend school socials, choir practice, meetings of the 4-H Club. But then, in the earliest hours of that morning in November, a Sunday morning, certain foreign sounds impinged on the normal nightly Holcomb noises - on the keening hysteria of coyotes, the dry scrape of scuttling tumbleweed, the racing, receding wail of locomotive whistles. At the time not a soul in sleeping Holcomb heard them - four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives. But afterward the townspeople, theretofore sufficiently unfearful of each other to seldom trouble to lock their doors, found fantasy recreating them over and again - those somber explosions that stimulated fires of mistrust in the glare of which many old neighbors viewed each other strangely, and as strangers.

### Living Like Weasels by Annie Dillard

A weasel is wild. Who knows what he thinks? He sleeps in his underground den, his tail draped over his nose. Sometimes he lives in his den for two days without leaving. Outside, he stalks rabbits, mice, muskrats, and birds, killing more bodies than he can eat warm, and often dragging the carcasses home. Obedient to instinct, he bites his prey at the neck, either splitting the jugular vein at the throat or crunching the brain at the base of the skull, and he does not let go. One naturalist refused to kill a weasel who was socketed into his hand deeply as a rattlesnake. The man could in no way pry the tiny weasel off, and he had to walk half a mile to water, the weasel dangling from his palm, and soak him off like a stubborn label.

And once, says Ernest Thompson Seton--once, a man shot an eagle out of the sky. He examined the eagle and found the dry skull of a weasel fixed by the jaws to his throat. The supposition is that the eagle had pounced on the weasel and the weasel swiveled and bit as instinct taught him, tooth to neck, and nearly won. I would like to have seen that eagle from the air a few weeks or months before he was shot: was the whole weasel still attached to his feathered throat, a fur pendant? Or did the eagle eat what he could reach, gutting the living weasel with his talons before his breast, bending his beak, cleaning the beautiful airborne bones?

I have been reading about weasels because I saw one last week. I startled a weasel who startled me, and we exchanged a long glance.

Twenty minutes from my house, through the woods by the quarry and across the highway, is Hollins Pond, a remarkable piece of shallowness, where I like to go at sunset and sit on a tree trunk. Hollins Pond is also called Murray's Pond; it covers two acres of bottomland near Tinker Creek with six inches of water and six thousand lily pads. In winter, brown-and-white steers stand in the middle of it, merely dampening their hooves; from the distant shore they look like miracle itself, complete with miracle's nonchalance. Now, in summer, the steers are gone. The water lilies have blossomed and spread to a green horizontal plane that is terra firma to plodding blackbirds, and tremulous ceiling to black leeches, crayfish, and carp.

This is, mind you, suburbia. It is a five-minute walk in three directions to rows of houses, though none is visible here. There's a 55-mph highway at one end of the pond, and a nesting pair of wood ducks at the other. Under every bush is a muskrat hole or a beer can. The far end is an alternating series of fields and woods, fields and woods, threaded everywhere with motorcycle tracks--in whose bare clay wild turtles lay eggs.

So, I had crossed the highway, stepped over two low barbed-wire fences, and traced the motorcycle path in all gratitude through the wild rose and poison ivy of the pond's shoreline up into high grassy fields. Then I cut down through the woods to the mossy fallen tree where I sit. This tree is excellent. It makes a dry, upholstered bench at the upper, marshy endof the pond, a plush jetty raised from the thorny shore between a shallow blue body of water and a deep blue body of sky.

The sun had just set. I was relaxed on the tree trunk, ensconced in the lap of lichen, watching the lily pads at my feet tremble and part dreamily over the thrusting path of a carp. A yellow bird appeared to my right and flew behind me. It caught my eye; I swiveled around—and the next instant**,**inexplicably, I was looking down at a weasel, who was looking up at me.

Weasel! I'd never seen one wild before. He was ten inches long, thin as a curve, a muscled ribbon, brown as fruitwood, soft-furred, alert. His face was fierce, small and pointed as a lizard's; he would have made a good arrowhead. There was just a dot of chin, maybe two brown hairs' worth, and then the pure white fur began that spread down his underside. He had two black eyes I didn't see, any more than you see a window.

The weasel was stunned into stillness as he was emerging from beneath an enormous shaggy wild rose bush four feet away. I was stunned into stillness twisted backward on the tree trunk. Our eyes locked, and someone threw away the key.

Our look was as if two lovers, or deadly enemies, met unexpectedly on an overgrown path when each had been thinking of something else: a clearing blow to the gut. It was also a bright blow to the brain, or a sudden beating of brains, with all the charge and intimate grate of rubbed balloons. It emptied our lungs. It felled the forest, moved the fields, and drained the pond; the world dismantled and tumbled into that black hole of eyes. If you and I looked at each other that way, our skulls would split and drop to our shoulders. But we don't. We keep our skulls. So.

He disappeared. This was only last week, and already I don't remember what shattered the enchantment. I think I blinked, I think I retrieved my brain from the weasel's brain, and tried to memorize what I was seeing, and the weasel felt the yank of separation, the careening splash-down into real life and the urgent current of instinct. He vanished under the wild rose. I waited motionless, my mind suddenly full of data and my spirit with pleadings, but he didn't return.

Please do not tell me about "approach-avoidance conflicts." I tell you I've been in that weasel's brain for sixty seconds, and he was in mine. Brains are private places, muttering through unique and secret tapes-but the weasel and I both plugged into another tape simultaneously, for a sweet and shocking time. Can I help it if it was a blank?

What goes on in his brain the rest of the time? What does a weasel think about? He won't say. His journal is tracks in clay, a spray of feathers, mouse blood and bone: uncollected, unconnected, loose leaf, and blown.

I would like to learn, or remember, how to live. I come to Hollins Pond not so much to learn how to live as, frankly, to forget about it. That is, I don't think I can learn from a wild animal how to live in particular--shall I suck warm blood, hold my tail high, walk with my footprints precisely over the prints of my hands?--but I might learn something of mindlessness, something of the purity of living in the physical sense and the dignity of living without bias or motive. The weasel lives in necessity and we live in choice, hating necessity and dying at the last ignobly in its talons. I would like to live as I should, as the weasel lives as he should. And I suspect that for me the way is like the weasel's: open to time and death painlessly, noticing everything, remembering nothing, choosing the given with a fierce and pointed will.

I missed my chance. I should have gone for the throat. I should have lunged for that streak of white under the weasel's chin and held on, held on through mud and into the wild rose, held on for a dearer life. We could live under the wild rose wild as weasels, mute and uncomprehending. I could very calmly go wild. I could live two days in the den, curled, leaning on mouse fur, sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk, my hair tangled in the roots of grasses. Down is a good place to go, where the mind is single. Down is out, out of your ever-loving mind and back to your careless senses. I remember muteness as a prolonged and giddy fast, where every moment is a feast of utterance received. Time and events are merely poured, unremarked, and ingested directly, like blood pulsed into my gut through a jugular vein. Could two live that way? Could two live under the wild rose, and explore by the pond, so that the smooth mind of each is as everywhere present to the other, and as received and as unchallenged, as falling snow?

We could, you know. We can live any way we want. People take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience--even of silence--by choice. The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way, to locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse. This is yielding, not fighting. A weasel doesn't "attack" anything; a weasel lives as he's meant to, yielding at every moment to the perfect freedom of single necessity.

I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you. Then even death**,**where you're going no matter how you live, cannot you part. Seize it and let it seize you up aloft even, till your eyes burn out and drop; let your musky flesh fall off in shreds, and let your very bones unhinge and scatter, loosened over fields, over fields and woods, lightly, thoughtless, from any height at all, from as high as eagles.

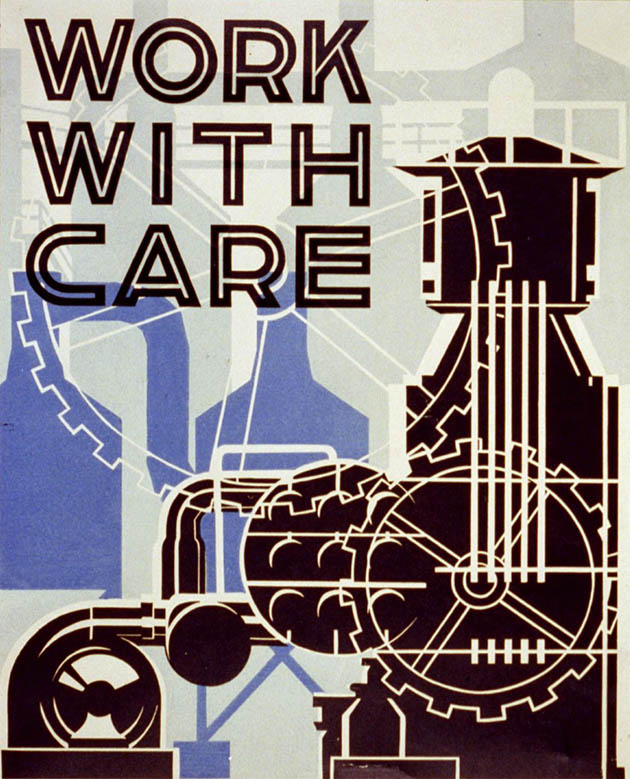
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### PERSONAL ESSAYSOCT 16, 2009

### Annie Dillard and the Writing Life

### [*by Alexander Chee*](http://www.themorningnews.org/archive/author/alexander-chee)

Writers aren’t born, they’re made—from practice, reading, and a lot of caffeine. And sometimes tutelage.

1937 WPA Federal Art Project poster

Dear Annie Dillard,

My name is Alexander Chee, and I’m a senior English major. I’ve taken Fiction 1 with Phyllis Rose and Advanced Fiction with Kit Reed, and last summer, I studied with Mary Robison and Toby Olson at the Bennington Writers Workshop. The stories here are from a creative writing thesis I’m currently writing with Professor Bill Stowe as my adviser. But the real reason I’m applying to this class is that whenever I tell people I go to Wesleyan, they ask me if I’ve studied with you, and I’d like to have something better to say than no.

Thanks for your time and consideration,  
Alexander Chee

In 1989, this was the letter I sent with my application to Annie Dillard’s Literary Nonfiction class at Wesleyan University. I was a last-semester senior, an English major who had failed at being a studio art major and thus became an English major by default.

As I waited for what I was sure was going to be rejection, I went to the mall to shop for Christmas presents and walked through bookstores full of copies of the Annie Dillard boxed edition—*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, American Childhood, Holy The Firm—*and the*Best American Essays of 1988*, edited, yes, by Annie Dillard. I walked around them as if they were her somehow and not her books, and left empty-handed.

I didn’t buy them because if she rejected me, they would be unbearable to own.

When I got into the class, in the first class meeting, she told us not to read her work while we were her students.

I’m going to have a big enough influence on you as it is, she said. You’re going to want to please me just for being your teacher. So I don’t want you trying to imitate me. I don’t want you to write like me. And she paused here. I want you to write like *you*.

Some people looked guilty when she said this. I felt guilty, too. I didn’t know her work. I just knew it had made her famous. I wished I’d had the sense to want to disobey her. I felt shallow, but I was there because my father had always said, Whatever it is you want to do, find the person who does it best, and then see if they will teach you.

I’d already gone through everyone else at Wesleyan. She was next on my list.

 I can still hear her say it: Put all your deaths, accidents and diseases up front, at the beginning. Where possible. “Where possible” was often her rejoinder.

The accident is that in the spring of my sophomore year, I fell asleep in the drawing class of the chair of the art department and woke to her firm grip on my shoulder.

Jacqueline Gourevitch, the painter, mother to Phillip, the writer. She was at the time an elegant, imperious woman with dark short curly hair and a formal but warm manner. I remember she was known for her paintings of clouds.

Mr. Chee, she said, tugging me up. I think you should do this at home.

I felt a wet spot on my cheek and the paper beneath it. I quickly packed my materials and left.

Before that, she had loved my work and often praised it to the class. Afterward, I could do nothing right. She even began marking assignments as missing that she’d already passed back to me, as if she were erasing even the memory of having admired my work. I left them in her mailbox with her clearly written comments, to prove my case, but it didn’t matter—a grade of B- from her put me below the average needed for the major. I was shut out.

I spent the summer before my junior year wondering what to do, which in this case meant becoming a vegan, cycling 20 miles a day, working for my mother as the night manager of a seafood restaurant we owned, and getting my weight down to 145 lbs from 165. I turned into a brown line drawing, eating strawberry fruit popsicles while I rang up lobsters and fries for tourists. And then in the last days of August, a school friend who lived in the next town over called me at home.

Do you have a typewriter, he asked.

Yes, I said.

Can I borrow it, he asked. I need to type up this story for Phyllis Rose’s class, to apply. Can I come by and get it this afternoon?

Sure, I said.

 After I hung up the phone, I wrote a story on that typewriter in the four hours before he arrived that I can still remember, partly for how it came out as I now know very few stories do: quickly and with confidence. I was an amnesiac about my accomplishments. In high school, I won a prize from the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Foundation, and a play of mine was honored by Maine’s gifted and talented program with a reading by actors from the Portland Stage Company. But those felt like accidents, in a life next door to mine. For some reason this first short story satisfied in me the idea that I could write in a way that these other things did not.

I had made something with some pieces of my life, rearranged into something else, like an exercise from that drawing class that combined three life studies into a single fictional tableau. The story was about a boy who spends the summer riding a bicycle (me), who gets hit by a car and goes into a coma, where he dreams constantly of his accident until he wakes (this happened to my dad, but also, the fateful art class). When he wakes, he is visited by a priest who wants to make sure he doesn’t lose his faith (me with my pastor, after my father’s death).

Lorrie Moore calls the feeling I felt that day “the consolations of the mask,” where you make a place that doesn’t exist in your own life for the life your life has no room for, the exiles of your memory. But I didn’t know this then.

All I could tell in that moment was that I had finally made an impression on myself. And whatever it was that I did when I writing a story, I wanted to do it again.

My friend arrived. I closed the typewriter case and handed it over. I didn’t tell him what I’d done. Somehow I couldn’t tell anyone I was doing this. Instead, I went to the post office after he left, a little guilty, like I was doing something illicit, and submitted the story.

 I saw your name on the list, my friend said, weeks later, back at school, with something like hurt in his voice. Congratulations.

When I looked, I saw he wasn’t on the list. I felt like I’d taken something out of the typewriter before I gave it to him, and wanted to apologize.

I didn’t think I’d gotten in because of what I’d written.

I went on to get an A in that class, which I didn’t understand, not even when a classmate announced he’d gotten a B. I didn’t understand because I didn’t feel like I knew what I was doing. I did, though, apply and get into Kit Reed’s advanced fiction class for the next semester—20 pages of fiction every other week—and won from her another of these mysterious As. I applied to and was accepted at the Bennington Writer’s Conference, studied with Mary Robison and Toby Olson and met Jane Smiley’s editor at Knopf, who offered to read a story of mine and then returned it with a note that said if I could turn it into a novella, she’d buy it.

I had no idea what a novella was or how to write one, and the excitement I felt as I read her note turned to confusion and then sadness.

Great and enviable things were happening for me. Another student in this situation would have gotten Mary Robison or Kit Reed to help him understand what a novella was so he could write it, and would have been published at age 21, but that wasn’t me. I thought I could choose a destiny. I wanted Jane Smiley’s editor to tell me, Go be a visual artist and forget about this writing thing, kid. I was someone who didn’t know how to find the path he was on, the one under his feet.

This, it seems to me, is why we have teachers.

II.

In my clearest memory of her, it’s spring, and she is walking towards me, smiling, her lipstick looking neatly cut around her smile. I never ask her why she’s smiling—for all I know, she’s laughing at me as I stand smoking in front of the building where we’ll have class. She’s Annie Dillard, and I am her writing student, a 21-year-old cliché—black clothes, deliberately mussed hair, cigarettes, dark but poppy music on my Walkman. I’m pretty sure she thinks I’m funny. She walks to class because she lives a few blocks from our classroom building in a beautiful house with her husband and her daughter, and each time I pass it on campus, I feel, like a pulse through the air, the idea of her there. Years later, when she no longer lives there, and I am teaching there, I feel the lack of it.

The dark green trees behind her on the Wesleyan campus sharpen her outline. She is dressed in pale colors, pearls at her neck and ears. She’s tall, athletic, vigorous. Her skin glows. She holds out her hand.

Chee, she says. Give me a drag off that.

She calls us all by our last names.

She lets the smoke curl out a little and then exhales brusquely. Thanks, she says, and hands it back, and then she smiles again and walks inside.

Lipstick crowns the yellow Marlboro Red filter.

I soon know this means there’s five minutes until class starts. As I stub the cigarette out, I think of the people who’d save the filters. At least one of them. I feel virtuous as I kick it into the gutter.

 In that first class, she wore the pearls and a tab collar peeped over her sweater, but she looked as if she would punch you if you didn’t behave. She walked with a cowgirl’s stride into the classroom, and from her bag withdrew her legal pad covered in notes, a thermos of coffee and a bag of Brach’s singly wrapped caramels, and then sat down. She undid the top of the thermos with a swift twist, poured a cup of coffee into the cup that was also the thermos top, and sipped at it as she gave us a big smile and looked around the room.

Hi, she said, sort of through the smile.

130 of you applied, and I took 13 of you, Annie announced. A shadowy crowd of the faceless rejected formed around us briefly. A feeling of terror at the near miss came and then passed.

No visitors, she said. Under no conditions. I don’t care who it is.

 The class had a rhythm to it dictated by how she had quit smoking to please her new husband. We were long-distance, she told me, at one of our longer smoke breaks. We met at a conference. He didn’t know what a smoker I was until we shacked up. She laughed at this, as at a prank.

At the beginning of class she would unpack the long thin thermos of coffee and the bag of Brach’s singly-wrapped caramels—the ones with the white centers. She would set her legal pad down, covered in notes, and pour the coffee, which she would drink as she unwrapped the caramels and ate them. A small pile of plastic wrappers grew by her left hand on the desk. The wrappers would flutter a little as she whipped the pages of her legal pad back and forth, and spoke in epigrams about writing that often led to short lectures but were sometimes lists: Don’t ever use the word ‘soul,’ if possible. Never quote dialogue you can summarize. Avoid describing crowd scenes but especially party scenes.

She began almost drowsily, but soon went at a pell-mell pace. Not frantic, but operatic. Then she might pause, check her notes in a brief silence, and launch in another direction, as we finished making our notes and the sound of our writing died down.

Each week we had to turn in a seven-page triple-spaced draft in response to that week’s assignment.

Triple-spaced, we asked in the first class, unsure, as this had never been asked of us.

I need the room to scribble notes in between your sentences, she said.

The silence in the room was the sound of our minds turning this over. Surely there wouldn’t be that much to say?

But she was already on her feet at the chalkboard, writing out a directory of copyediting marks: Stet is Latin and means let it stand… When I draw a line through something and it comes up with this little pig tail on it that means get rid of it.

There was that much to say. Each week we turned in our assignments on a Tuesday, and by Thursday we had them back again, the space between the triple-spaced lines and also the margins filled with her penciled notes. Sometimes you write amazing sentences,she wrote to me, and sometimes it’s amazing you can write a sentence. This had arrows drawn pointing off towards the amazing sentence and the disappointing one.Getting your pages back from her was like getting to the dance floor and seeing your favorite black shirt under the nightclub’s blacklight, all the hair and dust that was always there but invisible to you, now visible.

In her class, I learned that while I had spoken English all of my life, there was actually very little I knew about it. English was born from low German, a language that was good for categorization, and had filled itself in with words from Latin and Anglo Saxon words, and was now in the process of eating things from Asian languages. Latinates were polysyllabic, and Anglo Saxon words were short, with perhaps two syllables at best. A good writer made use of both to vary sentence rhythms.

Very quickly, she identified what she called ‘bizarre grammatical structures’ inside my writing. From the things Annie circled in my drafts, it was clear one answer to my problem really was, in a sense, Maine. From my mom’s family, I’d gotten the gift for the telling detail—*Your Uncle Charles is so cheap he wouldn’t buy himself two hamburgers if he was hungry—*but also a voice cluttered by the passive voice in common use in that of that part of the world—*I was writing to ask if you were interested*—a way of speaking that blunted all aggression, all direct inquiry, and certainly, all description. The degraded syntax of the Scottish settlers forced to Maine by their British lords, using indirect speech as they went and then after they stayed. And then there was the museum of clichés in my unconscious.

I felt like a child from a lost colony of Scotland who’d taught himself English by watching Gene Kelly films.

The passive voice in particular was a crisis. “Was” only told you that something existed—this was not enough. And on this topic, I remember one of her fugues almost exactly:

*You want vivid writing. How do we get vivid writing? Verbs, first. Precise verbs. All of the action on the page, everything that happens, happens in the verbs. The passive voice needs gerunds to make anything happen. But too many gerunds together on the page makes for tinnitus: Running, sitting, speaking, laughing, inginginginging. No. Don’t do it. The verbs tell a reader whether something happened once or continually, what is in motion, what is at rest. Gerunds are lazy, you don’t have to make a decision and soon, everything is happening at the same time, pell-mell, chaos. Don’t do that. Also, bad verb choices mean adverbs. More often than not, you don’t need them. Did he run quickly or did he sprint? Did he walk slowly or did he stroll or saunter?*

The chaos by now was with her notebook and the wrappers, the storm on the desk, a crescendo fueled by the sugar and caffeine. I remember in this case a pause, her looking off into the middle distance, and then back at her notebook as she said, I mean, just what *exactly* is going on inside your piece?

If fiction provided the consolations of the mask, nonfiction provided, per Annie’s idea of it, the sensibility underneath the mask, irreplaceable and potentially of great value. The literary essay, as she saw it, was a moral exercise that involved direct engagement with the unknown, whether it was a foreign civilization or your mind, and what mattered in this was you.

You are the only one of you, she said of it. Your unique perspective, at this time, in our age, whether it’s on Tunis or the trees outside your window, is what matters. Don’t worry about being original, she said dismissively. Yes, everything’s been written, but also, the thing you want to write, before you wrote it, was impossible to write. Otherwise it would already exist. You writing it makes it possible.

III.

Narrative writing sets down details in an order that evokes the writer’s experience for the reader, she announced. This seemed obvious but also radical—no one had ever said it so plainly to us. She spoke often of “the job.” If you’re doing your job, the reader feels what you felt. You don’t have to tell the reader how to feel. No one likes to be told how to feel about something. And if you doubt that, just go ahead. Try and tell someone how to feel.

We were to avoid emotional language. The line goes grey when you do that,she said. Don’t tell the reader that someone was happy or sad. When you do that, the reader has nothing to see. She isn’t angry, Annie said. She throws his clothes out the window. Be *specific.*

In the cutting and cutting and the move this here, put this at the beginning, this belongs on page six*,* I learned that the first three pages of a draft are usually where you clear your throat, that most times, the place your draft begins is around page four. That if the beginning isn’t there sometimes it’s at the end, that you’ve spent the whole time getting to your beginning, and that if you switch the first and last pages you might have a better result than if you leave them where they were.

One afternoon, at her direction, we brought in our pages, scissors and tape, and told to bring several drafts of an essay, one that we struggled with over many versions.

Now cut out only the best sentences, she said. And tape them on a blank page. And then when you have that, write in around them, she said. Fill in what’s missing and make it reach for the best of what you’ve written thus far.

I watched as the sentences that didn’t matter fell away.

You could think that your voice as a writer would just emerge naturally, all on its own, with no help whatsoever, but you’d be wrong. What I saw on the page was that the voice is in fact trapped, nervous, lazy. Even, and in my case, most especially, amnesiac. And that it had to be cut free.

After the lecture on verbs, we counted the verbs on the page, circled them, tallied the count for each page to the side and averaged them. Can you increase the average number of verbs per page, she asked. I got this exercise from Samuel Johnson, she told us, who believed in a lively page, and used to count his verbs. Now look at them. Have you used the right verbs? Is that the precise verb for that precise thing? Remember that adverbs are a sign that you’ve used the wrong verb. Verbs control when something is happening in the mind of the reader. Think carefully—when did this happen in relation to this? And is that how you’ve described it?

I stared, comprehendingly, at the circles on my page, and the bad choices surrounding them and inside them.

You can invent the details that don’t matter, she said. At the edges. You cannot invent the details that matter.

I remember clearly, in the details that matter to this, going to the campus center on the morning before one class in the middle of the spring, to pick up my manuscript for that week. We turned them in on a Tuesday, and she returned them to us on Wednesday, by campus mail, so we could have them in time for Thursday’s class. This particular essay I’d written with more intensity and passion than anything I’d tried to do for the class thus far. I felt I finally understood what I was doing—how I could make choices that made the work better or worse, line by line. After over a year of feeling lost, this feeling was like when your foot finds the ground in the dark water. Here, you think. Here I can push.

I opened the envelope. Inside was the manuscript, tattooed by many, many sentences in the space between, many more than usual. I read them all carefully, turning the pages around to follow the writing to the back page, where I found, at the end, this postscript: I was up all night thinking about this.

The thought that I’d kept her up all night with something I wrote, that it mattered enough, held my attention. Okay, I remember telling myself. If you can keep her up all night with something you wrote, you might actually be able to do this.

I resented the idea of being talented. I couldn’t respect it—in my experience, no one else did. Being called talented at school had only made me a target for resentment. I wanted to work. Work, I could honor.

Talent isn’t enough, she had told us. Writing is work. Anyone can do this, anyone can learn to do this. It’s not rocket science, it’s habits of mind and habits of work. I started with people much more talented than me, she said, and they’re dead or in jail or not writing. The difference between myself and them is that I’m writing.

Talent could give you nothing. Without work, talent is only talent, promise, not product. I wanted to learn how to go from being the accident at the beginning to a writer, and I learned that from her.

IV.

By the time I was done studying with Annie, I wanted to be her.

I wanted a boxed set of my books from Harper Collins, a handsome professor husband, a daughter, a house the college would provide, teaching just one class a year and writing during the rest of the year. I even wanted the beat-up Saab and the houses on Cape Cod. From where I stood, which was in her house on campus during a barbecue at the end of the semester, it looked like the best possible life a writer could have. I was a senior, aware that graduation meant the annihilation of my entire sense of life and reality. Here, as I balanced a paper plate stained by the burger I’d just eaten, here was a clear goal.

I had given up on vegetarianism, it should be said.

If I’ve done my job, she said in the last class, you won’t be happy with anything you write for the next 10 years. It’s not because you won’t be writing well, but because I’ve raised your standards for yourself. Don’t compare yourselves to each other. Compare yourself to Colette, or Henry James, or Edith Wharton. Compare yourselves to the classics. Shoot there.

She paused here. This was another of her fugue states. And then she smiled. We all knew she was right.

Go up to the place in the bookstore where your books will go, she said. Walk right up and find your place on the shelf. Put your finger there, and then go every time.

In class, the idea seemed ridiculous. But at some point after the class ended, I did it. I walked up to the shelf. Chabon, Cheever. I put my finger between them and made a space. Soon, I did it every time I went to a bookstore.

Years later, I tell my own students to do it. As Thoreau, someone she admires very much, once wrote, “In the long run, we only ever hit what we aim at.” She was pointing us there.

### Writing Personal Essays: On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character by Philip Lopate

[insert PDF]

### The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me by Sherman Alexie

[](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_LYtPJwBD1ng/SRIlovPYgbI/AAAAAAAALqw/LKF8EACE210/s1600-h/Sherman_Alexie_web.jpg)  
  
  
Late summer night on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Ten Indians are playing basketball on a court barely illuminated by the streetlight above them. They will play until the brown, leather ball is invisible in the dark, They will play until an errant pass jams a finger, knocks a pair of glasses off the face, smashes a nose and draws blood. They will play until the ball bounces off the court and disappears into the shadows.  
  
This may be all you need to know about Native American literature.  
  
\*  
Thesis: I have never met a Native American. Thesis repeated: I have met thousands of Indians.  
  
\*  
November 1994, Manhattan, PEN American panel on Indian Literature. N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Gloria Miguel, Joy Harjo, me. Two or three hundred people in the audience. Mostly non-Indians, an Indian or three. Questions and answers.  
  
"Why do you insist on calling yourselves Indian?" asks a white woman in a nice hat. "It's so demeaning."  
  
"Listen," I say. "The word belongs to us now. We are Indians. That has nothing to do with Indians from India. We are not American Indians. We are Indians, pronounced In-din. It belongs to us. We own it and we're not going to give it back."  
  
So much has been taken from us that we hold onto the smallest things left with all the strength we have.  
  
\*  
1976: Winter on the Spokane Indian Reservation. My two cousins, S and G, have enough money for gloves. They buy them at Irene's Grocery Store. Irene is a white woman who has lived on our reservation since the beginning of time. I have no money for gloves. My hands are bare.  
  
We build snow fortresses on the football field. Since we are Indian boys playing, there must be a war. We stockpile snowballs. S and G build their fortress on the fifty-yard line. I build mine on the thirty-yard line. We begin our little war.  
  
My cousins are good warriors. They throw snowballs with precision. I am bombarded, under seige, defeated quickly. My cousins bury me in the snow. My grave is shallow. If my cousins knew how to dance, they might have danced on my grave. But they do know how to laugh, so they laugh. They are my cousins, meaning we are related in the Indian way. My father drank beers with their father for most of two decades, and that is enough to make us relatives. Indians  
gather relatives like firewood, protection against the cold. I am buried in the snow, cold, without protection. My hands are bare.  
  
After a short celebration, my cousins exhume me. I am too cold to fight. Shivering, I walk home, anxious for warmth. I know my mother is home. She is probably sewing quilts. If she sells a quilt, we have dinner. If she fails to sell a quilt, we go hungry. My mother has never failed to sell a quilt. But the threat of hunger is always there.  
  
When I step into the house, my mother is sewing yet another quilt. She is singing a song under her breath. You might assume she is singing a highly traditional Spokane Indian song. In fact, she is singing Donna Fargo's "The Happiest Girl in the Whole USA." Improbably, this is a highly traditional Spokane Indian song. The living room is dark in the late afternoon. The house is cold. My mother is wearing her coat and shoes.  
  
"Why don't you turn up the heat?" I ask my mother.  
  
"No electricity," she says.  
  
"Power went out?" I ask.  
  
"Didn't pay the bill," she says.  
  
I am colder. I inhale, exhale, my breath visible inside the house. I can hear a car sliding on the icy road outside. My mother is making a quilt. This quilt will pay for the electricity. Her fingers are stiff and painful from the cold. She is sewing as   
fast as she can.  
  
\*  
On the jukebox in the bar: Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, Johnny Cash, Charlie Rich, Freddy Fender, Donna Fargo.  
  
On the radio in the car: Creedence Clearwater Revival, Three Dog Night, Blood Sweat & Tears, Janis Joplin, early Stones, earlier Beatles.  
  
On the stereo in the house: Glen Campbell, Roy Orbison, Johnny Horton, Loretta Lynn, "The Ballad of the Green Beret."  
  
\*  
1975, Mr. Manley, the fourth grade music teacher, sets a row of musical instruments in front of us. From left to right, a flute, clarinet, French horn, trombone, trumpet, tuba, drum. We're getting our first chance to play this kind of music.  
  
"Now," he explains, "I want all of you to line up behind the instrument you'd like to learn how to play."  
  
Dawn, Loretta, and Karen line up behind the flute. Melissa and Michelle behind the clarinet. Lori and Willette, the French horn. All ten Indian boys line up behind the drum.  
  
\*  
1970: My sister Mary is beautiful. She is fourteen years older than me. She wears short skirts and nylons because she is supposed to wear short skirts and nylons. It is expected. Her black hair is combed long, straight. Often, she sits in her favorite chair, the fake leather lounger we rescued from the dump. Holding a hand mirror, she combs her hair, applies make-up. Much lipstick and eye shadow, no foundation. She is always leaving the house. I do not know where she goes.  
  
I do remember sitting at her feet, rubbing my cheek against her nyloned calf, while she waited for her ride. In Montana in 1981, she died in an early morning fire. At that time, I was sleeping at a friend's house in Washington state. I was not dreaming of my sister.  
  
\*  
"Sherman," says the critic. "How does the oral tradition apply to your work?"  
  
"Well," I say, as I hold my latest book close to me, "It doesn't apply at all because I typed this. And when I'm typing, I'm really, really quiet."  
  
\*  
1977: Summer. Steve and I went to attend the KISS concert in Spokane. KISS is very popular on my reservation. Gene Simmons, the bass player, Paul Stanley, lead singer and rhythm guitarist, Ace Frehley, lead guitar. Peter Criss, drums. All four hide their faces behind elaborate make-up; Simmons the devil, Stanley the lover, Frehley the space man. Criss the cat.  
  
The songs: "Do You Love Me," "Calling Dr. Love," "Love Gun," "Makin' Love," and "C'mon and Love Me."  
  
Steve and I are too young to go on our own. His uncle and aunt, born-again Christians, decide to  
chaperon us. Inside the Spokane Coliseum, the four of us find seats far from the stage and the   
enormous speakers. Uncle and Aunt wanted to avoid the bulk of the crowd, but have landed us in the unofficial pot-smoking section. We are over-whelmed by the sweet smoke. Steve and I cover our mouths and noses with Styrofoam cups and try to breathe normally.  
  
KISS opens their show with staged explosions, flashing red lights, a prolonged guitar solo by Frehley. Simmons spits fire. The crowd rushes the stage. All the pot smokers in our section hold lighters, tiny flames flickering high above their heads. The songs are so  
familiar we know all the words. The audience sings along.  
  
The songs: "Let Me Go, Rock 'n' Roll," "Detroit Rock City," "Rock and Roll All Nite."  
  
The decibel level is tremendous. Steve and I can feel the sound waves crashing against the Styrofoam cups we hold over our faces. Aunt and Uncle are panicked, finally convinced that the devil plays a mean guitar. This is too much for them. It is also too much for Steve and me, but we pretend to be disappointed when Aunt and Uncle drag us out of the Coliseum.  
  
During the drive home, Aunt and Uncle play Christian music on the radio. Loudly and badly they sing along. Steve and I are in the back of the Pacer, lookin up through the strangely curved rear window. There is a meteor shower, the largest in a decade. Steve and I smell like pot smoke. We smile at this. Our ears ring. We make wishes on the shooting stars,  
though both of us know that a shooting star is not a star. It's just a sliver of stone.  
  
\*  
I made a very conscious decision to marry an Indian woman, who made a very conscous decision to marry me.  
  
Our hope: to give birth to and raise Indian children who love themselves. That is the most revolutionary act.  
  
\*  
1982: I am the only Indian student at Reardan High, an all-white school in a small farm town just outside my reservation. I am in the pizza parlor, sharing a deluxe with my white friends. We are talking and laughing. A drunk Indian walks in. He staggers to the counter and orders a beer. The waiter ignores him. We are all silent.  
  
At our table, S is shaking her head. She leans toward us as if to share a secret.  
  
"Man," she says, "I hate Indians."  
  
\*  
I am curious about the writers who identify themselves as mixed-blood Indians. Is it difficult for them to decide which container they should put their nouns and verbs into? Invisibility, after all, can be useful, as a blonde, Aryan-featured Jew in Germany might have found during WWII. Then again, I think of the horror stories that such a pale indetected Jew could tell about life during the Holocaust.  
  
\*  
An Incomplete List of People I Wish Were Indian  
  
Kareem Abdul-Jabber  
Adam  
Muhammad Ali  
Susan B. Anthony  
Jimmy Carter  
Patsy Cline  
D.B.Cooper  
Robert De Niro  
Emily Dickinson  
Isadora Duncan  
Amelia Earhart  
Eve  
Diane Fossey  
Jesus Christ  
Robert Johnson  
Helen Keller  
Billie Jean King  
Martin Luther King, Jr.  
John Lennon  
Mary Magdalene  
Pablo Neruda  
Flannery O'Conner  
Rosa Parks  
Wilma Rudolph  
Sappho  
William Shakespeare  
Bruce Springsteen  
Meryl Streep  
John Steinbeck  
Superman  
Harriet Tubman  
Voltaire  
Walt Whitman  
  
\*  
1995: Summer, Seattle, Washington. I am idling at a  red light when a car filled with white boys pulls up beside me. The white boy in the front passenger seat leans out his window.  
  
"I hate you Indian motherfuckers," he screams.  
  
I quietly wait for the green light.  
  
\*  
1978: David, Randy, Steve, and I decide to form a reservation doowop group, like the Platters. During recess, we practice behind the old tribal school. Steve, a falsetto, is the best singer. I am the worst singer, but have the deepest voice, and am therefore an asset.  
  
"What songs do you want to sing?" asks David.  
  
"Tracks of My Tears," says Steve, who always decides these kind of things.  
  
We sing, desperately trying to remember the lyrics to that song. We try to remember other songs. We remember the chorus to most, the first verse of a few, and only one in its entirety. For some reason, we all know the lyrics to "Monster Mash." However, I'm the only one who can manage to sing in a pseudo-Transylvanian accent that the song requires. This dubious skill makes me lead singer, despite Steve's protests.  
   
"We need a name for our group," says Randy.  
  
"How about The Warriors?" I ask.  
  
Everybody agrees. We've watched a lot of Westerns.  
  
We sing "Monster Mash" over and over. We want to be famous. We want all the little Indian girls  
to shout our names. Finally, after days of practice, we are ready for our debut. Walking in line, like soldiers, the four of us parade around the playground. We sing "Monster Mash." I am in front, followed by Steve, David, then Randy, who is the shortest, but the toughest Indian fighter our reservation has ever known. We sing. We are The Warriors. All the other Indian boys and girls line up behind us as we march. We are heroes. We are loved. I sing with everything I have inside of me: pain, happiness, anger, depression, heart, soul, small intestine. I sing and am rewarded with people who listen.  
  
That is why I am a poet.  
  
\*  
I remember watching Richard Nixon, during the Watergate affair, as he held a press conference and told the entire world that he was not a crook.  
  
For the first time, I understood that storytellers could be bad people.  
  
\*  
Poetry = Anger x Imagination  
  
\*  
Every time I venture into the bookstore, I find another book about Indians. There are hundreds of books about Indians published every year, yet so few are written by Indians. I gather all the books written by Indians. I discover:  
  
A book written by a person who identifies as mixed-blood will sell more copies than a book who identifies as strictly Indian.  
  
A book written by a non-Indian will sell more copies than a book written by either a mixed-blood or an Indian writer.  
  
Reservation Indian writers are rarely published in any form.  
  
A book about Indian life in the past, whether written by a non-Indian, mixed-blood, or Indian will sell more copies than a book about Indian life in the twentieth century.  
  
If you are a non-Indian writing about Indians, it is almost guaranteed that something positive will be written about you by Tony Hillerman.  
  
Indian writers who are women will be compared to Louise Erdich. Indian writers who are men will be compared with Michael Dorris.  
  
A very small percentage of the readers of Indian literature have heard of Simon J. Ortiz. This is a crime.  
  
Books about the Sioux sell more copies than all of the books written about other tribes combined.  
  
Mixed-blood writers often write about any tribe which interests them, whether or not they are related to that tribe.  
  
Writers who use obvious Indian names, such as Eagle Woman and Pretty Shield, are usually non-Indian.  
  
Non-Indian writers usually say "Great Spirit," "Mother Earth," "Two-Legged, Four-Legged, and Winged."

Mixed-blood writers usually say "Creator," "Mother Earth," "Two-Legged, Four-Legged, and Winged."

Indian writers usually say "God," "Mother Earth," "Human Being, Dog, and Bird."  
  
If a book about Indians contains no dogs, then it was written by a non-Indian or mixed-blood writer.  
  
If on a cover of a book there are winged animals who aren't supposed to have wings, then it was written by a non-Indian.  
  
Successful non-Indian writers are viewed as well-informed about Indian life. Successful mixed-blood writers are viewed as wonderful translators of Indian life. Successful Indian writers are viewed as traditional storytellers of Indian life.  
  
Very few Indian and mixed-blood writers speak their tribal languages. Even fewer non-Indian writers speak their tribal languages.  
  
Indians often write exclusively about reservation life, even if they never lived on a reservation.  
  
Mixed-bloods often write exclusively about Indians, even if they grew up in non-Indian communities.  
  
Non-Indian writers always write about reservation life.  
  
Nobody has written the great urban Indian novel yet.  
  
Most Indians who write about Indians are fiction writers. Fiction about Indians sells.  
  
\*  
Have you stood in a crowded room where nobody looks like you? If you are white, have you stood in a room full of black people? Are you an Irish man who has strolled through the streets of Compton? If you are black, have you stood in a room full of white people? Are you an African-American man, who has played a back nine at the local country club? If you are a woman, have you stood in a room full of men? Are you Sandra Day O'Conner or Ruth Ginsberg?  
  
Since I left the reservation, almost every room I enter is filled with people that do not look like me. There are only two million Indians in the country. We could all fit into one medium-sized city. Someone should look into it.  
  
Often, I am most alone in bookstores where I am reading from my work. I look up from the page at white faces. This is frightening.  
  
\*  
There is an apple tree outside my grandmother's house on the reservation. The apples are green; my grandmother's house is green. This is the game: My siblings and I try to sneak apples from the tree. Sometimes, our friends will join our raiding expeditions. My grandmother believes green apples are poison and is simply trying to protect us from sickness. There is nothing biblical about this story.  
  
The game has rules. We always have to raid the tree during the daylight. My grandmother has bad eyes and it would be unfair to challenge her in the dark. We all have to approach the tree at the same time. Arnold, my older brother, Kim and Arlene, myyounger twin sisters. We have to climb the tree to steal apples, ignoring the fruit which hands close to the ground.  
  
Arnold is the best apple thief on the reservation. He is chubby, but quick. He is fearless in the tree, climbing to the top for the plumpest apples. He hands from a branch with one arm, reaches for apples with the other, and fills his pockets with his booty. I love him like crazy. My sisters are more conservative. Often they grab one apple and eat it quickly, sitting on a sturdy branch. I always like the green apples with a hint of red. While we are busy raiding the tree, we also keep an eye on our grandmother's house. She is a big woman,  nearly six feet tall. At th age of seventy, she can still outrun any ten-year old.  
  
Arnold, of course, is always the first kid out of the tree. He hangs from a branch,drops to the ground, and screams loudly, announcing our presence to our grandmother. He runs away, leaving my sisters and me stuck in the tree. We scramble to the ground and try to escape.  
  
"Junior," she shouts and I freeze. That's the rule. Sometimes a dozen Indian kids have been in that tree, scattering in random directions when our grandmother bursts out of the house. If she remembers your name, you are a prisoner of war. And, belive me, no matter how many kids are running away, my grandmother always remembers my name.  
  
My grandmother died when I was fourteen years old. I miss her. I miss everybody.  
  
"Junior," she shouts and I close my eyes in disgust. Captured again! I wait as she walks up to me. She holds out her hand and I give her the stolen apples. Then she smacks me gently on the top of my head. I am free to run then, pretending she never caught me in the first place. I try to catch up with the others. Running through the trees surrounding my grandmother's house. I shout out their names.  
  
\*  
So many people claim to be Indian, speaking of an Indian grandmother, a warrior grandfather. Suppose the United States Government announced that all Indians had to return to their reservation. How many of these people would not shove the Indian ancestor back into the closet?  
  
\*  
My mother still makes quilts, My wife and I sleep beneath one. My brother works for our tribal casino. One sister works for our bingo hall, while the other works in the tribal finance department. Our adopted little brother, James, who is actually our second cousin, is a freshman at Reardan High School. He can run the mile in five minutes.  
  
My father is an alcoholic. He used to leave us for weeks at a time to drink with his friends and cousins. I missed him so much I'd cry myself sick.  
  
I could always tell when he was going to leave. He would be tense, quiet, unable to concentrate. He'd flip through magazines and television channels.  He'd open the refrigerator door, study its contents, shut the door, and walk away. Five minutes later, he'd be back at the fridge, rearranging items on the shelves. I would follow him from place to place, trying to prevent his escape.  
  
Once, he went into the bathroom, which had no windows, while I sat outside the only door and waited for him. I could not hear him inside. I knocked on the thin wood. I was five years old.  
  
"Are you there?," I asked. "Are you still there?"  
  
Every time he left, I ended up in the emergency room. But I always got well and he always came back. He'd walk in the door without warning. We'd forgive him.  
  
Years later, I am giving a reading at a bookstore in Spokane, Washington. There is a large crowd. I read a story about an Indian father who leaves his family for good. He moves to a city a thousand miles away. Then he dies. It is a sad story. When I finish, a woman in the front row breaks into tears.  
  
"What's wrong?" I ask her.  
  
"I'm so sorry about your father," she says.  
  
"Thank you," I say, "But that's my father sitting right next to you."

### How It Feels to Be Colored Me by Zora Neale Hurston

1 I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was *not* an Indian chief.

2 I remember the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. It is exclusively a colored town. The only white people I knew passed through the town going to or coming from Orlando. The native whites rode dusty horses, the Northern tourists chugged down the sandy village road in automobiles. The town knew the Southerners and never stopped cane chewing when they passed. But the Northerners were something else again. They were peered at cautiously from behind curtains by the timid. The more venturesome would come out on the porch to watch them go past and got just as much pleasure out of the tourists as the tourists got out of the village.

3 The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat for me. My favorite place was atop the gatepost. Proscenium box for a born first-nighter. Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn't mind the actors knowing that I liked it. I usually spoke to them in passing. I'd wave at them and when they returned my salute, I would say something like this: "Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-goin'?" Usually automobile or the horse paused at this, and after a queer exchange of compliments, I would probably "go a piece of the way" with them, as we say in farthest Florida. If one of my family happened to come to the front in time to see me, of course negotiations would be rudely broken off. But even so, it is clear that I was the first "welcome-to-our-state" Floridian, and I hope the Miami Chamber of Commerce will please take notice.

4 During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there. They liked to hear me "speak pieces" and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la, and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop, only they didn't know it. The colored people gave no dimes. They deplored any joyful tendencies in me, but I was their Zora nevertheless. I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county--everybody's Zora.

5 But changes came in the family when I was thirteen, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders, a Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown--warranted not to rub nor run.

6 But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more of less. No, I do not weep at the world--I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

7 Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said "On the line!" The Reconstruction said "Get set!" and the generation before said "Go!" I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it. No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think--to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep.

8 The position of my white neighbor is much more difficult. No brown specter pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed. The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting.

9 I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.

10 For instance at Barnard. "Beside the waters of the Hudson" I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.

11 Sometimes it is the other way around. A white person is set down in our midst, but the contrast is just as sharp for me. For instance, when I sit in the drafty basement that is The New World Cabaret with a white person, my color comes. We enter chatting about any little nothing that we have in common and are seated by the jazz waiters. In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one plunges into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions, but gets right down to business. It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen--follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeeooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something--give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.

12 "Good music they have here," he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips.

13 Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am so colored.

14 At certain times I have no race, I am me. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance. So far as my feelings are concerned, Peggy Hopkins Joyce on the Boule Mich with her gorgeous raiment, stately carriage, knees knocking together in a most aristocratic manner, has nothing on me. The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.

15 I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong.

16 Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me.

17 But in the main, I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red and yellow. Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless. A first-water diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knife-blade, old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two still a little fragrant. In your hand is the brown bag. On the ground before you is the jumble it held--so much like the jumble in the bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly. A bit of colored glass more or less would not matter. Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place--who knows?

(1928)

### Death of a Pig by E. B. White

**-1-**

I spent several days and nights in mid-September with an ailing pig and I feel driven to account for this stretch of time, more particularly since the pig died at last, and I lived, and things might easily have gone the other way round and none left to do the accounting. Even now, so close to the event, I cannot recall the hours sharply and am not ready to say whether death came on the third night or the fourth night. This uncertainty afflicts me with a sense of personal deterioration; if I were in decent health I would know how many nights I had sat up with a pig.  
  
The scheme of buying a spring pig in blossom time, feeding it through summer and fall, and butchering it when the solid cold weather arrives, is a familiar scheme to me and follows an antique pattern. It is a tragedy enacted on most farms with perfect fidelity to the original script. The murder, being premeditated, is in the first degree but is quick and skillful, and the smoked bacon and ham provide a ceremonial ending whose fitness is seldom questioned.  
  
Once in a while something slips - one of the actors goes up in his lines and the whole performance stumbles and halts. My pig simply failed to show up for a meal. The alarm spread rapidly. The classic outline of the tragedy was lost. I found myself cast suddenly in the role of pig's friend and physician - a farcical character with an enema bag for a prop. I had a presentiment, the very first afternoon, that the play would never regain its balance and that my sympathies were now wholly with the pig. This was slapstick - the sort of dramatic treatment which instantly appealed to my old dachshund, Fred, who joined the vigil, held the bag, and, when all was over, presided at the interment. When we slid the body into the grave, we both wore shaken to the core. The loss we felt was not the loss of ham but the loss of pig. He had evidently become precious to me, not that he represented a distant nourishment in a hungry time, but that he had suffered in a suffering world. But I'm running ahead of my story and shall have to go back.  
  
My pigpen is at the bottom of an old orchard below the house. The pigs I have raised have lived in a faded building which once was an icehouse. There is a pleasant yard to move about in, shaded by an apple tree which overhangs the low rail fence. A pig couldn't ask for anything better - or none has, at any rate. The sawdust in the icehouse makes a comfortable bottom in which to root, and a warm bed. This sawdust, however, came under suspicion when the pig took sick. One of my neighbors said he thought the pig would have done better on new ground - the same principle that applies in planting potatoes. He said there might be something unhealthy about that sawdust, that he never thought well of sawdust.  
  
It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when I first noticed that there was something wrong with the pig. He failed to appear at the trough for his supper, and when a pig (or a child) refuses supper a chill wave of fear runs through any household, or icehousehold. After examining my pig, who was stretched out in the sawdust inside the building, I went to the phone and cranked it four times. Mr. Henderson answered. "What's good for a sick pig?" I asked. (There is never any identification needed on a country phone; the person on the other end knows who is talking by the sound of the voice and by the character of the question.)  
  
"I don't know, I never had a sick pig," said Mr. Henderson, "but I can find out quick enough. You hang up and I'll call Irving."  
  
Mr. Henderson was back on the line again in five minutes. "Irving says roll him over on his back and give him two ounces of castor oil or sweet oil, and if that doesn't do the trick give him an injection of soapy water. He says he's almost sure the pig's plugged up, and even if he's wrong, it can't do any harm."  
  
1 thanked Mr. Henderson. I didn't go right down to the pig, though. I sank into a chair and sat still for a few minutes to think about my troubles, and then I got up and went to the barn, catching up on some odds and ends that needed tending to. Unconsciously I held off, for an hour, the deed by which I would officially recognize the collapse of the performance of raising a pig; I wanted no interruption in the regularity of feeding, the steadiness of growth, the even succession of days. I wanted no interruption, wanted no oil, no deviation. I just wanted to keep on raising a pig, full meal after full meal, spring into summer into fall. I didn't even know whether there were two ounces of castor oil on the place.

**-2-**

Shortly after five o'clock I remembered that we had been invited out to dinner that night and realized that if I were to dose a pig there was no time to lose. The dinner date seemed a familiar conflict: I move in a desultory society and often a week or two will roll by without my going to anybody's house to dinner or anyone's coming to mine, but when an occasion does arise, and I am summoned, something usually turns up (an hour or two in advance) to make all human intercourse seem vastly inappropriate. I have come to believe that there is in hostesses a special power of divination, and that they deliberately arrange dinners to coincide with pig failure or some other sort of failure. At any rate, it was after five o'clock and I knew I could put off no longer the evil hour.  
  
When my son and I arrived at the pigyard, armed with a small bottle of castor oil and a length of clothesline, the pig had emerged from his house and was standing in the middle of his yard, listlessly. He gave us a slim greeting. I could see that he felt uncomfortable and uncertain. I had brought the clothesline thinking I'd have to tie him (the pig weighed more than a hundred pounds) but we never used it. My son reached down, grabbed both front legs, upset him quickly, and when he opened his mouth to scream I turned the oil into his throat - a pink, corrugated area I had never seen before. I had just time to read the label while the neck of the bottle was in his mouth. It said Puretest. The screams, slightly muffled by oil, were pitched in the hysterically high range of pigsound, as though torture were being carried out, but they didn't last long: it was all over rather suddenly, and, his legs released, the pig righted himself.  
  
In the upset position the corners of his mouth had been turned down, giving him a frowning expression. Back on his feet again, he regained the set smile that a pig wears even in sickness. He stood his ground, sucking slightly at the residue of oil; a few drops leaked out of his lips while his wicked eyes, shaded by their coy little lashes, turned on me in disgust and hatred. I scratched him gently with oily fingers and he remained quiet, as though trying to recall the satisfaction of being scratched when in health, and seeming to rehearse in his mind the indignity to which he had just been subjected. I noticed, as I stood there, four or five small dark spots on his back near the tail end, reddish brown in color, each about the size of a housefly. I could not make out what they were. They did not look troublesome but at the same time they did not look like mere surface bruises or chafe marks. Rather they seemed blemishes of internal origin. His stiff white bristles almost completedly hid them and I had to part the bristles with my fingers to get a good look. Several hours later, a few minutes before midnight, having dined well and at someone else's expense, I returned to the pighouse with a flashlight. The patient was asleep. Kneeling, I felt his ears (as you might put your hand on the forehead of a child) and they seemed cool, and then with the light made a careful examination of the yard and the house for sign that the oil had worked. I found none and went to bed. We had been having an unseasonable spell of weather- hot, close days, with the fog shutting in every night, scaling for a few hours in midday, then creeping back again at dark, drifting in first over the trees on the point, then suddenly blowing across the fields, blotting out the world and taking possession of houses, men, and animals. Everyone kept hoping for a break, but the break failed to come. Next day was another hot one. I visited the pig before breakfast and tried to tempt him with a little milk in his trough. He just stared at it, while I made a sucking sound through my teeth to remind him of past pleasures of the feast. With very small, timid pigs, weanlings, this ruse is often quite successful and will encourage them to eat; but with a large, sick pig the ruse is senseless and the sound I made must have made him feel, if anything, more miserable. He not only did not crave food, he felt a positive revulsion to it. I found a place under the apple tree where he had vomited in the night. At this point, although a depression had settled over me, I didn't suppose that I was going to lose my pig. From the lustiness of a healthy pig a man derives a feeling of personal lustiness; the stuff that goes into the trough and is received with such enthusiasm is an earnest of some later feast of his own, and when this suddenly comes to an end and the food lies stale and untouched, souring in  
the sun, the pig's imbalance becomes the man's, vicariously, and life seems insecure, displaced, transitory.

**-3-**

As my own spirits declined, along with the pig's, the spirits of my vile old dachshund rose. The frequency of our trips down the footpath through the orchard to the pigyard delighted him, although he suffers greatly from arthritis, moves with difficulty, and would be bedridden if he could find anyone willing to serve him meals on a tray.  
  
He never missed a chance to visit the pig with me, and he made many professional calls on his own. You could see him down there at all hours, his white face parting the grass along the fence as he wobbled and stumbled about, his stethoscope dangling - a happy quack, writing his villainous prescriptions and grinning his corrosive grin. When the enema bag appeared, and the bucket of warm suds, his happiness was complete, and he managed to squeeze his enormous body between the two lowest rails of the yard and then assumed full charge of the irrigation. Once, when I lowered the bag to check the flow, he reached in and hurriedly drank a few mouthfuls of the suds to test their potency. I have noticed that Fred will feverishly consume any substance that is associated with trouble - the bitter flavor is to his liking. When the bag was above reach, he concentrated on the pig and was everywhere at once, a tower of strength and inconvenience. The pig, curiously enough, stood rather quietly through this colonic carnival, and the enema, though ineffective, was not as difficult as I had anticipated.  
  
I discovered, though, that once having given a pig an enema there is no turning back, no chance of resuming one of life's more stereotyped roles. The pig's lot and mine were inextricably bound now, as though the rubber tube were the silver cord. From then until the time of his death I held the pig steadily in the bowl of my mind; the task of trying to deliver him from his misery became a strong obsession. His suffering soon became the embodiment of all earthly wretchedness. Along toward the end of the afternoon, defeated in physicking, I phoned the veterinary twenty miles away and placed the case formally in his hands. He was full of questions, and when I casually mentioned the dark spots on the pig's back, his voice changed its tone.  
  
"I don't want to scare you," he said, "but when there are spots, erysipelas has to be considered."  
  
Together we considered erysipelas, with frequent interruptions from the telephone operator, who wasn't sure the connection had been established. "If a pig has erysipolas can he give it to a person?" I asked.  
  
"Yes, he can," replied the vet.  
  
"Have they answered?" asked the operator.  
  
"Yes, they have," I said. Then I addressed the vet again. "You better come over here and examine this pig right away."  
  
"I can't come myself," said the vet, "but McDonald can come this evening if that's all right. Mac knows more about pigs than I do anyway. You needn't worry too much about the spots. To indicate erysipelas they would have to be deep hemorrhagic infarcts."  
  
"Deep hemorrhagic what?" I asked.  
  
"Infarcts," said the vet.  
  
"Have they answered?" asked the operator.  
  
"Well," I said, "I don't know what you'd call these spots, except they're about the size of a housefly. If the pig has erysipelas I guess I have it, too, by this time, because we've been very close lately."  
  
"McDonald will be over," said the vet.  
  
I hung up. My throat felt dry and I went to the cupboard and got a bottle of whiskey. Deep hemorrhagic infarcts - the phrase began fastening its hooks in my head. I had assumed that there could be nothing much wrong with a pig during the months it was being groomed for murder; my confidence in the essential health and endurance of pigs had been strong and deep, particularly in the health of pigs that belonged to me and that were part of my proud scheme. The awakening had been violent and I minded it all the more because I knew that what could be true of my pig could be true also of the rest of my tidy world. 1 tried to put this distasteful idea from me, but it kept recurring. I took a short drink of the whiskey and then, although I wanted to go down to the yard and look for fresh signs, I was scared to. I was certain I had erysipelas.  
  
It was long after dark and the supper dishes had been put away when a car drove in and McDonald got out. He had a girl with him. I could just make her out in the darkness -she seemed young and pretty. "This is Miss Wyman," he said. "We've been having a picnic supper on the shore, that's why I'm late."  
  
McDonald stood in the driveway and stripped off his jacket, then his shirt. His stocky arms and capable hands showed up in my flashlight's gleam as I helped him find his coverall and get zipped up. The rear seat of his car contained an astonishing amount of paraphernalia, which he soon overhauled, selecting a chain, a syringe, a bottle of oil, a rubber tube, and some other things I couldn't identify. Miss Wyman said she'd go along with us and see the pig. I led the way down the warm slope of the orchard, my light picking out the path for them, and we all three climbed the fence, entered the pighouse, and squatted by the pig while McDonald took a rectal reading. My flashlight picked up the glitter of an engagement ring on the girl's hand.  
  
"No elevation," said McDonald, twisting the thermometer in the light. "You needn't worry about erysipelas." He ran his hand slowly over the pig's stomach and at one point the pig cried out in pain.  
  
"Poor piggledy-wiggledy!" said Miss Wyman.  
  
The treatment I had been giving the pig for two days was then repeated, somewhat more expertly, by the doctor, Miss Wyman and I handing him things as he needed them - holding the chain that he had looped around the pig's upper jaw, holding the syringe, holding the bottle stopper, the end of the tube, all of us working in darkness and in comfort, working with the instinctive teamwork induced by emergency conditions, the pig unprotesting, the house shadowy, protecting, intimate. I went to bed tired but with a feeling of relief that I had turned over part of the responsibility of the case to a licensed doctor. I was beginning to think, though, that the pig was not going to live.

**-4-**

He died twenty-four hours later, or it might have been forty-eight - there is a blur in time here, and I may have lost or picked up a day in the telling and the pig one in the dying. At intervals during the last day I took cool fresh water down to him and at such times as he found the strength to get to his feet he would stand with head in the pail and snuffle his snout around. He drank a few sips but no more; yet it seemed to comfort him to dip his nose in water and bobble it about, sucking in and blowing out through his teeth. Much of the time, now, he lay indoors half buried in sawdust. Once, near the last, while I was attending him I saw him try to make a bed for himself but he lacked the strength, and when he set his snout into the dust he was unable to plow even the little furrow he needed to lie down in.  
  
He came out of the house to die. When I went down, before going to bed, he lay stretched in the yard a few feet from the door. I knelt, saw that he was dead, and left him there: his face had a mild look, expressive neither of deep peace nor of deep suffering, although I think he had suffered a good deal. I went back up to the house and to bed, and cried internally - deep hemorrhagic intears. I didn't wake till nearly eight the next morning, and when I looked out the open window the grave was already being dug, down beyond the dump under a wild apple. I could hear the spade strike against the small rocks that blocked the way. Never send to know for whom the grave is dug, I said to myself, it's dug for thee. Fred, I well knew, was supervising the work of digging, so I ate breakfast slowly.  
  
It was a Saturday morning. The thicket in which I found the gravediggers at work was dark and warm, the sky overcast. Here, among alders and young hackmatacks, at the foot of the apple tree, Howard had dug a beautiful hole, five feet long, three feet wide, three feet deep. He was standing in it, removing the last spadefuls of earth while Fred patrolled the brink in simple but impressive circles, disturbing the loose earth of the mound so that it trickled back in. There had been no rain in weeks and the soil, even three feet down, was dry and powdery. As I stood and stared, an enormous earthworm which had been partially exposed by the spade at the bottom dug itself deeper and made a slow withdrawal, seeking even remoter moistures at even lonelier depths. And just as Howard stepped out and rested his spade against the tree and lit a cigarette, a small green apple separated itself from a branch overhead and fell into the hole. Everything about this last scene seemed overwritten - the dismal sky, the shabby woods, the imminence of rain, the worm (legendary bedfellow of the dead), the apple (conventional garnish of a pig).  
  
But even so, there was a directness and dispatch about animal burial, I thought, that made it a more decent affair than human burial: there was no stopover in the undertaker's foul parlor, no wreath nor spray; and when we hitched a line to the pig's hind legs and dragged him swiftly from his yard, throwing our weight into the harness and leaving a wake of crushed grass and smoothed rubble over the dump, ours was a businesslike procession, with Fred, the dishonorable pallbearer, staggering along in the rear, his perverse bereavement showing in every seam in his face; and the post mortem performed handily and swiftly right at the edge of the grave, so that the inwards which had caused the pig's death preceded him into the ground and he lay at last resting squarely on the cause of his own undoing.  
  
I threw in the first shovelful, and then we worked rapidly and without talk, until the job was complete. I picked up the rope, made it fast to Fred's collar (he is a notorious ghoul), and we all three filed back up the path to the house, Fred bringing up the rear and holding back every inch of the way, feigning unusual stiffness. I noticed that although he weighed far less than the pig, he was harder to drag, being possessed of the vital spark.  
  
The news of the death of my pig traveled fast and far, and I received many expressions of sympathy from friends and neighbors, for no one took the event lightly and the premature expiration of a pig is, I soon discovered, a departure which the community marks solemnly on its calendar, a sorrow in which it feels fully involved. I have written this account in penitence and in grief, as a man who failed to raise his pig, and to explain my deviation from the classic course of so many raised pigs. The grave in the woods is unmarked, but Fred can direct the mourner to it unerringly and with immense good will, and I know he and I shall often revisit it, singly and together, in seasons of reflection and despair, on flagless memorial days of our own choosing.  
  
*Vol. 181, No. 1, pp. 28–33*

### “Why’s this so good?” No. 72: E.B. White and the sick pig by [Betsy O'Donovan](http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/author/betsy-odonovan/)

 | February 26, 2013

The first time most people fall for E.B. White – certainly the first time I did – they are 6 or 7 or 8. In 1952, “Charlotte’s Web” made him the New Yorker writer with the largest grade-school fan base.

[](http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/304831_10151185252630266_898933179_n.jpg)

O’Donovan (photo by Finbarr O’Reilly)

I fell in love with “Charlotte’s Web” because, when White talked about grown-up mysteries  like love and death, he was as honest as a punch to the jaw. Many years later, I fell in love with “[Death of a Pig](http://www.theatlantic.com/ideastour/animals/white-full.html)” because, covering the same subjects for adults, White was as straightforward as a pie to the face.

Here are the facts of the case: A gentleman farmer (and New Yorker staff writer) ventures out to his pig enclosure one September afternoon and discovers that the hog he has nurtured through spring and summer has lost its appetite, gone listless. An obstruction of the bowel is suspected. The farmer, his dachshund and a veterinarian preside over the pig’s decline, until it dies alone a few days later, sometime between supper and midnight. The pig receives a graveside autopsy and is buried under a wild apple tree. The farmer accepts his neighbor’s condolences (“the premature expiration of a pig is, I soon discovered, a departure which the community marks solemnly on its calendar, a sorrow in which it feels fully involved”) before taking up his pen and telling the story “in penitence and in grief, as a man who failed to raise his pig.”

It’s slim stuff, but that voice! That rueful tone, the invitation to cast White out of the society of pig-raisers. White remembers (perhaps he wrote) the golden rule of first-person narration, which is to approach readers with humility and a perspective they can share. “I live by my wits and started at an early age to inject myself into the act, as a clown does in the ring,” he told The Paris Review in 1969.

It’s one thing to describe the trick. It’s another to execute it.

White was, first and always, an essayist, and he could muse about anything: Model T Fords (“Farewell My Lovely”), making his way around Alaska as a firemen’s messboy on a steamer ship (“The Years of Wonder”), sales pitches for lightning rods (“Removal”). The subjects were diverse, but the common thread was his approach, which was often that of a hapless outsider – as his readers would be. He combined wide-eyed interest with concern for the natural world and a scientist’s knack for detached observation. (Not, however, a scientist’s precision or methods: Once, after collecting, studying and describing a spider’s egg sack, White forgot it on top of his bureau in New York, resulting in a brief infestation and a web-covered hairbrush and nail scissors. This later fueled the conclusion of “Charlotte’s Web.”)

White emerges with vivid prose. “Death of a Pig” is chockablock with precise and memorable lines:

When he opened his mouth to scream, I turned the oil into his throat – a pink, corrugated area I had never seen before. (On dosing the patient with castor oil.)

I made a sucking sound through my teeth to remind him of past pleasures of the feast. With very small, timid pigs, weanlings, this ruse is often quite successful and will encourage them to eat; but with a large, sick pig the ruse is senseless and the sound I made must have made him feel, if anything, more miserable. (On tempting him to eat.)

I have noticed that Fred will feverishly consume any substance that is associated with trouble – the bitter flavor is to his liking. When the bag was above reach, he concentrated on the pig and was everywhere at once, a tower of strength and inconvenience. (On his dachshund’s attempts to sneak sips of an enema solution.)

We’re not being told much of anything; instead, we’re seeing and feeling it. And so we’re having fun, skipping from one bright image to another, along for whatever ride White wants to offer.

The narrative essay isn’t a self-help manual; if we do get any help, it’s to see that we are not alone. The first-person narrative is an invitation to consider the human condition, and part of that condition is indignity.

In that regard, White doesn’t spare himself. In “Death of a Pig,” at least ostensibly the story of a failure and death, the absurdity is relentless and delicious. White begins with a small pomposity:

I spent several days and nights in mid-September with an ailing pig and I feel driven to account for this stretch of time, more particularly since the pig died at last, and I lived, and things might easily have gone the other way round and none left to do the accounting.

Who doesn’t standing at a graveside and say, aghast, “I could have died – and one day I will”? This self-centered concern leads to all manner of human nonsense – thus the adage that tragedies begin with a wedding, and comedies begin with a funeral. White goes one better: We can’t forget that the grave, in this case, might as well be a luau pit.

Just as White is ginning up some pathos over his *pastoralis interruptus*, here come the clowns, flinging pies at the funeral.

Enter Fred, a “vile old dachshund” who thrusts his pointy nose into the story and the pigpen as “a happy quack, writing his villainous prescriptions and grinning his corrosive grin.” The pig is “plugged up,” which leads to doses of castor oil and ultimately leaves White “cast suddenly in the role of pig’s friend and physician – a farcical character with an enema bag for a prop.” In the days of treatment, White describes Fred’s surreptitious sips from the soapy enema solution with such exasperation and helplessness that it’s easy to forget that White, not Fred, is in full control of the storytelling. White could have omitted the indignities, if not from the experience, then from his narrative.

But he needs them.

Storytellers often borrow the idea of “a lens” from filmmaking and photography. One of White’s particular gifts was knowing when to shift his lens to unexpected details that seemed like whimsical asides. More often than not, the odd bits act as a counterweight, pulling the camera back from White’s self-contemplation and offering us some perspective. The world spins on when pigs are shuffling off their coil, and when people do, too.

One of my favorite bits of the piece is a quote:

“Poor piggledy-wiggledy!” said Miss Wyman.

It might be the silliest interjection in nonfiction. Miss Wyman, the veterinarian’s fiancée, speaks her only line  just as White’s anxiety and the pig’s illness are nearing their crisis. Miss Wyman hits the sour note in the funeral dirge and the balloon of White’s self-importance is punctured again.

And that’s another pleasure of this essay, and why I come back to it over and over again. White invites us to see how uncertainty enters the life of the farmer when reaping intrudes before its season, and to consider that at the end of farming and husbandry (for pigs, wheat, cows, corn, farmers) is death.

But when we finish the piece, we haven’t really read about life interrupted by death. White’s essay is the story of a death interrupted by life. Fred and Miss Wyman are to this story what Dogberry the constable is to “Much Ado About Nothing:” irrepressible and absolutely necessary vulgarity.

White wants to talk about death, he wants to tell us things – often quite interesting things:

The loss we felt was not the loss of ham but the loss of pig. He had evidently become precious to me, not that he represented a distant nourishment in a hungry time, but that he had suffered in a suffering world.

It’s an important thought, dancing on the edge of discomfort. White can get away with that, and keep our attention, by unleashing reality, messy and absurd and undignified – and true.

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this entry was written by [Betsy O'Donovan](http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/author/betsy-odonovan/), posted on at 9:22 am, filed under [why's this so good?](http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/category/whys-this-so-good/) and tagged [Betsy O'Donovan](http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/tag/betsy-odonovan/), [E.B. White](http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/tag/e-b-white/), [Finbarr O'Reilly](http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/tag/finbarr-oreilly/), [The New Yorker](http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/tag/the-new-yorker/). bookmark the [permalink](http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/2013/02/26/whys-this-so-good-no-72-e-b-white-and-the-sick-pig/). follow any comments here with the[RSS feed for this post](http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/2013/02/26/whys-this-so-good-no-72-e-b-white-and-the-sick-pig/feed/). [post a comment](http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/2013/02/26/whys-this-so-good-no-72-e-b-white-and-the-sick-pig/#respond) or leave a trackback: [trackback URL](http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/2013/02/26/whys-this-so-good-no-72-e-b-white-and-the-sick-pig/trackback/).

Explore the following topics and put your ideas into polished paragraphs.

* Let’s hope that O’Donovan gave you at least a greater appreciation of “Death of a Pig” as a piece of writing. Pick one point from O’Donovan’s analysis of White’s essay that changed your understanding or appreciation of his piece. What was she bringing to the table that you needed?
* Returning to White’s essay, what else could we find to say about how he crafts a narrative using purposeful rhetoric?
* What about O’Donovan? Discuss her rhetorical practices. Is she imitating what she says she likes about White; if so, how? Is she offering a different model? How engaging is her prose in this short piece?

### The Waltz by Dorothy Parker

[insert pdf]

Considered one of the better examples and most anthologized examples of satire, “The Waltz” seems like a simple dramatic monologue from a woman unfortunate enough to be saddled with a poor dancing partner. Closer analysis reveals a writer firmly in control of her tools and able to use them deftly to comment on larger issues.

Some readers view this story as a near-allegory about male-female relationships and marriage in the first half of the 20th century. How might that interpretation be fitting? Be specific.

Parker is a master of voice. While not exhibiting the range of individuality Shakespeare mastered, her own fictional voices are spot on portraits of a mind at work. In this piece, she gives us dual consciousness and thus dual voicing. Using language as precise as hers, write a character sketch of each voice. Think back to our discussion of objectives and tactics in plays we read last year. What are the objectives and what the tactics for each voice?

Finally, discuss what Parker seeks to achieve by telling this story in this way?

### Facts are stranger than fiction by [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](http://www.theguardian.com/profile/chimamandangoziadichie)

The parts of my work people tell me are 'unbelievable' are those that are most closely based on real events, says Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

* + [The Guardian](http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian), Friday 19 April 2013 13.29 EDT

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'Non-fiction is often as much about character and story and emotion as fiction is.' Photograph: Steve Bisgrove/Rex Features

It was Christmas in Abba, my ancestral hometown. I was walking to my uncle's house on a road baked and cracked by the harmattan. Ahead of me were two girls, perhaps 15, talking loudly. They were local; I could tell from their clothes, their rural Igbo dialect, their gait. Then one of them slipped and fell down. "Fuck!" she said, in English. "Fuck!" I almost stopped to ask if I had heard her correctly, it was the last exclamation I would have imagined coming out of her mouth. I expected "Ewo!" or "Jesus!" or, more fancifully, something else in Igbo, exotic and delicious to my city ears. But she said 'Fuck.' I promptly pulled out the notebook I carry for striking and unexpected moments such as this. Moments I might later mould into [fiction](http://www.theguardian.com/books/fiction). I am yet to use this incident in a story but I can already imagine a potential reader saying, "I don't believe an Igbo village girl would say 'Fuck!" – a reasonable protest. But this particular village girl did say "Fuck". And it was its singularity that made it interesting.

I am drawn, as a reader, to detail-drenched stories about human lives affected as much by the internal as by the external, the kind of fiction that [Jane Smiley](http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/jane-smiley) nicely describes as "first and foremost about how individuals fit, or don't fit, into their social worlds". This kind of fiction is interested in the general as well as the particular, but it is often judged only by the conventions of the general. Readers know, for example, that the carefully observed novels of Ama Ata Aidoo, [Graham Greene](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/grahamgreene) and Honoré de Balzac are not the real world, yet we often apply a generalised "real world" logic to characters – no woman, we say, would behave like [Philip Roth](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/philiproth) writes women. (Though one wants to ask: surely there must be ONE woman who does?) I, too, often read fiction in this way. I decide what is believable and not, and I tell myself that this comes from what is in the "text", but it might more truthfully be less about the text and more about the expectations I bring to my reading.

Somerset Maugham, in Points of View, writes that [Henry James](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/henryjames) never knew how ordinary people behaved. "His characters have neither bowels nor sexual organs. He wrote a number of stories about men of letters, and it is told that when someone protested that literary men were not like that, he retorted: 'So much the worse for them.' If someone had ventured to suggest that a story of James's was not like life, he would have replied: "It isn't life, it's a story." Still, James's fiction tells us something about particular literary men of letters, and something about the general world in which they lived.

I write from real life. I am an unrepentant eavesdropper and a collector of stories. I record bits of overheard dialogue. I ask questions. I watch the world. And what I have discovered is that the parts of my fiction that people most tell me are "unbelievable" are those that are most closely based on the real, those least diluted by my imagination. Perhaps it is because of the relatively recent convention we bring to reading stories, where stories come labelled either as fiction or as non-fiction.

I lived in Philadelphia when I first went to the US to attend university. I was fresh from Nigeria. I did not consciously think of myself as black because race was not a way of self-identification. I remember clearly when I began to think of myself as black, in a gathering of friends, in an apartment, sitting around a wooden table, listening to a joke-filled conversation about race, with my Nigerian friend and her Chinese friend and her Jewish friend and her African-American friend and her Irish-American friend. I realised that I had taken on this new, odd identity in America. It has stayed with me ever since, that scene.

I don't often do this – transplant a scene from my life into my fiction without first twisting and tweaking – but I did with this particular scene, of course changing the names of my characters. An early reader said it was unbelievable, a forced scene, too obvious, staged just so I could say something about race. It wouldn't happen like that in real life, she said. I wanted to tell her – it did happen exactly like that! But I didn't. Because when I teach creative writing I tell my students: you cannot use real life to defend your fiction. If a reader tells you a character or scene is not believable, you cannot say – well, it actually happened like that. Because if it is unbelievable to the reader, then you, the writer, have failed at your art, which is to use language to achieve the suspension of belief.

I used to firmly believe this. I was once a dutiful daughter, an upholder of the contemporary conventions of literary fiction. But, increasingly, I question it. If I had written that scene in a memoir, would that first reader have said it was unbelievable? I think not. But I would not have written it in a memoir because some of the people are friends and I would want to protect them, and I would also have to ask whether I have the moral right to tell their story, especially to portray them saying what they said in a closed room, words they did not intend to have the world hear.

Non-fiction, and in particular the literary memoir, the stylised recollection of personal experience, is often as much about character and story and emotion as fiction is.[Binyavanga Wainaina](http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/binyavanga-wainaina)'s recently published memoir, One Day I Will Write About This Place, has complex characters, wonderful dialogue that advances the story, beautiful imagery and interesting insights. If you tore off the covers and gave it to somebody who had never heard of it, they might very well think it was a novel.

The difference is often not how books are written but how we read them. We read memoir and fiction with different eyes. The appeal of the memoir is in the authority it has, not from its contents but from its label. To label something a memoir is, in effect, to tell a reader that they cannot doubt it. You cannot question. It comes with a prepaid label of truth.

But, as a writer, I consider fiction more honest than memoir. I trust fiction more than I trust memoir. Not that ALL fiction is honest or that memoir writers are dishonest but that, by its very form, memoir is as much about what the writer puts in the book as it is about what the writer leaves out. In writing memoir, I am very aware of my own self-censorship, very aware of the "I" as a character, very aware of protecting people I love. Of course, not all fiction is honest, but fiction, by its very nature, creates the possibility of a certain kind of radical honesty that memoir does not. When I write fiction, I am free. I am free of thinking of an audience, free of self-censorship. Even when I base a character on a "real" person, the character is never quite that real person and so I don't feel that obligation of protection, and this leads, I think, to the possibility of a greater honesty. There are fiction writers I admire, whose work tends to the essayistic, who take on positions – [George Eliot](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/georgeeliot), Balzac, [Fielding](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/henryfielding) – and the strength of their work is in the freedom, the unshackling, that fiction affords.

I long for a new form, a cross between fiction and memoir, or a new way of reading, where we read fiction with the eyes of memoir and read memoir with the eyes of fiction.

[• Americanah](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2013/apr/11/americanah-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-review) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is published by Fourth Estate.

### A Hanging by George Orwell

It was in Burma, a sodden morning of the rains. A sickly light, like yellow tinfoil, was slanting over the high walls into the jail yard. We were waiting outside the condemned cells, a row of sheds fronted with double bars, like small animal cages. Each cell measured about ten feet by ten and was quite bare within except for a plank bed and a pot of drinking water. In some of them brown silent men were squatting at the inner bars, with their blankets draped round them. These were the condemned men, due to be hanged within the next week or two.

One prisoner had been brought out of his cell. He was a Hindu, a puny wisp of a man, with a shaven head and vague liquid eyes. He had a thick, sprouting moustache, absurdly too big for his body, rather like the moustache of a comic man on the films. Six tall Indian warders were guarding him and getting him ready for the gallows. Two of them stood by with rifles and fixed bayonets, while the others handcuffed him, passed a chain through his handcuffs and fixed it to their belts, and lashed his arms tight to his sides. They crowded very close about him, with their hands always on him in a careful, caressing grip, as though all the while feeling him to make sure he was there. It was like men handling a fish which is still alive and may jump back into the water. But he stood quite unresisting, yielding his arms limply to the ropes, as though he hardly noticed what was happening.

Eight o'clock struck and a bugle call, desolately thin in the wet air, floated from the distant barracks. The superintendent of the jail, who was standing apart from the rest of us, moodily prodding the gravel with his stick, raised his head at the sound. He was an army doctor, with a grey toothbrush moustache and a gruff voice. "For God's sake hurry up, Francis," he said irritably. "The man ought to have been dead by this time. Aren't you ready yet?"

Francis, the head jailer, a fat Dravidian in a white drill suit and gold spectacles, waved his black hand. "Yes sir, yes sir," he bubbled. "All iss satisfactorily prepared. The hangman iss waiting. We shall proceed." "Well, quick march, then. The prisoners can't get their breakfast till this job's over."

We set out for the gallows. Two warders marched on either side of the prisoner, with their rifles at the slope; two others marched close against him, gripping him by arm and shoulder, as though at once pushing and supporting him. The rest of us, magistrates and the like, followed behind. Suddenly, when we had gone ten yards, the procession stopped short without any order or warning. A dreadful thing had happened--a dog, come goodness knows whence, had appeared in the yard. It came bounding among us with a loud volley of barks, and leapt round us wagging its whole body, wild with glee at finding so many human beings together. It was a large woolly dog, half Airedale, half pariah. For a moment it pranced round us, and then, before anyone could stop it, it had made a dash for the prisoner, and jumping up tried to lick his face. Everyone stood aghast, too taken aback even to grab at the dog.

"Who let that bloody brute in here?" said the superintendent angrily. "Catch it, someone!"

A warder, detached from the escort, charged clumsily after the dog, but it danced and gamboled just out of his reach, taking everything as part of the game. A young Eurasian jailer picked up a handful of gravel and tried to stone the dog away, but it dodged the stones and came after us again. Its yaps echoed from the jail wails. The prisoner, in the grasp of the two warders, looked on incuriously, as though this was another formality of the hanging. It was several minutes before someone managed to catch the dog. Then we put my handkerchief through its collar and moved off once more, with the dog still straining and whimpering.

It was about forty yards to the gallows. I watched the bare brown back of the prisoner marching in front of me. He walked clumsily with his bound arms, but quite steadily, with that bobbing gait of the Indian who never straightens his knees. At each step his muscles slid neatly into place, the lock of hair on his scalp danced up and down, his feet printed themselves on the wet gravel. And once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he stepped slightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path.

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working--bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming--all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing when he stood on the drop, when he was falling through the air with a tenth of a second to live. His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned--reasoned even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone--one mind less, one world less.

The gallows stood in a small yard, separate from the main grounds of the prison, and overgrown with tall prickly weeds. It was a brick erection like three sides of a shed, with planking on top, and above that two beams and a crossbar with the rope dangling. The hangman, a grey-haired convict in the white uniform of the prison, was waiting beside his machine. He greeted us with a servile crouch as we entered. At a word from Francis the two warders, gripping the prisoner more closely than ever, half led, half pushed him to the gallows and helped him clumsily up the ladder. Then the hangman climbed up and fixed the rope round the prisoner's neck.

We stood waiting, five yards away. The warders had formed in a rough circle round the gallows. And then, when the noose was fixed, the prisoner began crying out to his god. It was a high, reiterated cry of "Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!" not urgent and fearful like a prayer or a cry for help, but steady, rhythmical, almost like the tolling of a bell. The dog answered the sound with a whine. The hangman, still standing on the gallows, produced a small cotton bag like a flour bag and drew it down over the prisoner's face. But the sound, muffled by the cloth, still persisted, over and over again: "Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!"

The hangman climbed down and stood ready, holding the lever. Minutes seemed to pass. The steady, muffled crying from the prisoner went on and on, "Ram! Ram! Ram!" never faltering for an instant. The superintendent, his head on his chest, was slowly poking the ground with his stick; perhaps he was counting the cries, allowing the prisoner a fixed number--fifty, perhaps, or a hundred. Everyone had changed colour. The Indians had gone grey like bad coffee, and one or two of the bayonets were wavering. We looked at the lashed, hooded man on the drop, and listened to his cries--each cry another second of life; the same thought was in all our minds: oh, kill him quickly, get it over, stop that abominable noise!

Suddenly the superintendent made up his mind. Throwing up his head he made a swift motion with his stick. "Chalo!" he shouted almost fiercely.

There was a clanking noise, and then dead silence. The prisoner had vanished, and the rope was twisting on itself. I let go of the dog, and it galloped immediately to the back of the gallows; but when it got there it stopped short, barked, and then retreated into a corner of the yard, where it stood among the weeds, looking timorously out at us. We went round the gallows to inspect the prisoner's body. He was dangling with his toes pointed straight downward, very slowly revolving, as dead as a stone.

The superintendent reached out with his stick and poked the bare body; it oscillated, slightly. "*He's* all right," said the superintendent. He backed out from under the gallows, and blew out a deep breath. The moody look had gone out of his face quite suddenly. He glanced at his wrist watch. "Eight minutes past eight. Well, that's all for this morning, thank God."

The warders unfixed bayonets and marched away. The dog, sobered and conscious of having misbehaved itself, slipped after them. We walked out of the gallows yard, past the condemned cells with their waiting prisoners, into the big central yard of the prison. The convicts, under the command of warders armed with lathis, were already receiving their breakfast. They squatted in long rows, each man holding a tin pannikin, while two warders with buckets marched round ladling out rice; it seemed quite a homely, jolly scene, after the hanging. An enormous relief had come upon us now that the job was done. One felt an impulse to sing, to break into a run, to snigger. All at once everyone began chattering gaily.

The Eurasian boy walking beside me nodded towards the way we had come, with a knowing smile: "Do you know, sir, our friend [he meant the dead man], when he heard his appeal had been dismissed, he pissed on the floor of his cell. From fright. Kindly take one of my cigarettes, sir. Do you not admire my new silver case, sir? From the boxwalah, two rupees eight annas. Classy European style."

Several people laughed--at what, nobody seemed certain.

Francis was walking by the superintendent, talking garrulously. "Well, sir, all hass passed off with the utmost satisfactoriness. It wass all finished--flick! like that. It iss not always so--oah, no! I have known cases where the doctor wass obliged to go beneath the gallows and pull the prisoner's legs to ensure decease. Most disagreeable!"

"Wriggling about, eh? That's bad," said the superintendent.

"Ach, sir, it iss worse when they become refractory! One man, I recall, clung to the bars of hiss cage when we went to take him out. You will scarcely credit, sir, that it took six warders to dislodge him, three pulling at each leg. We reasoned with him. 'My dear fellow,' we said, 'think of all the pain and trouble you are causing to us!' But no, he would not listen! Ach, he wass very troublesome!"

I found that I was laughing quite loudly. Everyone was laughing. Even the superintendent grinned in a tolerant way. "You'd better all come out and have a drink," he said quite genially. "I've got a bottle of whisky in the car. We could do with it."

We went through the big double gates of the prison, into the road. "Pulling at his legs!" exclaimed a Burmese magistrate suddenly, and burst into a loud chuckling. We all began laughing again. At that moment Francis's anecdote seemed extraordinarily funny. We all had a drink together, native and European alike, quite amicably. The dead man was a hundred yards away.

*"A Hanging" by George Orwell was first published in*Adelphi*, August 1931. In was reprinted in 1950 in*Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*(UK edition, Secker and Warburg; US edition, H*

Write 12 model MC questions and include answers:

2 should be definitional

2 should be about organization

1 should be about voice

1 should be about tone

1 should be about syntax in a complex sentence

2 should be about meaning or theme or main idea

2 should be about the author’s purpose in doing \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1 should address the rhetorical mode

### AP English Language Multiple Choice Question Stems

**Questions about Rhetoric**

1. The shift in point of view has the effect of …

2. The syntax of lines \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_ serves to …

3. The author’s reference/allusion to “\_\_\_” serves primarily to …

4. The second sentence is unified by metaphorical references to …

5. As lines \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ are constructed, "\_\_\_\_\_" is parallel to which of the following?

6. The antecedent for "\_\_\_\_\_" is …

7. The diction in the piece is best described as…

8. The syntax in the piece is best described as …

9. In paragraph \_\_ the author employs which of the following rhetorical strategies …

10. One prominent stylistic characteristic of the piece is the use of…

11. The primary rhetorical function of lines--- “\_\_\_\_” is to …

12. In the sentence “\_\_\_” the speaker employs all of the following EXCEPT…

**Questions about the Author's Meaning and Purpose**

13. Which of the following best identifies the meaning of "\_\_\_\_\_"?

14. Which of the following best describes the author's purpose in the last sentence?

15. The author’s primary purpose is to…

16. The primary audience of the piece could be described as…

17. The authors uses (this certain image) for the purpose of…

18. The author emphasizes "\_\_\_\_\_" in order to …

19. The reason for the shift in tone in paragraph \_\_ is due to …

20. The sympathy (or other word) referred to in line \_\_\_\_\_ is called "adjective" because it …

21. What is the function of \_\_\_\_\_ ?

22. The phrase, “\_\_” functions primarily as …

**Questions about the Main Idea**

23. The theme of the second paragraph is …

24. The speaker's attitude is best described as one of …

25. The tone of the piece (or parts of it) is one of…

26. In context, the sentence "\_\_\_\_\_" is best interpreted as which of the following?

27. The atmosphere is one of …

28. Which of the following would the author be LEAST likely to encourage?

29. Which of the following best summarizes the main topic of the passage …

30. In the piece, the author makes all of the following assumptions about his/her readers EXCEPT…

**Questions about Organization and Structure**

31. The quotation "\_\_\_\_\_" signals a shift from …

32. The tone of the passage shifts from one of\_\_\_ to one of \_\_\_.

33. The speaker's mention of "\_\_\_\_\_" is appropriate to the development of her argument by …

34. The type of argument employed by the author is most similar to which of the following?

35. The author uses a pattern of organization best described as …

36. The relationship between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ is explained primarily by the use of which of the following?

37. Which of the following best describes the function of the \_\_\_\_ paragraph in relation to the paragraphs that precede it …

**Questions about Rhetorical Modes**

38. The pattern of exposition exemplified in the passage can best be described as …

39. The author's use of description is appropriate because …

40. Which of the following best describes the author's method?

41. Because the author uses expository format, he is able to …

42. The speaker's rhetorical strategy is to …

43. The author contrasts \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ in order to …

### "Paradox and Dream" (1966) by John Steinbeck

One of the generalities most often noted about Americans is that we are a restless, a dissatisfied, a searching people. We bridle and buck under failure, and we go mad with dissatisfaction in the face of success. We spend our time searching for security, and hate it when we get it. For the most part we are an intemperate people: we eat too much when we can, drink too much, indulge our senses too much. Even in our so-called virtues we are intemperate: a teetotaler is not content not to drink--he must stop all the drinking in the world; a vegetarian among us would outlaw the eating of meat. We work too hard, and many die under the strain; and then to make up for that we play with a violence as suicidal.

The result is that we seem to be in a state of turmoil all the time, both physically and mentally. We are able to believe that our government is weak, stupid, overbearing, dishonest, and inefficient, and at the same time we are deeply convinced that it is the best government in the world, and we would like to impose it upon everyone else. We speak of the American Way of Life as though it involved the ground rules for the governance of heaven. A man hungry and unemployed through his own stupidity and that of others, a man beaten by a brutal policeman, a woman forced into prostitution by her own laziness, high prices, availability, and despair--all bow with reverence toward the American Way of Life, although each one would look puzzled and angry if he were asked to define it. We scramble and scrabble up the stony path toward the pot of gold we have taken to mean security. We trample friends, relatives, and strangers who get in the way of our achieving it, and once we get it we shower it on psychoanalysts to try to find out why we are unhappy, and finally--if we have enough of the gold--we contribute it back to the nation in the form of foundations and charities.

We fight our way in, and try to buy our way out. We are alert, curious, hopeful, and we take more drugs designed to make us unaware than any other people. We are self-reliant and at the same time completely dependent. We are aggressive, and defenseless. Americans overindulge their children; the children in turn are overly dependent on their parents. We are complacent in our possessions, in our houses, in our education; but it is hard to find a man or woman who does not want something better for the next generation. Americans are remarkably kind and hospitable and open with both guests and strangers; and yet they will make a wide circle around the man dying on the pavement. Fortunes are spent getting cats out of trees and dogs out of sewer pipes; but a girl screaming for help in the street draws only slammed doors, closed windows, and silence.

*"Paradox and Dream" first appeared in John Steinbeck's*America and Americans*, published by Viking in 1966.*

*In Chapter Two* ("Commodity and Delight") *of* Home: A Short History of an Idea*, Canadian architect and writer Witold Rybczynski*[*contrasts*](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/comparison2term.htm)*cultures that have adopted a sitting-up posture with those that favor squatting.*

**by Witold Rybczynski**

Differences in posture, like differences in eating utensils (knife and fork, chopsticks or fingers, for example), divide the world as profoundly as political boundaries. Regarding posture there are two camps: the sitters-up (the so-called western world) and the squatters (everyone else). Although there is no Iron Curtain separating the two sides, neither feels comfortable in the position of the other. When I eat with oriental friends I soon feel awkward sitting on the floor, my back unsupported, my legs numb. But squatters don't like sitting up either. An Indian household may have a dining room with table and chairs, but when the family relaxes during the hot afternoon, parents and children sit together on the floor. The driver of a three-wheeled motor scooter in Delhi has to sit on a seat, but instead of doing so in a western manner he squats cross-legged, his feet on the bench instead of on the floor (precariously to my eyes, comfortably to his). A Canadian carpenter works standing up, at a bench. My Gujarati friend Vikram, given the choice, prefers to work sitting down, on the floor.

(Home: A Short History of an Idea*by Witold Rybczynsk was published by Viking Penguin in 1986.*)

### from  A River Runs through It by Norman Maclean

### University of Chicago Press

“The son of a bitch still has fight in him,” I thought I said to myself, but unmistakably I said it out loud, and was embarrassed for having said it out loud in front of my father. He said nothing.

Two or three more times Paul worked him close to shore, only to have him swirl and return to the deep, but even at that distance my father and I could feel the ebbing of the underwater power. The rod went high in the air, and the man moved backwards swiftly but evenly, motions which when translated into events meant the fish had tried to rest for a moment on top of the water and the man had quickly raised the rod high and skidded him to shore before the fish thought of getting under water again. He skidded him across the rocks clear back to a sandbar before the shocked fish gasped and discovered he could not live in oxygen. In belated despair, he rose in the sand and consumed the rest of momentary life in the Dance of Death on his tail.

The man put the wand down, got on his hands and knees in the sand, and, like an animal, circled another animal and waited. Then the shoulder shot straight out, and my brother stood up, faced us, and, with uplifted arm proclaimed himself the victor. Something giant dangled from his fist. Had Romans been watching they would have thought what was dangling had a helmet on it.

“That’s his limit,” I said to my father.

“He is beautiful,” my father said, although my brother had just finished catching his limit in the hole my father had already fished.

This was the last fish we were ever to see Paul catch. My father and I talked about this moment several times later, and whatever our other feelings, we always felt it fitting that, when we saw him catch his last fish, we never saw the fish but only the artistry of the fisherman.

While my father was watching my brother, he reached over to pat me, but he missed, so he had to turn his eyes and look for my knee and try again. He must have thought that I felt neglected and that he should tell me he was proud of me also but for other reasons.

It was a little too deep and fast where Paul was trying to wade the river, and he knew it. He was crouched over the water and his arms were spread wide for balance. If you were a wader of big rivers you could have felt with him even at a distance the power of the water making his legs weak and wavy and ready to swim out from under him. He looked downstream to estimate how far it was to an easier place to wade.

My father said, “He won’t take the trouble to walk downstream. He’ll swim it.” At the same time Paul thought the same thing, and put his cigarette and matches in his hat.

My father and I sat on the bank and laughed at each other. It never occurred to either of us to hurry to the shore in case he needed help with a rod in his right hand and a basket loaded with fish on his left shoulder. In our family it was no great thing for a fisherman to swim a river with matches in his hair. We laughed at each other because we knew he was getting damn good and wet, and we lived in him, and were swept over the rocks with him and held his rod high in one of our hands.

As he moved to shore he caught himself on his feet and then was washed off them, and, when he stood again, more of him showed and he staggered to shore. He never stopped to shake himself. He came charging up the bank showering molecules of water and images of himself to show what was sticking out of his basket, and he dripped all over us, like a young duck dog that in its joy forgets to shake itself before getting close.

“Let’s put them all out on the grass and take a picture of them,” he said. So we emptied our baskets and arranged them by size and took turns photographing each other admiring them and ourselves. The photographs turned out to be like most amateur snapshots of fishing catches–the fish were white from overexposure and didn’t look as big as they actually were and the fishermen looked self-conscious as if some guide had to catch the fish for them.

However, one closeup picture of him at the end of this day remains in my mind, as if fixed by some chemical bath. Usually, just after he finished fishing he had little to say unless he saw he could have fished better. Otherwise, he merely smiled. Now flies danced around his hatband. Large drops of water ran from under his hat on to his face and then into his lips when he smiled.

At the end of this day, then, I remember him both as a distant abstraction in artistry and as a closeup in water and laughter.

My father always felt shy when compelled to praise one of his family, and his family always felt shy when he praised them. My father said, “You are a fine fisherman.”

My brother said, “I’m pretty good with a rod, but I need three more years before I can think like a fish.”

Remembering that he had caught his limit by switching to George’s No. 2 Yellow Hackle with a feather wing, I said without knowing how much I said, “You already know how to think like a dead stone fly.”

We sat on the bank and the river went by. As always, it was making sounds to itself, and now it made sounds to us. It would be hard to find three men sitting side by side who knew better what a river was saying.

On the Big Blackfoot River above the mouth of Belmont Creek the banks are fringed by large Ponderosa pines. In the slanting sun of late afternoon the shadows of great branches reached from across the river, and the trees took the river in their arms. The shadows continued up the bank, until they included us.

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| A river, though, has so many things to say that it is hard to know what it says to each of us. As we were packing our tackle and fish in the car, Paul repeated, “Just give me three more years.” At the time, I was surprised by the repetition, but later I realized that the river somewhere, sometime, must have told me, too, that he would receive no such gift. For, when the police sergeant early next May wakened me before daybreak, I rose and asked no questions. Together we drove across the Continental Divide and down the length of the Big Blackfoot River over forest floors yellow and sometimes white with glacier lilies to tell my father and mother that my brother had been beaten to death by the butt of a revolver and his body dumped in an alley.  My mother turned and went to her bedroom where, in a house full of men and rods and rifles, she had faced most of her great problems alone. She was never to ask me a question about the man she loved most and understood least. Perhaps she knew enough to know that for her it was enough to have loved him. He was probably the only man in the world who had held her in his arms and leaned back and laughed.  When I finished talking to my father, he asked, “Is there anything else you can tell me?”  Finally, I said, “Nearly all the bones in his hand were broken.”  He almost reached the door and then turned back for reassurance. “Are you sure that the bones of his hand were broken? he asked. I repeated, “Nearly all the bones in his hand were broken.” “In which hand?” he asked. “In his right hand,” I answered.  After my brother’s death, my father never walked very well again. He had to struggle to lift his feet, and, when he did get them up, they came down slightly out of control. From time to time Paul’s right hand had to be reaffirmed; then my father would shuffle away again. He could not shuffle in a straight line from trying to lift his feet. Like many Scottish ministers before him, he had to derive what comfort he could from the faith that his son had died fighting.  For some time, though, he struggled for more to hold on to. “Are you sure you have told me everything you know about his death?” he asked. I said, “Everything.” "It’s not much, is it?” “No,” I replied, “but you can love completely without complete understanding.” “That I have known and preached,” my father said.  Once my father came back with another question. “Do you think I could have helped him?” he asked. Even if I might have thought longer, I would have made the same answer. “Do you think I could have helped him?” I answered. We stood waiting in deference to each other. How can a question be answered that asks a lifetime of questions?  After a long time he came with something he must have wanted to ask from the first. “Do you think it was just a stick-up and foolishly he tried to fight his way out? You know what I mean–that it wasn’t connected with anything in his past.”  “The police don’t know,” I said.  “But do you?” he asked, and I felt the implication.  “I’ve said I’ve told you all I know. If you push me far enough, all I really know is that he was a fine fisherman.”  “You know more than that,” my father said. “He was beautiful.”  “Yes,” I said, “he was beautiful. He should have been–you taught him.”  My father looked at me for a long time–he just looked at me. So this was the last he and I ever said to each other about Paul’s death.  Indirectly, though, he was present in many of our conversations. Once, for instance, my father asked me a series of questions that suddenly made me wonder whether I understood even my father whom I felt closer to than any man I have ever known. “You like to tell true stories, don’t you?” he asked, and I answered, “Yes, I like to tell stories that are true.”  Then he asked, “After you have finished your true stories sometime, why don’t you make up a story and the people to go with it?  “Only then will you understand what happened and why.  “It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us.” Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them.  Of course, now I am too old to be much of a fisherman, and now of course I usually fish the big waters alone, although some friends think I shouldn’t. Like many fly fishermen in western Montana where the summer days are almost Arctic in length, I often do not start fishing until the cool of the evening. Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise.  Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.  I am haunted by waters. |

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### Dumpster Diving by Lars Eighner

[insert PDF]

### How to Give Orders Like a Man by Deborah Tannen

The New York Times Magazine, August 28, 1994

A UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT WAS EXPECTING A VISIT FROM a member of the board of trustees. When her secretary buzzed to tell her that the board member had arrived, she left her office and entered the reception area to greet him. Before ushering him into her office, she handed her secretary a sheet of paper and said: "I've just finished drafting this letter. Do you think you could type it right away? I'd like to get it out before lunch. And would you please do me a favor and hold all calls while I'm meeting with Mr. Smith?"

When they sat down behind the closed door of her office, Mr. Smith began by telling her that he thought she had spoken inappropriately to her secretary. "Don't forget," he said. "You're the president!"

Putting aside the question of the appropriateness of his admonishing the president on her way of speaking, it is revealing -- and representative of many Americans' assumptions -- that the indirect way in which the university president told her secretary what to do struck him as self-deprecating. He took it as evidence that she didn't think she had the right to make demands of her secretary. He probably thought he was giving her a needed pep talk, bolstering her self-confidence.

I challenge the assumption that talking in an indirect way necessarily reveals powerlessness, lack of self-confidence or anything else about the character of the speaker. Indirectness is a fundamental element in human communication. It is also one of the elements that varies most from one culture to another, and one that can cause confusion and misunderstanding when speakers have different habits with regard to using it. I also want to dispel the assumption that American women tend to be more indirect than American men. Women and men are both indirect, but in addition to differences associated with their backgrounds -- regional, ethnic and class -- they tend to be indirect in different situations and in different ways.

At work, we need to get others to do things, and we all have different ways of accomplishing this. Any individual's ways will vary depending on who is being addressed -- a boss, a peer or a subordinate. At one extreme are bald commands. At the other are requests so indirect that they don't sound like requests at all, but are just a statement of need or a description of a situation. People with direct styles of asking others to do things perceive indirect requests -- if they perceive them as requests at all -- as manipulative. But this is often just a way of blaming others for our discomfort with their styles.

The indirect style is no more manipulative than making a telephone call, asking "Is Rachel there?" and expecting whoever answers the phone to put Rachel on. Only a child is likely to answer "Yes" and continue holding the phone -- not out of orneriness but because of inexperience with the conventional meaning of the question. (A mischievous adult might do it to tease.) Those who feel that indirect orders are illogical or manipulative do not recognize the conventional nature of indirect requests.

Issuing orders indirectly can be the prerogative of those in power. Imagine, for example, a master who says "It's cold in here" and expects a servant to make a move to close a window, while a servant who says the same thing is not likely to see his employer rise to correct the situation and make him more comfortable. Indeed, a Frenchman raised in Brittany tells me that his family never gave bald commands to their servants but always communicated orders in indirect and highly polite ways. This pattern renders less surprising the finding of David Bellinger and Jean Berko Gleason that fathers' speech to their young children had a higher incidence than mothers' of both direct imperatives like "Turn the bolt with the wrench" and indirect orders like "The wheel is going to fall off."

The use of indirectness can hardly be understood without the cross-cultural perspective. Many Americans find it self-evident that directness is logical and aligned with power while indirectness is akin to dishonesty and reflects subservience. But for speakers raised in most of the world's cultures, varieties of indirectness are the norm in communication. This is the pattern found by a Japanese sociolinguist, Kunihiko Harada, in his analysis of a conversation he recorded between a Japanese boss and a subordinate.

The markers of superior status were clear. One speaker was a Japanese man in his late 40's who managed the local branch of a Japanese private school in the United States. His conversational partner was a Japanese-American woman in her early 20's who worked at the school. By virtue of his job, his age and his native fluency in the language being taught, the man was in the superior position. Yet when he addressed the woman, he frequently used polite language and almost always used indirectness. For example, he had tried and failed to find a photography store that would make a black-and-white print from a color negative for a brochure they were producing. He let her know that he wanted her to take over the task by stating the situation and allowed her to volunteer to do it: (This is a translation of the Japanese conversation.)

On this matter, that, that, on the leaflet? This photo, I'm thinking of changing it to black-and-white and making it clearer. . . . I went to a photo shop and asked them. They said they didn't do black-and-white. I asked if they knew any place that did. They said they didn't know. They weren't very helpful, but anyway, a place must be found, the negative brought to it, the picture developed.

Harada observes, "Given the fact that there are some duties to be performed and that there are two parties present, the subordinate is supposed to assume that those are his or her obligation." It was precisely because of his higher status that the boss was free to choose whether to speak formally or informally, to assert his power or to play it down and build rapport -- an option not available to the subordinate, who would have seemed cheeky if she had chosen a style that enhanced friendliness and closeness.

The same pattern was found by a Chinese sociolinguist, Yuling Pan, in a meeting of officials involved in a neighborhood youth program. All spoke in ways that reflected their place in the hierarchy. A subordinate addressing a superior always spoke in a deferential way, but a superior addressing a subordinate could either be authoritarian, demonstrating his power, or friendly, establishing rapport. The ones in power had the option of choosing which style to use. In this spirit, I have been told by people who prefer their bosses to give orders indirectly that those who issue bald commands must be pretty insecure; otherwise why would they have to bolster their egos by throwing their weight around?

I am not inclined to accept that those who give orders directly are really insecure and powerless, any more than I want to accept that judgment of those who give indirect orders. The conclusion to be drawn is that ways of talking should not be taken as obvious evidence of inner psychological states like insecurity or lack of confidence. Considering the many influences on conversational style, individuals have a wide range of ways of getting things done and expressing their emotional states. Personality characteristics like insecurity cannot be linked to ways of speaking in an automatic, self-evident way.

Those who expect orders to be given indirectly are offended when they come unadorned. One woman said that when her boss gives her instructions, she feels she should click her heels, salute, and say "Yes, boss!" His directions strike her as so imperious as to border on the militaristic. Yet I received a letter from a man telling me that indirect orders were a fundamental part of his military training. He wrote:

Many years ago, when I was in the Navy, I was training to be a radio technician. One class I was in was taught by a chief radioman, a regular Navy man who had been to sea, and who was then in his third hitch. The students, about 20 of us, were fresh out of boot camp, with no sea duty and little knowledge of real Navy life. One day in class the chief said it was hot in the room. The students didn't react, except perhaps to nod in agreement. The chief repeated himself: "It's hot in this room." Again there was no reaction from the students.

Then the chief explained. He wasn't looking for agreement or discussion from us. When he said that the room was hot, he expected us to do something about it -- like opening the window. He tried it one more time, and this time all of us left our workbenches and headed for the windows. We had learned. And we had many opportunities to apply what we had learned.

This letter especially intrigued me because "It's cold in here" is the standard sentence used by linguists to illustrate an indirect way of getting someone to do something -- as I used it earlier. In this example, it is the very obviousness and rigidity of the military hierarchy that makes the statement of a problem sufficient to trigger corrective action on the part of subordinates.

A man who had worked at the Pentagon reinforced the view that the burden of interpretation is on subordinates in the military -- and he noticed the difference when he moved to a position in the private sector. He was frustrated when he'd say to his new secretary, for example, "Do we have a list of invitees?" and be told, "I don't know; we probably do" rather than "I'll get it for you." Indeed, he explained, at the Pentagon, such a question would likely be heard as a reproach that the list was not already on his desk.

The suggestion that indirectness is associated with the military must come as a surprise to many. But everyone is indirect, meaning more than is put into words and deriving meaning from words that are never actually said. It's a matter of where, when and how we each tend to be indirect and look for hidden meanings. But indirectness has a built-in liability. There is a risk that the other will either miss or choose to ignore your meaning.

ON JAN. 13, 1982, A FREEZING COLD, snowy day in Washington, Air Florida Flight 90 took off from National Airport, but could not get the lift it needed to keep climbing. It crashed into a bridge linking Washington to the state of Virginia and plunged into the Potomac. Of the 79 people on board, all but 5 perished, many floundering and drowning in the icy water while horror-stricken bystanders watched helplessly from the river's edge and millions more watched, aghast, on their television screens. Experts later concluded that the plane had waited too long after de-icing to take off. Fresh buildup of ice on the wings and engine brought the plane down. How could the pilot and co-pilot have made such a blunder? Didn't at least one of them realize it was dangerous to take off under these conditions?

Charlotte Linde, a linguist at the Institute for Research on Learning in Palo Alto, Calif., has studied the "black box" recordings of cockpit conversations that preceded crashes as well as tape recordings of conversations that took place among crews during flight simulations in which problems were presented. Among the black box conversations she studied was the one between the pilot and co-pilot just before the Air Florida crash. The pilot, it turned out, had little experience flying in icy weather. The co-pilot had a bit more, and it became heartbreakingly clear on analysis that he had tried to warn the pilot, but he did so indirectly.

The co-pilot repeatedly called attention to the bad weather and to ice building up on other planes:

Co-pilot: Look how the ice is just hanging on his, ah, back, back there, see that?  
. . .   
Co-pilot: See all those icicles on the back there and everything?   
Captain: Yeah.

He expressed concern early on about the long waiting time between de-icing:

Co-pilot: Boy, this is a, this is a losing battle here on trying to de-ice those things, it [gives] you a false feeling of security, that's all that does.

Shortly after they were given clearance to take off, he again expressed concern:

Co-pilot: Let's check these tops again since we been setting here awhile.   
Captain: I think we get to go here in a minute.

When they were about to take off, the co-pilot called attention to the engine instrument readings, which were not normal:

Co-pilot: That don't seem right, does it? [three-second pause] Ah, that's not right. . . .   
Captain: Yes, it is, there's 80.   
Co-pilot: Naw, I don't think that's right. [seven-second pause] Ah, maybe it is.   
Captain: Hundred and twenty.   
Co-pilot: I don't know.

The takeoff proceeded, and 37 seconds later the pilot and co-pilot exchanged their last words.

The co-pilot had repeatedly called the pilot's attention to dangerous conditions but did not directly suggest they abort the takeoff. In Linde's judgment, he was expressing his concern indirectly, and the captain didn't pick up on it -- with tragic results.

That the co-pilot was trying to warn the captain indirectly is supported by evidence from another airline accident -- a relatively minor one -- investigated by Linde that also involved the unsuccessful use of indirectness.

On July 9, 1978, Allegheny Airlines Flight 453 was landing at Monroe County Airport in Rochester, when it overran the runway by 728 feet. Everyone survived. This meant that the captain and co-pilot could be interviewed. It turned out that the plane had been flying too fast for a safe landing. The captain should have realized this and flown around a second time, decreasing his speed before trying to land. The captain said he simply had not been aware that he was going too fast. But the co-pilot told interviewers that he "tried to warn the captain in subtle ways, like mentioning the possibility of a tail wind and the slowness of flap extension." His exact words were recorded in the black box. The crosshatches indicate words deleted by the National Transportation Safety Board and were probably expletives:

Co-pilot: Yeah, it looks like you got a tail wind here.   
Captain: Yeah.   
[?]: Yeah [it] moves awfully # slow.   
Co-pilot: Yeah the # flaps are slower than a #.   
Captain: We'll make it, gonna have to add power.   
Co-pilot: I know.

The co-pilot thought the captain would understand that if there was a tail wind, it would result in the plane going too fast, and if the flaps were slow, they would be inadequate to break the speed sufficiently for a safe landing. He thought the captain would then correct for the error by not trying to land. But the captain said he didn't interpret the co-pilot's remarks to mean they were going too fast.

Linde believes it is not a coincidence that the people being indirect in these conversations were the co-pilots. In her analyses of flight-crew conversations she found it was typical for the speech of subordinates to be more mitigated -- polite, tentative or indirect. She also found that topics broached in a mitigated way were more likely to fail, and that captains were more likely to ignore hints from their crew members than the other way around. These findings are evidence that not only can indirectness and other forms of mitigation be misunderstood, but they are also easier to ignore.

In the Air Florida case, it is doubtful that the captain did not realize what the co-pilot was suggesting when he said, "Let's check these tops again since we been setting here awhile" (though it seems safe to assume he did not realize the gravity of the co-pilot's concern). But the indirectness of the co-pilot's phrasing certainly made it easier for the pilot to ignore it. In this sense, the captain's response, "I think we get to go here in a minute," was an indirect way of saying, "I'd rather not." In view of these patterns, the flight crews of some airlines are now given training to express their concerns, even to superiors, in more direct ways.

The conclusion that people should learn to express themselves more directly has a ring of truth to it -- especially for Americans. But direct communication is not necessarily always preferable. If more direct expression is better communication, then the most direct-speaking crews should be the best ones. Linde was surprised to find in her research that crews that used the most mitigated speech were often judged the best crews. As part of the study of talk among cockpit crews in flight simulations, the trainers observed and rated the performances of the simulation crews. The crews they rated top in performance had a higher rate of mitigation than crews they judged to be poor.

This finding seems at odds with the role played by indirectness in the examples of crashes that we just saw. Linde concluded that since every utterance functions on two levels -- the referential (what it says) and the relational (what it implies about the speaker's relationships), crews that attend to the relational level will be better crews. A similar explanation was suggested by Kunihiko Harada. He believes that the secret of successful communication lies not in teaching subordinates to be more direct, but in teaching higher-ups to be more sensitive to indirect meaning. In other words, the crashes resulted not only because the co-pilots tried to alert the captains to danger indirectly but also because the captains were not attuned to the co-pilots' hints. What made for successful performance among the best crews might have been the ability -- or willingness -- of listeners to pick up on hints, just as members of families or longstanding couples come to understand each other's meaning without anyone being particularly explicit.

It is not surprising that a Japanese sociolinguist came up with this explanation; what he described is the Japanese system, by which good communication is believed to take place when meaning is gleaned without being stated directly -- or at all.

WHILE AMERICANS BELIEVE THAT "THE SQUEAKY wheel gets the grease" (so it's best to speak up), the Japanese say, "The nail that sticks out gets hammered back in" (so it's best to remain silent if you don't want to be hit on the head). Many Japanese scholars writing in English have tried to explain to bewildered Americans the ethics of a culture in which silence is often given greater value than speech, and ideas are believed to be best communicated without being explicitly stated. Key concepts in Japanese give a flavor of the attitudes toward language that they reveal -- and set in relief the strategies that Americans encounter at work when talking to other Americans.

Sasshi, the anticipation of another's message through insightful guesswork, is considered an indication of maturity.

Considering the value placed on direct communication by Americans in general, and especially by American business people, it is easy to imagine that many American readers may scoff at such conversational habits. But the success of Japanese businesses makes it impossible to continue to maintain that there is anything inherently inefficient about such conversational conventions. With indirectness, as with all aspects of conversational style, our own habitual style seems to make sense -- seems polite, right and good. The light cast by the habits and assumptions of another culture can help us see our way to the flexibility and respect for other styles that is the only best way of speaking.

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| Blood, Toil, Tears and SweatMay 13, 1940First Speech as Prime Minister to House of Commons On May 10, 1940, Winston Churchill became Prime Minister. When he met his Cabinet on May 13 he told them that "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." He repeated that phrase later in the day when he asked the House of Commons for a vote of confidence in his new all-party government. The response of Labour was heart-warming; the Conservative reaction was luke-warm. They still really wanted Neville Chamberlain. For the first time, the people had hope but Churchill commented to General Ismay: "Poor people, poor people. They trust me, and I can give them nothing but disaster for quite a long time."  I beg to move,   That this House welcomes the formation of a Government representing the united and inflexible resolve of the nation to prosecute the war with Germany to a victorious conclusion.  On Friday evening last I received His Majesty's commission to form a new Administration. It as the evident wish and will of Parliament and the nation that this should be conceived on the broadest possible basis and that it should include all parties, both those who supported the late Government and also the parties of the Opposition. I have completed the most important part of this task. A War Cabinet has been formed of five Members, representing, with the Opposition Liberals, the unity of the nation. The three party Leaders have agreed to serve, either in the War Cabinet or in high executive office. The three Fighting Services have been filled. It was necessary that this should be done in one single day, on account of the extreme urgency and rigour of events. A number of other positions, key positions, were filled yesterday, and I am submitting a further list to His Majesty to-night. I hope to complete the appointment of the principal Ministers during to-morrow. the appointment of the other Ministers usually takes a little longer, but I trust that, when Parliament meets again, this part of my task will be completed, and that the administration will be complete in all respects.  I considered it in the public interest to suggest that the House should be summoned to meet today. Mr. Speaker agreed, and took the necessary steps, in accordance with the powers conferred upon him by the Resolution of the House. At the end of the proceedings today, the Adjournment of the House will be proposed until Tuesday, 21st May, with, of course, provision for earlier meeting, if need be. The business to be considered during that week will be notified to Members at the earliest opportunity. I now invite the House, by the Motion which stands in my name, to record its approval of the steps taken and to declare its confidence in the new Government.  To form an Administration of this scale and complexity is a serious undertaking in itself, but it must be remembered that we are in the preliminary stage of one of the greatest battles in history, that we are in action at many other points in Norway and in Holland, that we have to be prepared in the Mediterranean, that the air battle is continuous and that many preparations, such as have been indicated by my hon. Friend below the Gangway, have to be made here at home. In this crisis I hope I may be pardoned if I do not address the House at any length today. I hope that any of my friends and colleagues, or former colleagues, who are affected by the political reconstruction, will make allowance, all allowance, for any lack of ceremony with which it has been necessary to act. I would say to the House, as I said to those who have joined this government: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat."  We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival. Let that be realised; no survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge and impulse of the ages, that mankind will move forward towards its goal. But I take up my task with buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. At this time I feel entitled to claim the aid of all, and I say, "come then, let us go forward together with our united strength." | |

Focus on one sentence other than the one that gives the title to this speech. Discuss how it illustrates Churchill’s mastery of rhetoric to achieve specific objectives.

Overall, knowing that the British aristocracy had long and deep ties to Germany, were noted though not particularly active anti-Semites, and that they had no desire to engage in another protracted war on the Continent, what does Churchill do to make his appeal?

### On the Duty of Civil Disobedience by Henry David Thoreau

## [1849, original title: Resistance to Civil Government]

I heartily accept the motto, "That government is best which governs least"; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe — "That government is best which governs not at all"; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which the will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

This American government — what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed upon, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow. Yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient, by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of india-rubber, would never manage to bounce over obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and if one were to judge these men wholly by the effects of their actions and not partly by their intentions, they would deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievious persons who put obstructions on the railroads.

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at one no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.

After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in all cases can not be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which the majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? — in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation on conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents on injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for the law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart. They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. Now, what are they? Men at all? or small movable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power? Visit the Navy Yard, and behold a marine, such a man as an American government can make, or such as it can make a man with its black arts — a mere shadow and reminiscence of humanity, a man laid out alive and standing, and already, as one may say, buried under arms with funeral accompaniment, though it may be,

"Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,  
As his corse to the rampart we hurried;

Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot  
O'er the grave where out hero was buried."

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, posse comitatus, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgement or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens. Others — as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders — serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as the rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the devil, without intending it, as God. A very few — as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men — serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it. A wise man will only be useful as a man, and will not submit to be "clay," and "stop a hole to keep the wind away," but leave that office to his dust at least:

"I am too high born to be propertied,  
To be a second at control,  
Or useful serving-man and instrument  
To any sovereign state throughout the world."

He who gives himself entirely to his fellow men appears to them useless and selfish; but he who gives himself partially to them in pronounced a benefactor and philanthropist.

How does it become a man to behave toward the American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also.

All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable. But almost all say that such is not the case now. But such was the case, they think, in the Revolution of '75. If one were to tell me that this was a bad government because it taxed certain foreign commodities brought to its ports, it is most probable that I should not make an ado about it, for I can do without them. All machines have their friction; and possibly this does enough good to counter-balance the evil. At any rate, it is a great evil to make a stir about it. But when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer. In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is that fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army.

Paley, a common authority with many on moral questions, in his chapter on the "Duty of Submission to Civil Government," resolves all civil obligation into expediency; and he proceeds to say that "so long as the interest of the whole society requires it, that it, so long as the established government cannot be resisted or changed without public inconveniencey, it is the will of God... that the established government be obeyed — and no longer. This principle being admitted, the justice of every particular case of resistance is reduced to a computation of the quantity of the danger and grievance on the one side, and of the probability and expense of redressing it on the other." Of this, he says, every man shall judge for himself. But Paley appears never to have contemplated those cases to which the rule of expediency does not apply, in which a people, as well and an individual, must do justice, cost what it may. If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself. This, according to Paley, would be inconvenient. But he that would save his life, in such a case, shall lose it. This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people.

In their practice, nations agree with Paley; but does anyone think that Massachusetts does exactly what is right at the present crisis?

"A drab of stat,  
a cloth-o'-silver slut,

To have her train borne up,  
and her soul trail in the dirt."

Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity, and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico, cost what it may. I quarrel not with far-off foes, but with those who, neat at home, co-operate with, and do the bidding of, those far away, and without whom the latter would be harmless. We are accustomed to say, that the mass of men are unprepared; but improvement is slow, because the few are not as materially wiser or better than the many. It is not so important that many should be good as you, as that there be some absolute goodness somewhere; for that will leaven the whole lump. There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing; who even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free trade, and quietly read the prices-current along with the latest advices from Mexico, after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them both. What is the price-current of an honest man and patriot today? They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for other to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret. At most, they give up only a cheap vote, and a feeble countenance and Godspeed, to the right, as it goes by them. There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man. But it is easier to deal with the real possessor of a thing than with the temporary guardian of it.

All voting is a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it. The character of the voters is not staked. I cast my vote, perchance, as I think right; but I am not vitally concerned that that right should prevail. I am willing to leave it to the majority. Its obligation, therefore, never exceeds that of expediency. Even voting for the right is doing nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail. A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority. There is but little virtue in the action of masses of men. When the majority shall at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it will be because they are indifferent to slavery, or because there is but little slavery left to be abolished by their vote. They will then be the only slaves. Only his vote can hasten the abolition of slavery who asserts his own freedom by his vote.

I hear of a convention to be held at Baltimore, or elsewhere, for the selection of a candidate for the Presidency, made up chiefly of editors, and men who are politicians by profession; but I think, what is it to any independent, intelligent, and respectable man what decision they may come to? Shall we not have the advantage of this wisdom and honesty, nevertheless? Can we not count upon some independent votes? Are there not many individuals in the country who do not attend conventions? But no: I find that the respectable man, so called, has immediately drifted from his position, and despairs of his country, when his country has more reasons to despair of him. He forthwith adopts one of the candidates thus selected as the only available one, thus proving that he is himself available for any purposes of the demagogue. His vote is of no more worth than that of any unprincipled foreigner or hireling native, who may have been bought. O for a man who is a man, and, and my neighbor says, has a bone is his back which you cannot pass your hand through! Our statistics are at fault: the population has been returned too large. How many men are there to a square thousand miles in the country? Hardly one. Does not America offer any inducement for men to settle here? The American has dwindled into an Odd Fellow — one who may be known by the development of his organ of gregariousness, and a manifest lack of intellect and cheerful self-reliance; whose first and chief concern, on coming into the world, is to see that the almshouses are in good repair; and, before yet he has lawfully donned the virile garb, to collect a fund to the support of the widows and orphans that may be; who, in short, ventures to live only by the aid of the Mutual Insurance company, which has promised to bury him decently.

It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even to most enormous, wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too. See what gross inconsistency is tolerated. I have heard some of my townsmen say, "I should like to have them order me out to help put down an insurrection of the slaves, or to march to Mexico — see if I would go"; and yet these very men have each, directly by their allegiance, and so indirectly, at least, by their money, furnished a substitute. The soldier is applauded who refuses to serve in an unjust war by those who do not refuse to sustain the unjust government which makes the war; is applauded by those whose own act and authority he disregards and sets at naught; as if the state were penitent to that degree that it hired one to scourge it while it sinned, but not to that degree that it left off sinning for a moment. Thus, under the name of Order and Civil Government, we are all made at last to pay homage to and support our own meanness. After the first blush of sin comes its indifference; and from immoral it becomes, as it were, unmoral, and not quite unnecessary to that life which we have made.

The broadest and most prevalent error requires the most disinterested virtue to sustain it. The slight reproach to which the virtue of patriotism is commonly liable, the noble are most likely to incur. Those who, while they disapprove of the character and measures of a government, yield to it their allegiance and support are undoubtedly its most conscientious supporters, and so frequently the most serious obstacles to reform. Some are petitioning the State to dissolve the Union, to disregard the requisitions of the President. Why do they not dissolve it themselves — the union between themselves and the State — and refuse to pay their quota into its treasury? Do not they stand in same relation to the State that the State does to the Union? And have not the same reasons prevented the State from resisting the Union which have prevented them from resisting the State?

How can a man be satisfied to entertain and opinion merely, and enjoy it? Is there any enjoyment in it, if his opinion is that he is aggrieved? If you are cheated out of a single dollar by your neighbor, you do not rest satisfied with knowing you are cheated, or with saying that you are cheated, or even with petitioning him to pay you your due; but you take effectual steps at once to obtain the full amount, and see to it that you are never cheated again. Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divided States and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine.

Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men, generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. It makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to put out its faults, and do better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?

One would think, that a deliberate and practical denial of its authority was the only offense never contemplated by its government; else, why has it not assigned its definite, its suitable and proportionate, penalty? If a man who has no property refuses but once to earn nine shillings for the State, he is put in prison for a period unlimited by any law that I know, and determined only by the discretion of those who put him there; but if he should steal ninety times nine shillings from the State, he is soon permitted to go at large again.

If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth — certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.

As for adopting the ways of the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man's life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to. I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad. A man has not everything to do, but something; and because he cannot do everything, it is not necessary that he should be petitioning the Governor or the Legislature any more than it is theirs to petition me; and if they should not hear my petition, what should I do then? But in this case the State has provided no way: its very Constitution is the evil. This may seem to be harsh and stubborn and unconcilliatory; but it is to treat with the utmost kindness and consideration the only spirit that can appreciate or deserves it. So is all change for the better, like birth and death, which convulse the body.

I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves Abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts, and not wait till they constitute a majority of one, before they suffer the right to prevail through them. I think that it is enough if they have God on their side, without waiting for that other one. Moreover, any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already.

I meet this American government, or its representative, the State government, directly, and face to face, once a year — no more — in the person of its tax-gatherer; this is the only mode in which a man situated as I am necessarily meets it; and it then says distinctly, Recognize me; and the simplest, the most effectual, and, in the present posture of affairs, the indispensablest mode of treating with it on this head, of expressing your little satisfaction with and love for it, is to deny it then. My civil neighbor, the tax-gatherer, is the very man I have to deal with — for it is, after all, with men and not with parchment that I quarrel — and he has voluntarily chosen to be an agent of the government. How shall he ever know well that he is and does as an officer of the government, or as a man, until he is obliged to consider whether he will treat me, his neighbor, for whom he has respect, as a neighbor and well-disposed man, or as a maniac and disturber of the peace, and see if he can get over this obstruction to his neighborlines without a ruder and more impetuous thought or speech corresponding with his action. I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name — if ten honest men only — ay, if one *honest* man, in this State of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this co-partnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever. But we love better to talk about it: that we say is our mission. Reform keeps many scores of newspapers in its service, but not one man. If my esteemed neighbor, the State's ambassador, who will devote his days to the settlement of the question of human rights in the Council Chamber, instead of being threatened with the prisons of Carolina, were to sit down the prisoner of Massachusetts, that State which is so anxious to foist the sin of slavery upon her sister — though at present she can discover only an act of inhospitality to be the ground of a quarrel with her — the Legislature would not wholly waive the subject of the following winter.

Under a government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place today, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less despondent spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles. It is there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race should find them; on that separate but more free and honorable ground, where the State places those who are not with her, but against her — the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor. If any think that their influence would be lost there, and their voices no longer afflict the ear of the State, that they would not be as an enemy within its walls, they do not know by how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who has experienced a little in his own person. Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible. If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, "But what shall I do?" my answer is, "If you really wish to do anything, resign your office." When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned from office, then the revolution is accomplished. But even suppose blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man's real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now.

I have contemplated the imprisonment of the offender, rather than the seizure of his goods — though both will serve the same purpose — because they who assert the purest right, and consequently are most dangerous to a corrupt State, commonly have not spent much time in accumulating property. To such the State renders comparatively small service, and a slight tax is wont to appear exorbitant, particularly if they are obliged to earn it by special labor with their hands. If there were one who lived wholly without the use of money, the State itself would hesitate to demand it of him. But the rich man — not to make any invidious comparison — is always sold to the institution which makes him rich. Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue; for money comes between a man and his objects, and obtains them for him; it was certainly no great virtue to obtain it. It puts to rest many questions which he would otherwise be taxed to answer; while the only new question which it puts is the hard but superfluous one, how to spend it. Thus his moral ground is taken from under his feet. The opportunities of living are diminished in proportion as that are called the "means" are increased. The best thing a man can do for his culture when he is rich is to endeavor to carry out those schemes which he entertained when he was poor. Christ answered the Herodians according to their condition. "Show me the tribute-money," said he — and one took a penny out of his pocket — if you use money which has the image of Caesar on it, and which he has made current and valuable, that is, if you are men of the State, and gladly enjoy the advantages of Caesar's government, then pay him back some of his own when he demands it. "Render therefore to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God those things which are God's" — leaving them no wiser than before as to which was which; for they did not wish to know.

When I converse with the freest of my neighbors, I perceive that, whatever they may say about the magnitude and seriousness of the question, and their regard for the public tranquillity, the long and the short of the matter is, that they cannot spare the protection of the existing government, and they dread the consequences to their property and families of disobedience to it. For my own part, I should not like to think that I ever rely on the protection of the State. But, if I deny the authority of the State when it presents its tax bill, it will soon take and waste all my property, and so harass me and my children without end. This is hard. This makes it impossible for a man to live honestly, and at the same time comfortably, in outward respects. It will not be worth the while to accumulate property; that would be sure to go again. You must hire or squat somewhere, and raise but a small crop, and eat that soon. You must live within yourself, and depend upon yourself always tucked up and ready for a start, and not have many affairs. A man may grow rich in Turkey even, if he will be in all respects a good subject of the Turkish government. Confucius said: "If a state is governed by the principles of reason, poverty and misery are subjects of shame; if a state is not governed by the principles of reason, riches and honors are subjects of shame." No: until I want the protection of Massachusetts to be extended to me in some distant Southern port, where my liberty is endangered, or until I am bent solely on building up an estate at home by peaceful enterprise, I can afford to refuse allegiance to Massachusetts, and her right to my property and life. It costs me less in every sense to incur the penalty of disobedience to the State than it would to obey. I should feel as if I were worth less in that case.

Some years ago, the State met me in behalf of the Church, and commanded me to pay a certain sum toward the support of a clergyman whose preaching my father attended, but never I myself. "Pay," it said, "or be locked up in the jail." I declined to pay. But, unfortunately, another man saw fit to pay it. I did not see why the schoolmaster should be taxed to support the priest, and not the priest the schoolmaster; for I was not the State's schoolmaster, but I supported myself by voluntary subscription. I did not see why the lyceum should not present its tax bill, and have the State to back its demand, as well as the Church. However, as the request of the selectmen, I condescended to make some such statement as this in writing: "Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any society which I have not joined." This I gave to the town clerk; and he has it. The State, having thus learned that I did not wish to be regarded as a member of that church, has never made a like demand on me since; though it said that it must adhere to its original presumption that time. If I had known how to name them, I should then have signed off in detail from all the societies which I never signed on to; but I did not know where to find such a complete list.

I have paid no poll tax for six years. I was put into a jail once on this account, for one night; and, as I stood considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet thick, the door of wood and iron, a foot thick, and the iron grating which strained the light, I could not help being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated my as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up. I wondered that it should have concluded at length that this was the best use it could put me to, and had never thought to avail itself of my services in some way. I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was. I did nor for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar. I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax. They plainly did not know how to treat me, but behaved like persons who are underbred. In every threat and in every compliment there was a blunder; for they thought that my chief desire was to stand the other side of that stone wall. I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance, and they were really all that was dangerous. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it.

Thus the state never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed with superior with or honesty, but with superior physical strength. I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest. What force has a multitude? They only can force me who obey a higher law than I. They force me to become like themselves. I do not hear of men being forced to live this way or that by masses of men. What sort of life were that to live? When I meet a government which says to me, "Your money our your life," why should I be in haste to give it my money? It may be in a great strait, and not know what to do: I cannot help that. It must help itself; do as I do. It is not worth the while to snivel about it. I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society. I am not the son of the engineer. I perceive that, when an acorn and a chestnut fall side by side, the one does not remain inert to make way for the other, but both obey their own laws, and spring and grow and flourish as best they can, till one, perchance, overshadows and destroys the other. If a plant cannot live according to nature, it dies; and so a man.

The night in prison was novel and interesting enough. The prisoners in their shirtsleeves were enjoying a chat and the evening air in the doorway, when I entered. But the jailer said, "Come, boys, it is time to lock up"; and so they dispersed, and I heard the sound of their steps returning into the hollow apartments. My room-mate was introduced to me by the jailer as "a first-rate fellow and clever man." When the door was locked, he showed me where to hang my hat, and how he managed matters there. The rooms were whitewashed once a month; and this one, at least, was the whitest, most simply furnished, and probably neatest apartment in town. He naturally wanted to know where I came from, and what brought me there; and, when I had told him, I asked him in my turn how he came there, presuming him to be an honest man, of course; and as the world goes, I believe he was. "Why," said he, "they accuse me of burning a barn; but I never did it." As near as I could discover, he had probably gone to bed in a barn when drunk, and smoked his pipe there; and so a barn was burnt. He had the reputation of being a clever man, had been there some three months waiting for his trial to come on, and would have to wait as much longer; but he was quite domesticated and contented, since he got his board for nothing, and thought that he was well treated.

He occupied one window, and I the other; and I saw that if one stayed there long, his principal business would be to look out the window. I had soon read all the tracts that were left there, and examined where former prisoners had broken out, and where a grate had been sawed off, and heard the history of the various occupants of that room; for I found that even there there was a history and a gossip which never circulated beyond the walls of the jail. Probably this is the only house in the town where verses are composed, which are afterward printed in a circular form, but not published. I was shown quite a long list of young men who had been detected in an attempt to escape, who avenged themselves by singing them.

I pumped my fellow-prisoner as dry as I could, for fear I should never see him again; but at length he showed me which was my bed, and left me to blow out the lamp.

It was like travelling into a far country, such as I had never expected to behold, to lie there for one night. It seemed to me that I never had heard the town clock strike before, not the evening sounds of the village; for we slept with the windows open, which were inside the grating. It was to see my native village in the light of the Middle Ages, and our Concord was turned into a Rhine stream, and visions of knights and castles passed before me. They were the voices of old burghers that I heard in the streets. I was an involuntary spectator and auditor of whatever was done and said in the kitchen of the adjacent village inn — a wholly new and rare experience to me. It was a closer view of my native town. I was fairly inside of it. I never had seen its institutions before. This is one of its peculiar institutions; for it is a shire town. I began to comprehend what its inhabitants were about.

In the morning, our breakfasts were put through the hole in the door, in small oblong-square tin pans, made to fit, and holding a pint of chocolate, with brown bread, and an iron spoon. When they called for the vessels again, I was green enough to return what bread I had left, but my comrade seized it, and said that I should lay that up for lunch or dinner. Soon after he was let out to work at haying in a neighboring field, whither he went every day, and would not be back till noon; so he bade me good day, saying that he doubted if he should see me again.

When I came out of prison — for some one interfered, and paid that tax — I did not perceive that great changes had taken place on the common, such as he observed who went in a youth and emerged a gray-headed man; and yet a change had come to my eyes come over the scene — the town, and State, and country, greater than any that mere time could effect. I saw yet more distinctly the State in which I lived. I saw to what extent the people among whom I lived could be trusted as good neighbors and friends; that their friendship was for summer weather only; that they did not greatly propose to do right; that they were a distinct race from me by their prejudices and superstitions, as the Chinamen and Malays are that in their sacrifices to humanity they ran no risks, not even to their property; that after all they were not so noble but they treated the thief as he had treated them, and hoped, by a certain outward observance and a few prayers, and by walking in a particular straight through useless path from time to time, to save their souls. This may be to judge my neighbors harshly; for I believe that many of them are not aware that they have such an institution as the jail in their village.

It was formerly the custom in our village, when a poor debtor came out of jail, for his acquaintances to salute him, looking through their fingers, which were crossed to represent the jail window, "How do ye do?" My neighbors did not this salute me, but first looked at me, and then at one another, as if I had returned from a long journey. I was put into jail as I was going to the shoemaker's to get a shoe which was mender. When I was let out the next morning, I proceeded to finish my errand, and, having put on my mended show, joined a huckleberry party, who were impatient to put themselves under my conduct; and in half an hour — for the horse was soon tackled — was in the midst of a huckleberry field, on one of our highest hills, two miles off, and then the State was nowhere to be seen.

This is the whole history of "My Prisons."

I have never declined paying the highway tax, because I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject; and as for supporting schools, I am doing my part to educate my fellow countrymen now. It is for no particular item in the tax bill that I refuse to pay it. I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually. I do not care to trace the course of my dollar, if I could, till it buys a man a musket to shoot one with — the dollar is innocent — but I am concerned to trace the effects of my allegiance. In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make use and get what advantages of her I can, as is usual in such cases.

If others pay the tax which is demanded of me, from a sympathy with the State, they do but what they have already done in their own case, or rather they abet injustice to a greater extent than the State requires. If they pay the tax from a mistaken interest in the individual taxed, to save his property, or prevent his going to jail, it is because they have not considered wisely how far they let their private feelings interfere with the public good.

*This, then is my position at present. But one cannot be too much on his guard in such a case, lest his actions be biased by obstinacy or an undue regard for the opinions of men. Let him see that he does only what belongs to himself and to the hour.*

*I think sometimes, Why, this people mean well, they are only ignorant; they would do better if they knew how: why give your neighbors this pain to treat you as they are not inclined to? But I think again, This is no reason why I should do as they do, or permit others to suffer much greater pain of a different kind. Again, I sometimes say to myself, When many millions of men, without heat, without ill will, without personal feelings of any kind, demand of you a few shillings only, without the possibility, such is their constitution, of retracting or altering their present demand, and without the possibility, on your side, of appeal to any other millions, why expose yourself to this overwhelming brute force? You do not resist cold and hunger, the winds and the waves, thus obstinately; you quietly submit to a thousand similar necessities. You do not put your head into the fire. But just in proportion as I regard this as not wholly a brute force, but partly a human force, and consider that I have relations to those millions as to so many millions of men, and not of mere brute or inanimate things, I see that appeal is possible, first and instantaneously, from them to the Maker of them, and, secondly, from them to themselves. But if I put my head deliberately into the fire, there is no appeal to fire or to the Maker for fire, and I have only myself to blame. If I could convince myself that I have any right to be satisfied with men as they are, and to treat them accordingly, and not according, in some respects, to my requisitions and expectations of what they and I ought to be, then, like a good Mussulman and fatalist, I should endeavor to be satisfied with things as they are, and say it is the will of God. And, above all, there is this difference between resisting this and a purely brute or natural force, that I can resist this with some effect; but I cannot expect, like Orpheus, to change the nature of the rocks and trees and beasts.*

*I do not wish to quarrel with any man or nation. I do not wish to split hairs, to make fine distinctions, or set myself up as better than my neighbors. I seek rather, I may say, even an excuse for conforming to the laws of the land. I am but too ready to conform to them. Indeed, I have reason to suspect myself on this head; and each year, as the tax-gatherer comes round, I find myself disposed to review the acts and position of the general and State governments, and the spirit of the people to discover a pretext for conformity.*

*"We must affect our country as our parents,  
And if at any time we alienate  
Out love or industry from doing it honor,  
We must respect effects and teach the soul  
Matter of conscience and religion,  
And not desire of rule or benefit."*

*I believe that the State will soon be able to take all my work of this sort out of my hands, and then I shall be no better patriot than my fellow-countrymen. Seen from a lower point of view, the Constitution, with all its faults, is very good; the law and the courts are very respectable; even this State and this American government are, in many respects, very admirable, and rare things, to be thankful for, such as a great many have described them; seen from a higher still, and the highest, who shall say what they are, or that they are worth looking at or thinking of at all?*

*However, the government does not concern me much, and I shall bestow the fewest possible thoughts on it. It is not many moments that I live under a government, even in this world. If a man is thought-free, fancy-free, imagination-free, that which is not never for a long time appearing to be to him, unwise rulers or reformers cannot fatally interrupt him.*

*I know that most men think differently from myself; but those whose lives are by profession devoted to the study of these or kindred subjects content me as little as any. Statesmen and legislators, standing so completely within the institution, never distinctly and nakedly behold it. They speak of moving society, but have no resting-place without it. They may be men of a certain experience and discrimination, and have no doubt invented ingenious and even useful systems, for which we sincerely thank them; but all their wit and usefulness lie within certain not very wide limits. They are wont to forget that the world is not governed by policy and expediency. Webster never goes behind government, and so cannot speak with authority about it. His words are wisdom to those legislators who contemplate no essential reform in the existing government; but for thinkers, and those who legislate for all time, he never once glances at the subject. I know of those whose serene and wise speculations on this theme would soon reveal the limits of his mind's range and hospitality. Yet, compared with the cheap professions of most reformers, and the still cheaper wisdom an eloquence of politicians in general, his are almost the only sensible and valuable words, and we thank Heaven for him. Comparatively, he is always strong, original, and, above all, practical. Still, his quality is not wisdom, but prudence. The lawyer's truth is not Truth, but consistency or a consistent expediency. Truth is always in harmony with herself, and is not concerned chiefly to reveal the justice that may consist with wrong-doing. He well deserves to be called, as he has been called, the Defender of the Constitution. There are really no blows to be given him but defensive ones. He is not a leader, but a follower. His leaders are the men of '87. "I have never made an effort," he says, "and never propose to make an effort; I have never countenanced an effort, and never mean to countenance an effort, to disturb the arrangement as originally made, by which various States came into the Union." Still thinking of the sanction which the Constitution gives to slavery, he says, "Because it was part of the original compact — let it stand." Notwithstanding his special acuteness and ability, he is unable to take a fact out of its merely political relations, and behold it as it lies absolutely to be disposed of by the intellect — what, for instance, it behooves a man to do here in American today with regard to slavery — but ventures, or is driven, to make some such desperate answer to the following, while professing to speak absolutely, and as a private man — from which what new and singular of social duties might be inferred? "The manner," says he, "in which the governments of the States where slavery exists are to regulate it is for their own consideration, under the responsibility to their constituents, to the general laws of propriety, humanity, and justice, and to God. Associations formed elsewhere, springing from a feeling of humanity, or any other cause, have nothing whatever to do with it. They have never received any encouragement from me and they never will. [These extracts have been inserted since the lecture was read — HDT]*

*They who know of no purer sources of truth, who have traced up its stream no higher, stand, and wisely stand, by the Bible and the Constitution, and drink at it there with reverence and humanity; but they who behold where it comes trickling into this lake or that pool, gird up their loins once more, and continue their pilgrimage toward its fountainhead.*

*No man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America. They are rare in the history of the world. There are orators, politicians, and eloquent men, by the thousand; but the speaker has not yet opened his mouth to speak who is capable of settling the much-vexed questions of the day. We love eloquence for its own sake, and not for any truth which it may utter, or any heroism it may inspire. Our legislators have not yet learned the comparative value of free trade and of freed, of union, and of rectitude, to a nation. They have no genius or talent for comparatively humble questions of taxation and finance, commerce and manufactures and agriculture. If we were left solely to the wordy wit of legislators in Congress for our guidance, uncorrected by the seasonable experience and the effectual complaints of the people, America would not long retain her rank among the nations. For eighteen hundred years, though perchance I have no right to say it, the New Testament has been written; yet where is the legislator who has wisdom and practical talent enough to avail himself of the light which it sheds on the science of legislation.*

*The authority of government, even such as I am willing to submit to — for I will cheerfully obey those who know and can do better than I, and in many things even those who neither know nor can do so well — is still an impure one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed. It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it. The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual. Even the Chinese philosopher was wise enough to regard the individual as the basis of the empire. Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man? There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which I have also imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.*

On the Flesch-Kincaid reading score, Thoreau’s text ranks as an 11th to 12th grade reading score. Recraft the closing excerpt of this speech in italics to meet the needs of the average American reader (reading level Grade 6). Simplify but do not reduce the power. Do not resort to mere slang and idiom or try to be cute to garner interest. Respect your imagined reader as a person of good will and earnest citizenship but also as one who has been undereducated in reading complex texts.

You can test your results on this web site: https://readability-score.com/

### From “On Civil Disobedience,” by Mohandas Gandhi

July 27, 1916

There are two ways of countering injustice. One way is to smash the head of the man who perpetrates injustice and to get your own head smashed in the process. All strong people in the world adopt this course.

Everywhere wars are fought and millions of people are killed. The consequence is not the progress of a nation but its decline. Soldiers returning from the front have become so bereft of reason that they indulge in various anti-social activities. One does not have to go far for examples. Pride makes a victorious nation bad-tempered.

It falls into luxurious ways of living. Then for a time, it may be conceded, peace prevails. But after a short while, it comes more and more to be realized that the seeds of war have not been destroyed but have become a thousand times more nourished and mighty. No country has ever become, or will ever become, happy through victory in war. A nation does not rise that way, it only falls further. In fact, what comes to it is defeat, not victory. And if, perchance, either our act or our purpose was ill-conceived, it brings disaster to both belligerents.

But through the other method of combating injustice, we alone suffer the consequences of our mistakes, and the other side is wholly spared. This other method is satyagraha. One who resorts to it does not have to break another’s head; he may merely have his own head broken. He has to be prepared to die himself suffering all the pain. In opposing the atrocious laws of the Government of South Africa, it was this method that we adopted. We made it clear to the said Government that we would never bow to its outrageous laws. No clapping is possible without two hands to do it, and no quarrel without two persons to make it. Similarly, no State is possible without two entities (the rulers and the ruled). You are our sovereign, our Government, only so long as we consider ourselves your subjects.

When we are not subjects, you are not the sovereign either. So long as it is your endeavor to control us with justice and love, we will let you do so. But if you wish to strike at us from behind, we cannot permit it.

Whatever you do in other matters, you will have to ask our opinion about the laws that concern us. If you make laws to keep us suppressed in a wrongful manner and without taking us into confidence, these laws will merely adorn the statute-books. We will never obey them. Award us for it what punishment you like, we will put up with it. Send us to prison and we will live there as in a paradise. Ask us to mount the scaffold and we will do so laughing. Shower what sufferings you like upon us, we will calmly endure all and not hurt a hair of your body. We will gladly die and will not so much as touch you. But so long as there is yet life in these our bones, we will never comply with your arbitrary laws.

## Fail Better by Zadie Smith

What makes a good writer? Is writing an expression of self, or, as TS Eliot argued, 'an escape from personality'? Do novelists have a duty? Do readers? Why are there so few truly great novels?Zadie Smith on literature's legacy of honourable failure

**Saturday January 13, 2007**

**Guardian**

**1. The tale of Clive**

I want you to think of a young man called Clive. Clive is on a familiar literary mission: he wants to write the perfect novel. Clive has a lot going for him: he's intelligent and well read; he's made a study of contemporary fiction and can see clearly where his peers have gone wrong; he has read a good deal of rigorous literary theory - those elegant blueprints for novels not yet built - and is now ready to build his own unparalleled house of words. Maybe Clive even teaches novels, takes them apart and puts them back together. If writing is a craft, he has all the skills, every tool. Clive is ready. He clears out the spare room in his flat, invests in an ergonomic chair, and sits down in front of the blank possibility of the Microsoft Word program. Hovering above his desktop he sees the perfect outline of his platonic novel - all he need do is drag it from the ether into the real. He's excited. He begins.

Fast-forward three years. Somehow, despite all Clive's best efforts, the novel he has pulled into existence is not the perfect novel that floated so tantalisingly above his computer. It is, rather, a poor simulacrum, a shadow of a shadow. In the transition from the dream to the real it has shed its aura of perfection; its shape is warped, unrecognisable. Something got in the way, something almost impossible to articulate. For example, when it came to fashioning the character of the corrupt Hispanic government economist, Maria Gomez, who is so vital to Clive's central theme of corruption within American identity politics, he found he needed something more than simply "the right words" or "knowledge about economists". Maria Gomez effectively proves his point about the deflated American dream, but in other, ineffable, ways she seems not quite to convince as he'd hoped. He found it hard to get into her silk blouse, her pencil skirt - even harder to get under her skin. And then, later, trying to describe her marriage, he discovered that he wanted to write cleverly and aphoristically about "Marriage" with a capital M far more than he wanted to describe Maria's particular marriage, which, thinking of his own marriage, seemed suddenly a monumentally complex task, particularly if his own wife, Karina, was going to read it. And there are a million other little examples ...flaws that are not simply flaws of language or design, but rather flaws of ... what? Him? This thought bothers him for a moment. And then another, far darker thought comes. Is it possible that if he were only the reader, and not the writer, of this novel, he would think it a failure?

Clive doesn't wallow in such thoughts for long. His book gets an agent, his agent gets a publisher, his novel goes out into the world. It is well received. It turns out that Clive's book smells like literature and looks like literature and maybe even, intermittently, feels like literature, and after a while Clive himself has almost forgotten that strange feeling of untruth, of self-betrayal, that his novel first roused in him. He becomes not only a fan of his own novel, but its great defender. If a critic points out an overindulgence here, a purple passage there, well, then Clive explains this is simply what he intended. It was all to achieve a certain effect. In fact, Clive doesn't mind such criticism: nit-picking of this kind feels superficial compared to the bleak sense he first had that his novel was not only not good, but not true. No one is accusing him of so large a crime. The critics, when they criticise, speak of the paintwork and brickwork of the novel, a bad metaphor, a tedious denouement, and are confident he will fix these little mistakes next time round. As for Maria Gomez, everybody agrees that she is just as you'd imagine a corrupt Hispanic government economist in a pencil skirt to be. Clive is satisfied and vindicated. He begins work on a sequel.

**2. The craft that defies craftsmanship**

That is the end of the tale of Clive. Its purpose was to suggest that somewhere between a critic's necessary superficiality and a writer's natural dishonesty, the truth of how we judge literary success or failure is lost. It is very hard to get writers to speak frankly about their own work, particularly in a literary market where they are required to be not only writers, but also hucksters selling product. It is always easier to depersonalise the question. In preparation for this essay I emailed many writers (under the promise of anonymity) to ask how they judge their own work. One writer, of a naturally analytical and philosophical bent, replied by refining my simple question into a series of more interesting ones:

I've often thought it would be fascinating to ask living writers: "Never mind critics, what do you yourself think is wrong with your writing? How did you dream of your book before it was created? What were your best hopes? How have you let yourself down?" A map of disappointments - that would be a revelation.

Map of disappointments - Nabokov would call that a good title for a bad novel. It strikes me as a suitable guide to the land where writers live, a country I imagine as mostly beach, with hopeful writers standing on the shoreline while their perfect novels pile up, over on the opposite coast, out of reach. Thrusting out of the shoreline are hundreds of piers, or "disappointed bridges", as Joyce called them. Most writers, most of the time, get wet. Why they get wet is of little interest to critics or readers, who can only judge the soggy novel in front of them. But for the people who write novels, what it takes to walk the pier and get to the other side is, to say the least, a matter of some importance. To writers, writing well is not simply a matter of skill, but a question of character. What does it take, after all, to write well? What personal qualities does it require? What personal resources does a bad writer lack? In most areas of human endeavour we are not shy of making these connections between personality and capacity. Why do we never talk about these things when we talk about books?

It's my experience that when a writer meets other writers and the conversation turns to the fault lines of their various prose styles, then you hear a slightly different language than the critic's language. Writers do not say, "My research wasn't sufficiently thorough" or "I thought Casablanca was in Tunisia" or "I seem to reify the idea of femininity" - at least, they don't consider problems like these to be central. They are concerned with the ways in which what they have written reveals or betrays their best or worst selves. Writers feel, for example, that what appear to be bad aesthetic choices very often have an ethical dimension. Writers know that between the platonic ideal of the novel and the actual novel there is always the pesky self - vain, deluded, myopic, cowardly, compromised. That's why writing is the craft that defies craftsmanship: craftsmanship alone will not make a novel great. This is hard for young writers, like Clive, to grasp at first. A skilled cabinet-maker will make good cabinets, and a skilled cobbler will mend your shoes, but skilled writers very rarely write good books and almost never write great ones. There is a rogue element somewhere - for convenience's sake we'll call it the self, although, in less metaphysically challenged times, the "soul" would have done just as well. In our public literary conversations we are squeamish about the connection between selves and novels. We are repelled by the idea that writing fiction might be, among other things, a question of character. We like to think of fiction as the playground of language, independent of its originator. That's why, in the public imagination, the confession "I did not tell the truth" signifies failure when James Frey says it, and means nothing at all if John Updike says it. I think that fiction writers know different. Though we rarely say it publicly, we know that our fictions are not as disconnected from our selves as you like to imagine and we like to pretend. It is this intimate side of literary failure that is so interesting; the ways in which writers fail on their own terms: private, difficult to express, easy to ridicule, completely unsuited for either the regulatory atmosphere of reviews or the objective interrogation of seminars, and yet, despite all this, true.

**3. What writers know**

First things first: writers do not have perfect or even superior knowledge about the quality or otherwise of their own work - God knows, most writers are quite deluded about the nature of their own talent. But writers do have a different kind of knowledge than either professors or critics. Occasionally it's worth listening to. The insight of the practitioner is, for better or worse, unique. It's what you find in the criticism of Virginia Woolf, of Iris Murdoch, of Roland Barthes. What unites those very different critics is the confidence with which they made the connection between personality and prose. To be clear: theirs was neither strictly biographical criticism nor prescriptively moral criticism, and nothing they wrote was reducible to the childish formulations "only good men write good books" or "one must know a man's life to understand his work". But neither did they think of a writer's personality as an irrelevance. They understood style precisely as an expression of personality, in its widest sense. A writer's personality is his manner of being in the world: his writing style is the unavoidable trace of that manner. When you understand style in these terms, you don't think of it as merely a matter of fanciful syntax, or as the flamboyant icing atop a plain literary cake, nor as the uncontrollable result of some mysterious velocity coiled within language itself. Rather, you see style as a personal necessity, as the only possible expression of a particular human consciousness. Style is a writer's way of telling the truth. Literary success or failure, by this measure, depends not only on the refinement of words on a page, but in the refinement of a consciousness, what Aristotle called the education of the emotions.

**4. Tradition versus the individual talent**

But before we go any further along that track we find TS Eliot, that most distinguished of critic-practitioners, standing in our way. In his famous essay of 1919, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot decimated the very idea of individual consciousness, of personality, in writing. There was hardly any such thing, he claimed, and what there was, was not interesting. For Eliot the most individual and successful aspects of a writer's work were precisely those places where his literary ancestors asserted their immortality most vigorously. The poet and his personality were irrelevant, the poetry was everything; and the poetry could only be understood through the glass of literary history. That essay is written in so high church a style, with such imperious authority, that even if all your affective experience as a writer is to the contrary, you are intimidated into believing it. "Poetry," says Eliot, "is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." "The progress of an artist," says Eliot, "is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." These credos seem so impersonal themselves, so disinterested, that it is easy to forget that young critic-practitioners make the beds they wish to lie in, and it was in Eliot's interest - given the complexity and scandals of his private life and his distaste for intrusion - ruthlessly to separate the personal from the poetry. He was so concerned with privacy that it influences his terminology: everywhere in that essay there is the assumption that personality amounts to simply the biographical facts of one's life - but that is a narrow vision. Personality is much more than autobiographical detail, it's our way of processing the world, our way of being, and it cannot be artificially removed from our activities; it is our way of being active.

Eliot may have been ruthlessly impersonal in his writing in the superficial sense (if by that we mean he did not reveal personal details, such as the tricky fact that he had committed his wife to an asylum), but never was a man's work more inflected with his character, with his beliefs about the nature of the world. As for that element of his work that he puts forward as a model of his impersonality - a devotion to tradition - such devotion is the very definition of personality in writing. The choices a writer makes within a tradition - preferring Milton to Moliere, caring for Barth over Barthelme - constitute some of the most personal information we can have about him.

There is no doubt that Eliot's essay, with its promise to "halt at the frontiers of metaphysics or mysticism", is a brilliant demarcation of what is properly within the remit of, as he puts it, "the responsible person interested in poetry". It lays out an entirely reasonable boundary between what we can and cannot say about a piece of writing without embarrassing ourselves. Eliot was honest about wanting both writing and criticism to approach the condition of a science; he famously compared a writer to a piece of finely filiated platinum introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide. This analogy has proved a useful aspiration for critics. It has allowed them to believe in the writer as catalyst, entering into a tradition, performing an act of meaningful recombination, and yet leaving no trace of himself, or at least none the critic need worry himself with. Eliot's analogy freed critics to do the independent, radically creative, non- biographical criticism of which they had long dreamt, and to which they have every right. For writers, however, Eliot's analogy just won't do. Fiction writing is not an objective science and writers have selves as well as traditions to understand and assimilate. It is certainly very important, as Eliot argues, that writers should foster an understanding of the cultures and the books of the past, but they also unavoidably exist within the garden of the self and this, too, requires nurture and development. The self is not like platinum - it leaves traces all over the place. Just because Eliot didn't want to talk about it, doesn't mean it isn't there.

**5. Writing as self-betrayal**

Back to my simple point, which is that writers are in possession of "selfhood", and that the development or otherwise of self has some part to play in literary success or failure. This shameful fact needn't trouble the professor or the critic, but it is naturally of no little significance to writers themselves. Here is the poet Adam Zagajewski, speaking of The Self, in a poem of the same title:

It is small and no more visible than a cricket  
in August. It likes to dress up, to masquerade,   
as all dwarves do. It lodges between  
granite blocks, between serviceable  
truths. It even fits under  
a bandage, under adhesive. Neither custom officers  
nor their beautiful dogs will find it. Between  
hymns, between alliances, it hides itself.

To me, writing is always the attempted revelation of this elusive, multifaceted self, and yet its total revelation - as Zagajewski suggests - is a chimerical impossibility. It is impossible to convey all of the truth of all our experience. Actually, it's impossible to even know what that would mean, although we stubbornly continue to have an idea of it, just as Plato had an idea of the forms. When we write, similarly, we have the idea of a total revelation of truth, but cannot realise it. And so, instead, each writer asks himself which serviceable truths he can live with, which alliances are strong enough to hold. The answers to those questions separate experimentalists from so-called "realists", comics from tragedians, even poets from novelists. In what form, asks the writer, can I most truthfully describe the world as it is experienced by this particular self? And it is from that starting point that each writer goes on to make their individual compromise with the self, which is always a compromise with truth as far as the self can know it. That is why the most common feeling, upon re-reading one's own work, is Prufrock's: "That is not it at all ... that is not what I meant, at all ..." Writing feels like self-betrayal, like failure.

**6. Writing as inauthenticity**

Here is another novelist, in another email, answering the question: "How would you define literary failure?"

I was once asked by a high-school student in an audience in Chennai: "Why, sir, are you so eager to please?" That's how I tend to define failure - work done for what Heidegger called "Das Mann", the indeterminate "They" who hang over your shoulder, warping your sense of judgment; what he (not me) would call your authenticity.

That novelist, like me, I suppose like all of us who came of age under postmodernity, is naturally sceptical of the concept of authenticity, especially what is called "cultural authenticity" - after all, how can any of us be more or less authentic than we are? We were taught that authenticity was meaningless. How, then, to deal with the fact that when we account for our failings, as writers, the feeling that is strongest is a betrayal of one's deepest, authentic self?

That sounds very grand: maybe it's better to start at the simplest denomination of literary betrayal, the critic's favourite, the cliche. What is a cliche except language passed down by Das Mann, used and shop-soiled by so many before you, and in no way the correct jumble of language for the intimate part of your vision you meant to express? With a cliche you have pandered to a shared understanding, you have taken a short-cut, you have re-presented what was pleasing and familiar rather than risked what was true and strange. It is an aesthetic and an ethical failure: to put it very simply, you have not told the truth. When writers admit to failures they like to admit to the smallest ones - for example, in each of my novels somebody "rummages in their purse" for something because I was too lazy and thoughtless and unawake to separate "purse" from its old, persistent friend "rummage". To rummage through a purse is to sleepwalk through a sentence - a small enough betrayal of self, but a betrayal all the same. To speak personally, the very reason I write is so that I might not sleepwalk through my entire life. But it is easy to admit that a sentence makes you wince; less easy to confront the fact that for many writers there will be paragraphs, whole characters, whole books through which one sleepwalks and for which "inauthentic" is truly the correct term.

**7. Do writers have duties?**

All this talk of authenticity, of betrayal, presupposes a duty - an obligation that the writers and readers of literature are under. It is deeply unfashionable to conceive of such a thing as a literary duty; what that might be, how we might fail to fulfil it. Duty is not a very literary term. These days, when we do speak of literary duties, we mean it from the reader's perspective, as a consumer of literature. We are really speaking of consumer rights. By this measure the duty of writers is to please readers and to be eager to do so, and this duty has various subsets: the duty to be clear; to be interesting and intelligent but never wilfully obscure; to write with the average reader in mind; to be in good taste. Above all, the modern writer has a duty to entertain. Writers who stray from these obligations risk tiny readerships and critical ridicule. Novels that submit to a shared vision of entertainment, with characters that speak therecognisable dialogue of the sitcom, with plots that take us down familiar roads and back home again, will always be welcomed. This is not a good time, in literature, to be a curio. Readers seem to wish to be "represented", as they are at the ballot box, and to do this, fiction needs to be general, not particular. In the contemporary fiction market a writer must entertain and be recognisable - anything less is seen as a failure and a rejection of readers.

Personally, I have no objection to books that entertain and please, that are clear and interesting and intelligent, that are in good taste and are not wilfully obscure - but neither do these qualities seem to me in any way essential to the central experience of fiction, and if they should be missing, this in no way rules out the possibility that the novel I am reading will yet fulfil the only literary duty I care about. For writers have only one duty, as I see it: the duty to express accurately their way of being in the world. If that sounds woolly and imprecise, I apologise. Writing is not a science, and I am speaking to you in the only terms I have to describe what it is I persistently aim for (yet fail to achieve) when I sit in front of my computer.

When I write I am trying to express my way of being in the world. This is primarily a process of elimination: once you have removed all the dead language, the second-hand dogma, the truths that are not your own but other people's, the mottos, the slogans, the out-and-out lies of your nation, the myths of your historical moment - once you have removed all that warps experience into a shape you do not recognise and do not believe in - what you are left with is something approximating the truth of your own conception. That is what I am looking for when I read a novel; one person's truth as far as it can be rendered through language. This single duty, properly pursued, produces complicated, various results. It's certainly not a call to arms for the autobiographer, although some writers will always mistake the readerly desire for personal truth as their cue to write a treatise or a speech or a thinly disguised memoir in which they themselves are the hero. Fictional truth is a question of perspective, not autobiography. It is what you can't help tell if you write well; it is the watermark of self that runs through everything you do. It is language as the revelation of a consciousness.

**8. We refuse to be each other**

A great novel is the intimation of a metaphysical event you can never know, no matter how long you live, no matter how many people you love: the experience of the world through a consciousness other than your own. And I don't care if that consciousness chooses to spend its time in drawing rooms or in internet networks; I don't care if it uses a corner of a Dorito as its hero, or the charming eldest daughter of a bourgeois family; I don't care if it refuses to use the letter e or crosses five continents and two thousand pages. What unites great novels is the individual manner in which they articulate experience and force us to be attentive, waking us from the sleepwalk of our lives. And the great joy of fiction is the variety of this process: Austen's prose will make you attentive in a different way and to different things than Wharton's; the dream Philip Roth wishes to wake us from still counts as sleep if Pynchon is the dream-catcher.

A great piece of fiction can demand that you acknowledge the reality of its wildest proposition, no matter how alien it may be to you. It can also force you to concede the radical otherness lurking within things that appear most familiar. This is why the talented reader understands George Saunders to be as much a realist as Tolstoy, Henry James as much an experimentalist as George Perec. Great styles represent the interface of "world" and "I", and the very notion of such an interface being different in kind and quality from your own is where the power of fiction resides. Writers fail us when that interface is tailored to our needs, when it panders to the generalities of its day, when it offers us a world it knows we will accept having already seen it on the television. Bad writing does nothing, changes nothing, educates no emotions, rewires no inner circuitry - we close its covers with the same metaphysical confidence in the universality of our own interface as we did when we opened it. But great writing - great writing forces you to submit to its vision. You spend the morning reading Chekhov and in the afternoon, walking through yourneighbourhood, the world has turned Chekhovian; the waitress in the cafe offers a non- sequitur, a dog dances in the street.

**9. The dream of a perfect novel drives writers crazy**

There is a dream that haunts writers: the dream of the perfect novel. It is a dream that causes only chaos and misery. The dream of this perfect novel is really the dream of a perfect revelation of the self. In America, where the self is so neatly wedded to the social, their dream of the perfect novel is called "The Great American Novel" and requires the revelation of the soul of a nation, not just of a man ... Still I think the principle is the same: on both sides of the Atlantic we dream of a novel that tells the truth of experience perfectly. Such a revelation is impossible - it will always be a partial vision, and even a partial vision is incredibly hard to achieve. The reason it is so hard to think of more than a handful of great novels is because the duty I've been talking about - the duty to convey accurately the truth of one's own conception - is a duty of the most demanding kind. If, every 30 years, people complain that there were only a few first-rate novels published, that's because there were only a few. Genius in fiction has always been and always will be extremely rare. Fact is, to tell the truth of your own conception - given the nature of our mediated world, given the shared and ambivalent nature of language, given the elusive, deceitful, deluded nature of the self - truly takes a genius, truly demands of its creator a breed of aesthetic and ethical integrity that makes one's eyes water just thinking about it.

But there's no reason to cry. If it's true that first-rate novels are rare, it's also true that what we call the literary canon is really the history of the second-rate, the legacy of honourable failures. Any writer should be proud to join that list just as any reader should count themselves lucky to read them. The literature we love amounts to the fractured shards of an attempt, not the monument of fulfilment. The art is in the attempt, and this matter of understanding-that-which-is-outside-of-ourselves using only what we have inside ourselves amounts to some of the hardest intellectual and emotional work you'll ever do. It is a writer's duty. It is also a reader's duty. Did I mention that yet?

**10. Note to readers: a novel is a two-way street**

A novel is a two-way street, in which the labour required on either side is, in the end, equal. Reading, done properly, is every bit as tough as writing - I really believe that. As for those people who align reading with the essentially passive experience of watching television, they only wish to debase reading and readers. The more accurate analogy is that of the amateur musician placing her sheet music on the stand and preparing to play. She must use her own, hard-won, skills to play this piece of music. The greater the skill, the greater the gift she gives the composer and the composer gives her.

This is a conception of "reading" we rarely hear now. And yet, when you practise reading, when you spend time with a book, the old moral of effort and reward is undeniable. Reading is a skill and an art and readers should take pride in their abilities and have no shame in cultivating them if for no other reason than the fact that writers need you. To respond to the ideal writer takes an ideal reader, the type of reader who is open enough to allow into their own mind a picture of human consciousness so radically different from their own as to be almost offensive to reason. The ideal reader steps up to the plate of the writer's style so that together writer and reader might hit the ball out of the park.

What I'm saying is, a reader must have talent. Quite a lot of talent, actually, because even the most talented reader will find much of the land of literature tricky terrain. For how many of us feel the world to be as Kafka felt it, too impossibly foreshortened to ride from one village to the next? Or can imagine a world without nouns, as Borges did? How many are willing to be as emotionally generous as Dickens, or to take religious faith as seriously as did Graham Greene? Who among us have Zora Neale Hurston's capacity for joy or Douglas Coupland's strong stomach for the future? Who has the delicacy to tease out Flaubert's faintest nuance, or the patience and the will to follow David Foster Wallace down his intricate recursive spirals of thought? The skills that it takes to write it are required to read it. Readers fail writers just as often as writers fail readers. Readers fail when they allow themselves to believe the old mantra that fiction is the thing you relate to and writers the amenable people you seek out when you want to have your own version of the world confirmed and reinforced. That is certainly one of the many things fiction can do, but it's a conjurer's trick within a far deeper magic. To become better readers and writers we have to ask of each other a little bit more.

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### Speaking in Tongues by [Zadie Smith](http://www.nybooks.com/contributors/zadie-smith-2/)

[FEBRUARY 26, 2009 ISSUE](http://www.nybooks.com/issues/2009/feb/26/)

The following is based on a lecture given at the New York Public Library in December 2008.

Hello. This voice I speak with these days, this English voice with its rounded vowels and consonants in more or less the right place—this is not the voice of my childhood. I picked it up in college, along with the unabridged *Clarissa* and a taste for port. Maybe this fact is only what it seems to be—a case of bald social climbing—but at the time I genuinely thought*this* was the voice of lettered people, and that if I didn’t have the voice of lettered people I would never truly be lettered. A braver person, perhaps, would have stood firm, teaching her peers a useful lesson by example: not all lettered people need be of the same class, nor speak identically. I went the other way. Partly out of cowardice and a constitutional eagerness to please, but also because I didn’t quite see it as a straight swap, of this voice for that.

My own childhood had been the story of this and that combined, of the synthesis of disparate things. It never occurred to me that I was leaving the London district of Willesden for Cambridge. I thought I was *adding* Cambridge to Willesden, this new way of talking to that old way. Adding a new kind of knowledge to a different kind I already had. And for a while, that’s how it was: at home, during the holidays, I spoke with my old voice, and in the old voice seemed to feel and speak things that I couldn’t express in college, and vice versa. I felt a sort of wonder at the flexibility of the thing. Like being alive twice.

But flexibility is something that requires work if it is to be maintained. Recently my double voice has deserted me for a single one, reflecting the smaller world into which my work has led me. Willesden was a big, colorful, working-class sea; Cambridge was a smaller, posher pond, and almost univocal; the literary world is a puddle. This voice I picked up along the way is no longer an exotic garment I put on like a college gown whenever I choose—now it is my only voice, whether I want it or not. I regret it; I should have kept both voices alive in my mouth. They were both a part of me. But how the culture warns against it! As George Bernard Shaw delicately put it in his preface to the play *Pygmalion*, “many thousands of [British] men and women…have sloughed off their native dialects and acquired a new tongue.”

Few, though, will admit to it. Voice adaptation is still the original British sin. Monitoring and exposing such citizens is a national pastime, as popular as sex scandals and libel cases. If you lean toward the Atlantic with your high-rising terminals you’re a sell-out; if you pronounce borrowed European words in their original style—even if you try something as innocent as *parmigiano* for “parmesan”—you’re a fraud. If you go (metaphorically speaking) down the British class scale, you’ve gone from Cockney to “mockney,” and can expect a public tar and feathering; to go the other way is to perform an unforgivable act of class betrayal. Voices are meant to be unchanging and singular. There’s no quicker way to insult an ex-pat Scotsman in London than to tell him he’s lost his accent. We feel that our voices are who we are, and that to have more than one, or to use different versions of a voice for different occasions, represents, at best, a Janus-faced duplicity, and at worst, the loss of our very souls.

Whoever changes their voice takes on, in Britain, a queerly tragic dimension. They have betrayed that puzzling dictum “To thine own self be true,” so often quoted approvingly as if it represented the wisdom of Shakespeare rather than the hot air of Polonius. ” *What’s to become of me? What’s to become of me?”* wails Eliza Doolittle, realizing her middling dilemma. With a voice too posh for the flower girls and yet too redolent of the gutter for the ladies in Mrs. Higgins’s drawing room.

But Eliza—patron saint of the tragically double-voiced—is worthy of closer inspection. The first thing to note is that both Eliza and *Pygmalion* are entirely didactic, as Shaw meant them to be. “I delight,” he wrote,

in throwing [*Pygmalion*] at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that art should never be anything else.

He was determined to tell the unambiguous tale of a girl who changes her voice and loses her self. And so she arrives like this:

Don’t you be so saucy. You ain’t heard what I come for yet. Did you tell him I come in a taxi?… Oh, we are proud! He ain’t above giving lessons, not him: I heard him say so. Well, I ain’t come here to ask for any compliment; and if my moneys not good enough I can go elsewhere…. Now you know, don’t you? I’m come to have lessons, I am. And to pay for em too: make no mistake…. I want to be a lady in a flower shop stead of selling at the corner of Tottenham Court Road. But they wont take me unless I can talk more genteel.

And she leaves like this:

I can’t. I could have done it once; but now I can’t go back to it. Last night, when I was wandering about, a girl spoke to me; and I tried to get back into the old way with her; but it was no use. You told me, you know, that when a child is brought to a foreign country, it picks up the language in a few weeks, and forgets its own. Well, I am a child in your country. I have forgotten my own language, and can speak nothing but yours.

By the end of his experiment, Professor Higgins has made his Eliza an awkward, in-between thing, neither flower girl nor lady, with one voice lost and another gained, at the steep price of everything she was, and everything she knows. Almost as afterthought, he sends Eliza’s father, Alfred Doolittle, to his doom, too, securing a three-thousand-a-year living for the man on the condition that Doolittle lecture for the Wannafeller Moral Reform World League up to six times a year. This burden brings the philosophical dustman into the close, unwanted embrace of what he disdainfully calls “middle class morality.” By the time the curtain goes down, both Doolittles find themselves stuck in the middle, which is, to Shaw, a comi-tragic place to be, with the emphasis on the tragic. What are they fit for? What will become of them?

How persistent this horror of the middling spot is, this dread of the interim place! It extends through the specter of the tragic mulatto, to the plight of the transsexual, to our present anxiety —disguised as genteel concern—for the contemporary immigrant, tragically split, we are sure, between worlds, ideas, cultures, voices—whatever will become of them? Something’s got to give—one voice must be sacrificed for the other. What is double must be made singular.

But this, the apparent didactic moral of Eliza’s story, is undercut by the fact of the play itself, which is an orchestra of many voices, simultaneously and perfectly rendered, with no shade of color or tone sacrificed. Higgins’s Harley Street high-handedness is the equal of Mrs. Pierce’s lower-middle-class gentility, Pickering’s kindhearted aristocratic imprecision every bit as convincing as Arthur Doolittle’s Nietzschean Cockney-by-way-of-Wales. Shaw had a wonderful ear, able to reproduce almost as many quirks of the English language as Shakespeare’s. Shaw was in possession of a gift he wouldn’t, or couldn’t, give Eliza: he spoke in tongues.

It gives me a strange sensation to turn from Shaw’s melancholy Pygmalion story to another, infinitely more hopeful version, written by the new president of the United States of America. Of course, his ear isn’t half bad either. In *Dreams from My Father*, the new president displays an enviable facility for dialogue, and puts it to good use, animating a cast every bit as various as the one James Baldwin—an obvious influence—conjured for his own many-voiced novel *Another Country*. Obama can do young Jewish male, black old lady from the South Side, white woman from Kansas, Kenyan elders, white Harvard nerds, black Columbia nerds, activist women, churchmen, security guards, bank tellers, and even a British man called Mr. Wilkerson, who on a starry night on safari says credibly British things like: “I believe that’s the Milky Way.” This new president doesn’t just speak *for* his people. He can *speak* them. It is a disorienting talent in a president; we’re so unused to it. I have to pinch myself to remember who wrote the following well-observed scene, seemingly plucked from a comic novel:

“Man, I’m not going to any more of these bullshit Punahou parties.”

“Yeah, that’s what you said the last time….”

“I mean it this time…. These girls are A-1, USDA-certified racists. All of ‘em. White girls. Asian girls—shoot, these Asians worse than the whites. Think we got a disease or something.”

“Maybe they’re looking at that big butt of yours. Man, I thought you were in training.”

“Get your hands out of my fries. You ain’t my bitch, nigger…buy your own damn fries. Now what was I talking about?”

“Just ‘cause a girl don’t go out with you doesn’t make her a racist.”

This is the voice of Obama at seventeen, as remembered by Obama. He’s still recognizably Obama; he already seeks to unpack and complicate apparently obvious things (“Just ‘cause a girl don’t go out with you doesn’t make her a racist”); he’s already gently cynical about the impassioned dogma of other people (“Yeah, that’s what you said the last time”). And he has a sense of humor (“Maybe they’re looking at that big butt of yours”). Only the voice is different: he has made almost as large a leap as Eliza Doolittle. The conclusions Obama draws from his own Pygmalion experience, however, are subtler than Shaw’s. The tale he tells is not the old tragedy of gaining a new, false voice at the expense of a true one. The tale he tells is all about addition. His is the story of a genuinely many-voiced man. If it has a moral it is that each man must be true to his selves, plural.

For Obama, having more than one voice in your ear is not a burden, or not solely a burden—it is also a gift. And the gift is of an interesting kind, not well served by that dull publishing-house title *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* with its suggestion of a simple linear inheritance, of paternal dreams and aspirations passed down to a son, and fulfilled. *Dreams from My Father* would have been a fine title for John McCain’s book *Faith of My Fathers*, which concerns exactly this kind of linear masculine inheritance, in his case from soldier to soldier. For Obama’s book, though, it’s wrong, lopsided. He corrects its misperception early on, in the first chapter, while discussing the failure of his parents’ relationship, characterized by their only son as the end of a dream. “Even as that spell was broken,” he writes, “and the worlds that they thought they’d left behind reclaimed each of them, I *occupied the place* where their dreams had been.”

To *occupy* a dream, to exist in a dreamed space (conjured by both father and mother), is surely a quite different thing from simply *inheriting* a dream. It’s more interesting. What did Pauline Kael call Cary Grant? ” *The Man from Dream City*.” When Bristolian Archibald Leach became suave Cary Grant, the transformation happened in his voice, which he subjected to a strange, indefinable manipulation, resulting in that heavenly sui generis accent, neither west country nor posh, American nor English. It came from nowhere, *he* came from nowhere. Grant seemed the product of a collective dream, dreamed up by moviegoers in hard times, as it sometimes feels voters have dreamed up Obama in hard times. Both men have a strange reflective quality, typical of the self-created man—we see in them whatever we want to see. ” *Everyone wants to be Cary Grant*,” said Cary Grant. ” *Even I want to be Cary Grant*.” It’s not hard to imagine Obama having that same thought, backstage at Grant Park, hearing his own name chanted by the hopeful multitude. *Everyone wants to be Barack Obama. Even I want to be Barack Obama*.

But I haven’t described Dream City. I’ll try to. It is a place of many voices, where the unified singular self is an illusion. Naturally, Obama was born there. So was I. When your personal multiplicity is printed on your face, in an almost too obviously thematic manner, in your DNA, in your hair and in the neither this nor that beige of your skin—well, anyone can see you come from Dream City. In Dream City everything is doubled, everything is various. You have no choice but to cross borders and speak in tongues. That’s how you get from your mother to your father, from talking to one set of folks who think you’re not black enough to another who figure you insufficiently white. It’s the kind of town where the wise man says “I” cautiously, because “I” feels like too straight and singular a phoneme to represent the true multiplicity of his experience. Instead, citizens of Dream City prefer to use the collective pronoun “we.”

Throughout his campaign Obama was careful always to say we. He was noticeably wary of “I.” By speaking so, he wasn’t simply avoiding a singularity he didn’t feel, he was also drawing us in with him. He had the audacity to suggest that, even if you can’t see it stamped on their faces, most people come from Dream City, too. Most of us have complicated back stories, messy histories, multiple narratives.

It was a high-wire strategy, for Obama, this invocation of our collective human messiness. His enemies latched on to its imprecision, emphasizing the exotic, un-American nature of Dream City, this ill-defined place where you could be from Hawaii and Kenya, Kansas and Indonesia all at the same time, where you could jive talk like a street hustler and orate like a senator. What kind of a crazy place is that? But they underestimated how many people come from Dream City, how many Americans, in their daily lives, conjure contrasting voices and seek a synthesis between disparate things. Turns out, Dream City wasn’t so strange to them.

Or did they never actually see it? We now know that Obama spoke of *Main Street* in Iowa and of *sweet potato pie* in Northwest Philly, and it could be argued that he succeeded because he so rarely misspoke, carefully tailoring his intonations to suit the sensibility of his listeners. Sometimes he did this within one speech, within one line: “We worship an *awesome*God in the blue states, and we don’t like federal agents poking around our libraries in the red states.” *Awesome God* comes to you straight from the pews of a Georgia church; *poking around* feels more at home at a kitchen table in South Bend, Indiana. The balance was perfect, cunningly counterpoised and never accidental. It’s only now that it’s over that we see him let his guard down a little, on *60 Minutes*, say, dropping in that culturally, casually black construction “Hey, I’m not stupid, *man*, that’s why I’m president,” something it’s hard to imagine him doing even three weeks earlier. To a certain kind of mind, it must have looked like the mask had slipped for a moment.

Which brings us to the single-voiced Obamanation crowd. They rage on in the blogs and on the radio, waiting obsessively for the mask to slip. They have a great fear of what they see as Obama’s doubling ways. “He says one thing but he means another”—this is the essence of the fear campaign. He says he’s a capitalist, but he’ll spread your wealth. He says he’s a Christian, but really he’s going to empower the Muslims. And so on and so forth. These are fears that have their roots in an anxiety about voice. *Who is he?* people kept asking. *I mean, who is this guy, really?* He says *sweet potato pie* in Philly and*Main Street* in Iowa! When he talks to us, he sure *sounds* like us—but behind our backs he says we’re clinging to our religion, to our guns. And when Jesse Jackson heard that Obama had lectured a black church congregation about the epidemic of absent black fathers, he experienced this, too, as a tonal betrayal; Obama was “talking down to black people.” In both cases, there was the sense of a double-dealer, of someone who tailors his speech to fit the audience, who is not *of*the people (because he is able to look at them objectively) but always above them.

The Jackson gaffe, with its Oedipal violence (“I want to cut his nuts out”), is especially poignant because it goes to the heart of a generational conflict in the black community, concerning what we will say in public and what we say in private. For it has been a point of honor, among the civil rights generation, that any criticism or negative analysis of our community, expressed, as they often are by white politicians, without context, without real empathy or understanding, should not be repeated by a black politician when the white community is listening, even if ( *especially* if) the criticism happens to be true (more than half of all black American children live in single-parent households). Our business is our business. Keep it in the family; don’t wash your dirty linen in public; stay unified. (Of course, with his overheard gaffe, Jackson unwittingly broke his own rule.)

Until Obama, black politicians had always adhered to these unwritten rules. In this way, they defended themselves against those two bogeymen of black political life: the Uncle Tom and the House Nigger. The black politician who played up to, or even simply echoed, white fears, desires, and hopes for the black community was in danger of earning these epithets—even Martin Luther King was not free from such suspicions. Then came Obama, and the new world he had supposedly ushered in, the postracial world, in which what mattered most was not blind racial allegiance but factual truth. It was felt that Jesse Jackson was sadly out of step with this new postracial world: even his own son felt moved to publicly repudiate his “ugly rhetoric.” But Jackson’s anger was not incomprehensible nor his distrust unreasonable. Jackson lived through a bitter struggle, and bitter struggles deform their participants in subtle, complicated ways. The idea that one should speak one’s cultural allegiance first and the truth second (and that this is a sign of authenticity) is precisely such a deformation.

Right up to the wire, Obama made many black men and women of Jackson’s generation suspicious. How can the man who passes between culturally black and white voices with such flexibility, with such ease, be an honest man? How *will* the man from Dream City keep it real? Why won’t he speak with a clear and unified voice? These were genuine questions for people born in real cities at a time when those cities were implacably divided, when the black movement had to yell with a clear and unified voice, or risk not being heard at all. And then he won. Watching Jesse Jackson in tears in Grant Park, pressed up against the varicolored American public, it seemed like he, at least, had received the answer he needed: only a many-voiced man could have spoken to that many people.

*A clear and unified voice.* In that context, this business of being biracial, of being half black and half white, is awkward. In his memoir, Obama takes care to ridicule a certain black girl called Joyce—a composite figure from his college days who happens also to be part Italian and part French and part Native American and is inordinately fond of mentioning these facts, and who likes to say:

I’m not black…I’m *multiracial*…. Why should I have to choose between them?… It’s not white people who are making me choose…. No—it’s *black people* who always have to make everything racial. *They’re* the ones making me choose. *They’re* the ones who are telling me I can’t be who I am….

He has her voice down pat and so condemns her out of her own mouth. For she’s the third bogeyman of black life, the tragic mulatto, who secretly wishes she “passed,” always keen to let you know about her white heritage. It’s the fear of being mistaken for Joyce that has always ensured that I ignore the box marked “biracial” and tick the box marked “black” on any questionnaire I fill out, and call myself unequivocally a black writer and roll my eyes at anyone who insists that Obama is not the first black president but the first biracial one. But I also know in my heart that it’s an equivocation; I know that Obama has a double consciousness, is black and, at the same time, white, as I am, unless we are suggesting that one side of a person’s genetics and cultural heritage cancels out or trumps the other.

But to mention the double is to suggest shame at the singular. Joyce insists on her varied heritage because she fears and is ashamed of the singular black. I suppose it’s possible that subconsciously I am also a tragic mulatto, torn between pride and shame. In my conscious life, though, I cannot honestly say I feel proud to be white and ashamed to be black or proud to be black and ashamed to be white. I find it impossible to experience either pride or shame over accidents of genetics in which I had no active part. I understand how those words got into the racial discourse, but I can’t sign up to them. I’m not proud to be female either. I am not even proud to be human—I only love to be so. As I love to be female and I love to be black, and I love that I had a white father.

[](http://www.nybooks.com/media/photo/2009/07/13/smith_3-022609.jpg)Gabriel Pascal/Kobal Collection

Leslie Howard as Henry Higgins and Wendy Hiller as Eliza Doolittle in Pygmalion, 1938

It’s telling that Joyce is one of the few voices in *Dreams from My Father* that is truly left out in the cold, outside of the expansive sympathy of Obama’s narrative. She is an entirely didactic being, a demon Obama has to raise up, if only for a page, so everyone can watch him slay her. I know the feeling. When I was in college I felt I’d rather run away with the Black Panthers than be associated with the Joyces I occasionally met. It’s the Joyces of this world who “talk down to black folks.” And so to avoid being Joyce, or being seen to be Joyce, you unify, you speak with one voice.

And the concept of a unified black voice is a potent one. It has filtered down, these past forty years, into the black community at all levels, settling itself in that impossible injunction “keep it real,” the original intention of which was unification. We were going to unify the concept of Blackness in order to strengthen it. Instead we confined and restricted it. To me, the instruction “keep it real” is a sort of prison cell, two feet by five. The fact is, it’s too narrow. I just can’t live comfortably in there. ” *Keep it real”* replaced the blessed and solid genetic fact of Blackness with a flimsy imperative. It made Blackness a quality each individual black person was constantly in danger of losing. And almost anything could trigger the loss of one’s Blackness: attending certain universities, an impressive variety of jobs, a fondness for opera, a white girlfriend, an interest in golf. And of course, any change in the voice. There was a popular school of thought that maintained the voice was at the very heart of the thing; fail to keep it real there and you’d never see your Blackness again.

How absurd that all seems now. And not because we live in a postracial world—we don’t—but because the reality of race has diversified. Black reality has diversified. It’s black people who talk like me, and black people who talk like L’il Wayne. It’s black conservatives and black liberals, black sportsmen and black lawyers, black computer technicians and black ballet dancers and black truck drivers and black presidents. We’re all black, and we all love to be black, and we all sing from our own hymn sheet. We’re all surely black people, but we may be finally approaching a point of human history where you can’t talk up or down to us anymore, but only *to* us. *He’s talking down to white people* —how curious it sounds the other way round! In order to say such a thing one would have to think collectively of white people, as a people of one mind who speak with one voice—a thought experiment in which we have no practice. But it’s worth trying. It’s only when you play the record backward that you hear the secret message.

For reasons that are obscure to me, those qualities we cherish in our artists we condemn in our politicians. In our artists we look for the many-colored voice, the multiple sensibility. The apogee of this is, of course, Shakespeare: even more than for his wordplay we cherish him for his lack of allegiance. *Our* Shakespeare sees always both sides of a thing, he is black and white, male and female—he is everyman. The giant lacunae in his biography are merely a convenience; if any new facts of religious or political affiliation were ever to arise we would dismiss them in our hearts anyway. Was he, for example, a man of Rome or not? He has appeared, to generations of readers, not of one religion but of both, in truth, beyond both. Born into the middle of Britain’s fierce Catholic–Protestant culture war, how could the bloody absurdity of those years not impress upon him a strong sense of cultural contingency?

It was a war of ideas that began for Will—as it began for Barack—in the dreams of his father. For we know that John Shakespeare, a civic officer in Protestant times, oversaw the repainting of medieval frescoes and the destruction of the rood loft and altar in Stratford’s own fine Guild Chapel, but we also know that in the rafters of the Shakespeare home John hid a secret Catholic “Spiritual Testament,” a signed profession of allegiance to the old faith. A strange experience, to watch one’s own father thus divided, professing one thing in public while practicing another in private. John Shakespeare was a kind of equivocator: it’s what you do when you’re in a corner, when you can’t be a Catholic and a loyal Englishman at the same time. When you can’t be both black and white. Sometimes in a country ripped apart by dogma, those who wish to keep their heads—in both senses—must learn to split themselves in two.

And this we *still* know, here, at a four-hundred-year distance. No one can hope to be president of these United States without professing a committed and straightforward belief in two things: the existence of God and the principle of American exceptionalism. But how many of them equivocated, and who, in their shoes, would not equivocate, too?

Fortunately, Shakespeare was an artist and so had an outlet his father didn’t have—the many-voiced theater. Shakespeare’s art, the very medium of it, allowed him to do what civic officers and politicians can’t seem to: speak simultaneous truths. (Is it not, for example, experientially true that one can both believe and *not* believe in God?) In his plays he is woman, man, black, white, believer, heretic, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Muslim. He grew up in an atmosphere of equivocation, but he lived in freedom. And he offers us freedom: to pin him down to a single identity would be an obvious diminishment, both for Shakespeare and for us. Generations of critics have insisted on this irreducible multiplicity, though they have each expressed it different ways, through the glass of their times. Here is Keats’s famous attempt, in 1817, to give this quality a name:

At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

And here is Stephen Greenblatt doing the same, in 2004:

There are many forms of heroism in Shakespeare, but ideological heroism—the fierce, self-immolating embrace of an idea or institution—is not one of them.

For Keats, Shakespeare’s many voices are quasi-mystical as suited the Romantic thrust of Keats’s age. For Greenblatt, Shakespeare’s negative capability is sociopolitical at root. Will had seen too many wild-eyed martyrs, too many executed terrorists, too many wars on the Catholic terror. He had watched men rage absurdly at rood screens and write treatises in praise of tables. He had seen men disemboweled while still alive, their entrails burned before their eyes, and all for the preference of a Latin Mass over a common prayer or vice versa. He understood what fierce, singular certainty creates and what it destroys. In response, he made himself a diffuse, uncertain thing, a mass of contradictory, irresolvable voices that speak truth plurally. Through the glass of 2009, “negative capability” looks like the perfect antidote to “ideological heroism.”

From our politicians, though, we still look for ideological heroism, despite everything. We consider pragmatists to be weak. We call men of balance naive fools. In England, we once had an insulting name for such people: trimmers. In the mid-1600s, a trimmer was any politician who attempted to straddle the reviled middle ground between Cavalier and Roundhead, Parliament and the Crown; to call a man a trimmer was to accuse him of being insufficiently committed to an ideology. But in telling us of these times, the nineteenth-century English historian Thomas Macaulay draws our attention to Halifax, great statesman of the Privy Council, set up to mediate between Parliament and Crown as London burned. Halifax proudly called himself a trimmer, assuming it, Macaulay explains, as

a title of honour, and vindicat[ing], with great vivacity, the dignity of the appellation. Everything good, he said, trims between extremes. The temperate zone trims between the climate in which men are roasted and the climate in which they are frozen. The English Church trims between the Anabaptist madness and the Papist lethargy. The English constitution trims between the Turkish despotism and Polish anarchy. Virtue is nothing but a just temper between propensities any one of which, if indulged to excess, becomes vice.

Which all sounds eminently reasonable and Aristotelian. And Macaulay’s description of Halifax’s character is equally attractive:

His intellect was fertile, subtle, and capacious. His polished, luminous, and animated eloquence…was the delight of the House of Lords…. His political tracts well deserve to be studied for their literary merit.

In fact, Halifax is familiar—he sounds like the man from Dream City. This makes Macaulay’s caveat the more striking:

Yet he was less successful in politics than many who enjoyed smaller advantages. Indeed, those intellectual *peculiarities which make his writings valuable* frequently impeded him in the contests of active life. For he always saw passing events, not in the point of view in which they commonly appear to one who bears a part in them, but in the point of view in which, after the lapse of many years, they appear to the philosophic historian.

To me, this is a doleful conclusion. It is exactly men with such intellectual peculiarities that I have always hoped to see in politics. But maybe Macaulay is correct: maybe the Halifaxes of this world make, in the end, better writers than politicians. A lot rests on how this president turns out—but that’s a debate for the future. Here I want instead to hazard a little theory, concerning the evolution of a certain type of voice, typified by Halifax, by Shakespeare, and very possibly the President. For the voice of what Macaulay called “the philosophic historian” is, to my mind, a valuable and particular one, and I think someone should make a proper study of it. It’s a voice that develops in a man over time; my little theory sketches four developmental stages.

The first stage in the evolution is contingent and cannot be contrived. In this first stage, the voice, by no fault of its own, finds itself trapped between two poles, two competing belief systems. And so this first stage necessitates the second: the voice learns to be flexible between these two fixed points, even to the point of equivocation. Then the third stage: this native flexibility leads to a sense of being able to “see a thing from both sides.” And then the final stage, which I think of as the mark of a certain kind of genius: the voice relinquishes ownership of itself, develops a creative sense of disassociation in which the claims that are particular to it seem no stronger than anyone else’s. There it is, my little theory—I’d rather call it a story. It is a story about a wonderful voice, occasionally used by citizens, rarely by men of power. Amidst the din of the 2008 culture wars it proved especially hard to hear.

In this lecture I have been seeking to tentatively suggest that the voice that speaks with such freedom, thus unburdened by dogma and personal bias, thus flooded with empathy, might make a good president. It’s only now that I realize that in all this utilitarianism I’ve left joyfulness out of the account, and thus neglected a key constituency of my own people, the poets! Being many-voiced may be a complicated gift for a president, but in poets it is a pure delight in need of neither defense nor explanation. Plato banished them from his uptight and annoying republic so long ago that they have lost all their anxiety. They are fancy-free.

“I am a Hittite in love with a horse,” writes Frank O’Hara.

*I don’t know what blood’s  
in me I feel like an African prince I am a girl walking downstairs  
in a red pleated dress with heels I am a champion taking a fall  
I am a jockey with a sprained ass-hole I am the light mist  
in which a face appears  
and it is another face of blonde I am a baboon eating a banana  
I am a dictator looking at his wife I am a doctor eating a child  
and the child’s mother smiling I am a Chinaman climbing a mountain  
I am a child smelling his father’s underwear I am an Indian  
sleeping on a scalp  
and my pony is stamping in  
the birches,  
and I’ve just caught sight of the*Niña*, the* Pinta*and the* Santa  
Maria*.*  
What land is this, so free?

Frank O’Hara’s republic is of the imagination, of course. It is the only land of perfect freedom. Presidents, as a breed, tend to dismiss this land, thinking it has nothing to teach them. If this new president turns out to be different, then writers will count their blessings, but with or without a president on board, writers should always count their blessings. A line of O’Hara’s reminds us of this. It’s carved on his gravestone. It reads: “Grace to be born and live as variously as possible.”

But to live variously cannot simply be a gift, endowed by an accident of birth; it has to be a continual effort, continually renewed. I felt this with force the night of the election. I was at a lovely New York party, full of lovely people, almost all of whom were white, liberal, highly educated, and celebrating with one happy voice as the states turned blue. Just as they called Iowa my phone rang and a strident German voice said: “Zadie! Come to Harlem! It’s vild here. I’m in za middle of a crazy Reggae bar—it’s so vonderful! Vy not come now!”

I mention he was German only so we don’t run away with the idea that flexibility comes only to the beige, or gay, or otherwise marginalized. Flexibility is a choice, always open to all of us. (He was a writer, however. Make of that what you will.)

But wait: all the way uptown? A crazy reggae bar? For a minute I hesitated, because I was at a lovely party having a lovely time. Or was that it? There was something else. In truth I thought: but I’ll be ludicrous, in my silly dress, with this silly posh English voice, in a crowded bar of black New Yorkers celebrating. It’s amazing how many of our cross-cultural and cross-class encounters are limited not by hate or pride or shame, but by another equally insidious, less-discussed, emotion: embarrassment. A few minutes later, I was in a taxi and heading uptown with my Northern Irish husband and our half-Indian, half-English friend, but that initial hesitation was ominous; the first step on a typical British journey. A hesitation in the face of difference, which leads to caution before difference and ends in fear of it. Before long, the only voice you recognize, the only life you can empathize with, is your own. You will think that a novelist’s screwy leap of logic. Well, it’s my novelist credo and I believe it. I believe that flexibility of voice leads to a flexibility in all things. My audacious hope in Obama is based, I’m afraid, on precisely such flimsy premises.

It’s my audacious hope that a man born and raised between opposing dogmas, between cultures, between voices, could not help but be aware of the extreme contingency of culture. I further audaciously hope that such a man will not mistake the happy accident of his own cultural sensibilities for a set of natural laws, suitable for general application. I even hope that he will find himself in agreement with George Bernard Shaw when he declared, “Patriotism is, fundamentally, a conviction that a particular country is the best in the world because you were born in it.” But that may be an audacious hope too far. We’ll see if Obama’s lifelong vocal flexibility will enable him to say proudly with one voice “I love my country” while saying with another voice “It is a country, like other countries.” I hope so. He seems just the man to demonstrate that between those two voices there exists no contradiction and no equivocation but rather a proper and decent human harmony.

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### Narration

Narration is an important rhetorical mode. Useful in fiction obviously, it brings to nonfiction a comparable appeal. Narration draws readers to writing and speeches the way any good story draws listeners in. In nonfiction, the same principles of narration apply as in fiction. The story must be vividly told; it must show rather than tell. Words must be appropriate to content. Sentence structures work as guides to help readers feel events. Pacing creates or lessens intensity. In short, nothing is accidental.

High school students use narration in writing most significantly in the common application essay. This essay may be the most rhetorically significant endeavor of your high school years. In it, you reveal yourself to panels of readers who decide based on the essay and other application data whether they would like to meet you, know more about you, have you join their institution.

While that can seem horrifying at this point, breeding endless forms of anxiety, the essay can also be incredibly therapeutic. As a work of personal reflection, it offers students an opportunity, in 650 words, to come to a more mature understanding of themselves, what makes them unique, what excites them, where weaknesses abide. Like everything in the college application process, the writing portions are best viewed as opportunities to stretch oneself toward adulthood.

Writing Exercise Prompt:

In 650-1000 words, write a personal narration. As in any good narration, plot is really secondary to all the other things the writer does. Whatever “plot” you tell, be attentive to story. Think of causality. Be sure the narrative voice is clear, purposeful and suited to the story. Think of diction. Word choice matters and you won’t find all the right words in a first draft. The words should match the story. Think sentence structure. Sentences do things. Good sentences do them well. Your sentences should—in their structure, syntax, and style—mirror the action they are conveying. Finally, stories mean something. Tales can just tell about an event, but stories communicate something between a writer and a reader that can linger. We call these abstractions. What abstract idea will the reader walk away with having read your narration?

https://www.randomhouse.com/features/nabokov/lo\_excerpt.html

### Lolita (an excerpt) by Vladmir Nabokov

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita.

Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a princedom by the sea. Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns.

**2**

I was born in 1910, in Paris. My father was a gentle, easy-going person, a salad of racial genes: a Swiss citizen, of mixed French and Austrian descent, with a dash of the Danube in his veins. I am going to pass around in a minute some lovely, glossy-blue picture-postcards. He owned a luxurious hotel on the Riviera. His father and two grandfathers had sold wine, jewels and silk, respectively. At thirty he married an English girl, daughter of Jerome Dunn, the alpinist, and granddaughter of two Dorset parsons, experts in obscure subjects--paleopedology and Aeolian harps, respectively. My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three, and, save for a pocket of warmth in the darkest past, nothing of her subsists within the hollows and dells of memory, over which, if you can still stand my style (I am writing under observation), the sun of my infancy had set: surely, you all know those redolent remnants of day suspended, with the midges, about some hedge in bloom or suddenly entered and traversed by the rambler, at the bottom of a hill, in the summer dusk; a furry warmth, golden midges.

My mother's elder sister, Sybil, whom a cousin of my father's had married and then neglected, served in my immediate family as a kind of unpaid governess and housekeeper. Somebody told me later that she had been in love with my father, and that he had lightheartedly taken advantage of it one rainy day and forgotten it by the time the weather cleared. I was extremely fond of her, despite the rigidity--the fatal rigidity--of some of her rules. Perhaps she wanted to make of me, in the fullness of time, a better widower than my father. Aunt Sybil had pink-rimmed azure eyes and a waxen complexion. She wrote poetry. She was poetically superstitious. She said she knew she would die soon after my sixteenth birthday, and did. Her husband, a great traveler in perfumes, spent most of his time in America, where eventually he founded a firm and acquired a bit of real estate.

I grew, a happy, healthy child in a bright world of illustrated books, clean sand, orange trees, friendly dogs, sea vistas and smiling faces. Around me the splendid Hotel Mirana revolved as a kind of private universe, a whitewashed cosmos within the blue greater one that blazed outside. From the aproned pot-scrubber to the flanneled potentate, everybody liked me, everybody petted me. Elderly American ladies leaning on their canes listed toward me like towers of Pisa. Ruined Russian princesses who could not pay my father, bought me expensive bonbons. He, *mon cher petit papa,* took me out boating and biking, taught me to swim and dive and water-ski, read to me *Don Quixote* and *Les Misérables*, and I adored and respected him and felt glad for him whenever I overheard the servants discuss his various lady-friends, beautiful and kind beings who made much of me and cooed and shed precious tears over my cheerful motherlessness.

I attended an English day school a few miles from home, and there I played rackets and fives, and got excellent marks, and was on perfect terms with schoolmates and teachers alike. The only definite sexual events that I can remember as having occurred before my thirteenth birthday (that is, before I first saw my little Annabel) were: a solemn, decorous and purely theoretical talk about pubertal surprises in the rose garden of the school with an American kid, the son of a then celebrated motion-picture actress whom he seldom saw in the three-dimensional world; and some interesting reactions on the part of my organism to certain photographs, pearl and umbra, with infinitely soft partings, in Pichon's sumptuous *La Beauté Humaine* that I had filched from under a mountain of marble-bound *Graphics* in the hotel library. Later, in his delightful debonair manner, my father gave me all the information he thought I needed about sex; this was just before sending me, in the autumn of 1923, to a*lycée* in Lyon (where we were to spend three winters); but alas, in the summer of that year, he was touring Italy with Mme. de R. and her daughter, and I had nobody to complain to, nobody to consult.

**3**

Annabel was, like the writer, of mixed parentage: half-English, half-Dutch, in her case. I remember her features far less distinctly today than I did a few years ago, before I knew Lolita. There are two kinds of visual memory: one when you skillfully recreate an image in the laboratory of your mind, with your eyes open (and then I see Annabel in such general terms as: "honey-colored skin," "thin arms," "brown bobbed hair," "long lashes," "big bright mouth"); and the other when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark innerside of your eyelids, the objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors (and this is how I see Lolita).

Let me therefore primly limit myself, in describing Annabel, to saying she was a lovely child a few months my junior. Her parents were old friends of my aunt's, and as stuffy as she. They had rented a villa not far from Hotel Mirana. Bald brown Mr. Leigh and fat, powdered Mrs. Leigh (born Vanessa van Ness). How I loathed them! At first, Annabel and I talked of peripheral affairs. She kept lifting handfuls of fine sand and letting it pour through her fingers. Our brains were turned the way those of intelligent European preadolescents were in our day and set, and I doubt if much individual genius should be assigned to our interest in the plurality of inhabited worlds, competitive tennis, infinity, solipsism and so on. The softness and fragility of baby animals caused us the same intense pain. She wanted to be a nurse in some famished Asiatic country; I wanted to be a famous spy.

All at once we were madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly in love with each other; hopelessly, I should add, because that frenzy of mutual possession might have been assuaged only by our actually imbibing and assimilating every particle of each other's soul and flesh; but there we were, unable even to mate as slum children would have so easily found an opportunity to do. After one wild attempt we made to meet at night in her garden (of which more later), the only privacy we were allowed was to be out of earshot but not out of sight on the populous part of the *plage*. There, on the soft sand, a few feet away from our elders, we would sprawl all morning, in a petrified paroxysm of desire, and take advantage of every blessed quirk in space and time to touch each other: her hand, half-hidden in the sand, would creep toward me, its slender brown fingers sleepwalking nearer and nearer; then, her opalescent knee would start on a long cautious journey; sometimes a chance rampart built by younger children granted us sufficient concealment to graze each other's salty lips; these incomplete contacts drove our healthy and inexperienced young bodies to such a state of exasperation that not even the cold blue water, under which we still clawed at each other, could bring relief.

Among some treasures I lost during the wanderings of my adult years, there was a snapshot taken by my aunt which showed Annabel, her parents and the staid, elderly, lame gentleman, a Dr. Cooper, who that same summer courted my aunt, grouped around a table in a sidewalk café. Annabel did not come out well, caught as she was in the act of bending over her *chocolate glacé* and her thin bare shoulders and the parting in her hair were about all that could be identified (as I remember that picture) amid the sunny blur into which her lost loveliness graded; but I, sitting somewhat apart from the rest, came out with a kind of dramatic conspicuousness: a moody, beetle-browed boy in a dark sport shirt and well-tailored white shorts, his legs crossed, sitting in profile, looking away. That photograph was taken on the last day of our fatal summer and just a few minutes before we made our second and final attempt to thwart fate. Under the flimsiest of pretexts (this was our very last chance, and nothing really mattered) we escaped from the cafe to the beach, and found a desolate stretch of sand, and there, in the violet shadow of some red rocks forming a kind of cave, had a brief session of avid caresses, with somebody's lost pair of sun-glasses for only witness. I was on my knees, and on the point of possessing my darling, when two bearded bathers, the old man of the sea and his brother, came out of the sea with exclamations of ribald encouragement, and four months later she died of typhus in Corfu.

**4**

I leaf again and again through these miserable memories, and keep asking myself, was it then, in the glitter of that remote summer, that the rift in my life began; or was my excessive desire for that child only the first evidence of an inherent singularity? When I try to analyze my own cravings, motives, actions and so forth, I surrender to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives and which causes each visualized route to fork and re-fork without end in the maddeningly complex prospect of my past. I am convinced, however, that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel.

### "Once More to the Lake," by E.B. White

One summer, along about 1904, my father rented a camp on a lake in Maine and took us all there for the month of August. We all got ringworm from some kittens and had to rub Pond's Extract on our arms and legs night and morning, and my father rolled over in a canoe with all his clothes on; but outside of that the vacation was a success and from then on none of us ever thought there was any place in the world like that lake in Maine. We returned summer after summer--always on August 1st for one month. I have since become a salt-water man, but sometimes in summer there are days when the restlessness of the tides and the fearful cold of the sea water and the incessant wind which blows across the afternoon and into the evening make me wish for the placidity of a lake in the woods. A few weeks ago this feeling got so strong I bought myself a couple of bass hooks and a spinner and returned to the lake where we used to go, for a week's fishing and to revisit old haunts.  
  
I took along my son, who had never had any fresh water up his nose and who had seen lily pads only from train windows. On the journey over to the lake I began to wonder what it would be like. I wondered how time would have marred this unique, this holy spot--the coves and streams, the hills that the sun set behind, the camps and the paths behind the camps. I was sure that the tarred road would have found it out and I wondered in what other ways it would be desolated.  
  
It is strange how much you can remember about places like that once you allow your mind to return into the grooves which lead back. You remember one thing, and that suddenly reminds you of another thing. I guess I remembered clearest of all the early mornings, when the lake was cool and motionless, remembered how the bedroom smelled of the lumber it was made of and of the wet woods whose scent entered through the screen. The partitions in the camp were thin and did not extend clear to the top of the rooms, and as I was always the first up I would dress softly so as not to wake the others, and sneak out into the sweet outdoors and start out in the canoe, keeping close along the shore in the long shadows of the pines. I remembered being very careful never to rub my paddle against the gunwale for fear of disturbing the stillness of the cathedral.  
  
The lake had never been what you would call a wild lake. There were cottages sprinkled around the shores, and it was in farming although the shores of the lake were quite heavily wooded. Some of the cottages were owned by nearby farmers, and you would live at the shore and eat your meals at the farmhouse. That's what our family did. But although it wasn't wild, it was a fairly large and undisturbed lake and there were places in it which, to a child at least, seemed infinitely remote and primeval.  
  
I was right about the tar: it led to within half a mile of the shore But when I got back there, with my boy, and we settled into a camp near a farmhouse and into the kind of summertime I had known, I could tell that it was going to be pretty much the same as it had been before--I knew it, lying in bed the first morning, smelling the bedroom, and hearing the boy sneak quietly out and go off along the shore in a boat. I began to sustain the illusion that he was I, and therefore, by simple transposition, that I was my father. This sensation persisted, kept cropping up all the time we were there. It was not an entirely new feeling, but in this setting it grew much stronger. I seemed to be living a dual existence. I would be in the middle of some simple act, I would be picking up a bait box or laying down a table fork, or I would be saying something, and suddenly it would be not I but my father who was saying the words or making the gesture. It gave me a creepy sensation.  
  
We went fishing the first morning. I felt the same damp moss covering the worms in the bait can, and saw the dragonfly alight on the tip of my rod as it hovered a few inches from the surface of the water. It was the arrival of this fly that convinced me beyond any doubt that everything was as it always had been, that the years were a mirage and there had been no years. The small waves were the same, chucking the rowboat under the chin as we fished at anchor, and the boat was the same boat, the same color green and the ribs broken in the same places, and under the floor-boards the same freshwater leavings and debris--the dead helgramite, the wisps of moss, the rusty discarded fishhook, the dried blood from yesterday's catch. We stared silently at the tips of our rods, at the dragonflies that came and wells. I lowered the tip of mine into the water, tentatively, pensively dislodging the fly, which darted two feet away, poised, darted two feet back, and came to rest again a little farther up the rod. There had been no years between the ducking of this dragonfly and the other one--the one that was part of memory. I looked at the boy, who was silently watching his fly, and it was my hands that held his rod, my eyes watching. I felt dizzy and didn't know which rod I was at the end of.  
  
We caught two bass, hauling them in briskly as though they were mackerel. pulling them over the side of the boat in a businesslike manner without any landing net, and stunning them with a blow on the back of the head. When we got back for a swim before lunch, the lake was exactly where we had left it, the same number of inches from the dock, and there was only the merest suggestion of a breeze. This seemed an utterly enchanted sea, this lake you could leave to its own devices for a few hours and come back to, and find that it had not stirred, this constant and trustworthy body of water. In the shallows, the dark, water-soaked sticks and twigs, smooth and old, were undulating in clusters on the bottom against the clean ribbed sand, and the track of the mussel was plain. A school of minnows swam by, each minnow with its small, individual shadow, doubling the attendance, so clear and sharp in the sunlight. Some of the other campers were in swimming, along the shore, one of them with a cake of soap, and the water felt thin and clear and insubstantial. Over the years there had been this person with the cake of soap, this cultist, and here he was. There had been no years.  
  
Up to the farmhouse to dinner through the teeming, dusty field, the road under our sneakers was only a two-track road. The middle track was missing, the one with the marks of the hooves and the splotches of dried, flaky manure. There had always been three tracks to choose from in choosing which track to walk in; now the choice was narrowed down to two. For a moment I missed terribly the middle alternative. But the way led past the tennis court, and something about the way it lay there in the sun reassured me; the tape had loosened along the backline, the alleys were green with plantains and other weeds, and the net (installed in June and removed in September) sagged in the dry noon, and the whole place steamed with midday heat and hunger and emptiness. There was a choice of pie for dessert, and one was blueberry and one was apple, and the waitresses were the same country girls, there having been no passage of time, only the illusion of it as in a dropped curtain--the waitresses were still fifteen; their hair had been washed, that was the only difference--they had been to the movies and seen the pretty girls with the clean hair.  
  
Summertime, oh summertime, pattern of life indelible, the fade proof lake, the woods unshatterable, the pasture with the sweet fern and the juniper forever and ever, summer without end; this was the background, and the life along the shore was the design, the cottages with their innocent and tranquil design, their tiny docks with the flagpole and the American flag floating against the white clouds in the blue sky, the little paths over the roots of the trees leading from camp to camp and the paths leading back to the outhouses and the can of lime for sprinkling, and at the souvenir counters at the store the miniature birch-bark canoes and the post cards that showed things looking a little better than they looked. This was the American family at play, escaping the city heat, wondering whether the newcomers at the camp at the head of the cove were "common" or "nice," wondering whether it was true that the people who drove up for Sunday dinner at the farmhouse were turned away because there wasn't enough chicken.  
  
It seemed to me, as I kept remembering all this, that those times and those summers had been infinitely precious and worth saving. There had been jollity and peace and goodness. The arriving (at the beginning of August) had been so big a business in itself, at the railway station the farm wagon drawn up, the first smell of the pine-laden air, the first glimpse of the smiling farmer, and the great importance of the trunks and your father's enormous authority in such matters, and the feel of the wagon under you for the long ten-mile haul, and at the top of the last long hill catching the first view of the lake after eleven months of not seeing this cherished body of water. The shouts and cries of the other campers when they saw you, and the trunks to be unpacked, to give up their rich burden. (Arriving was less exciting nowadays, when you sneaked up in your car and parked it under a tree near the camp and took out the bags and in five minutes it was all over, no fuss, no loud wonderful fuss about trunks.)  
  
Peace and goodness and jollity. The only thing that was wrong now, really, was the sound of the place, an unfamiliar nervous sound of the outboard motors. This was the note that jarred, the one thing that would sometimes break the illusion and set the years moving. In those other summertimes, all motors were inboard; and when they were at a little distance, the noise they made was a sedative, an ingredient of summer sleep. They were one-cylinder and two-cylinder engines, and some were make-and-break and some were jump-spark, but they all made a sleepy sound across the lake. The one-lungers throbbed and fluttered, and the twin-cylinder ones purred and purred, and that was a quiet sound too. But now the campers all had outboards. In the daytime, in the hot mornings, these motors made a petulant, irritable sound; at night, in the still evening when the afterglow lit the water, they whined about one's ears like mosquitoes. My boy loved our rented outboard, and his great desire was to achieve single-handed mastery over it, and authority, and he soon learned the trick of choking it a little (but not too much), and the adjustment of the needle valve. Watching him I would remember the things you could do with the old one-cylinder engine with the heavy flywheel, how you could have it eating out of your hand if you got really close to it spiritually. Motor boats in those days didn't have clutches, and you would make a landing by shutting off the motor at the proper time and coasting in with a dead rudder. But there was a way of reversing them, if you learned the trick, by cutting the switch and putting it on again exactly on the final dying revolution of the flywheel, so that it would kick back against compression and begin reversing. Approaching a dock in a strong following breeze, it was difficult to slow up sufficiently by the ordinary coasting method, and if a boy felt he had complete mastery over his motor, he was tempted to keep it running beyond its time and then reverse it a few feet from the dock. It took a cool nerve, because if you threw the switch a twentieth of a second too soon you would catch the flywheel when it still had speed enough to go up past center, and the boat would leap ahead, charging bull-fashion at the dock.  
  
We had a good week at the camp. The bass were biting well and the sun shone endlessly, day after day. We would be tired at night and lie down in the accumulated heat of the little bedrooms after the long hot day and the breeze would stir almost imperceptibly outside and the smell of the swamp drift in through the rusty screens. Sleep would come easily and in the morning the red squirrel would be on the roof, tapping out his gay routine. I kept remembering everything, lying in bed in the mornings--the small steamboat that had a long rounded stern like the lip of a Ubangi, and how quietly she ran on the moonlight sails, when the older boys played their mandolins and the girls sang and we ate doughnuts dipped in sugar, and how sweet the music was on the water in the shining night, and what it had felt like to think about girls then.  
  
After breakfast we would go up to the store and the things were in the same place--the minnows in a bottle, the plugs and spinners disarranged and pawed over by the youngsters from the boys' camp, the fig newtons and the Beeman'sgum. Outside, the road was tarred and cars stood in front of the store. Inside, all was just as it had always been, except there was more Coca Cola and not so much Moxie and root beer and birch beer and sarsaparilla. We would walk out with a bottle of pop apiece and sometimes the pop would backfire up our noses and hurt.  
  
We explored the streams, quietly, where the turtles slid off the sunny logs and dug their way into the soft bottom; and we lay on the town wharf and fed worms to the tame bass. Everywhere we went I had trouble making out which was I, the one walking at my side, the one walking in my pants.  
  
One afternoon while we were there at that lake a thunderstorm came up. It was like the revival of an old melodrama that I had seen long ago with childish awe. The second-act climax of the drama of the electrical disturbance over a lake in America had not changed in any important respect. This was the big scene, still the big scene.  
  
The whole thing was so familiar, the first feeling of oppression and heat and a general air around camp of not wanting to go very far away. In mid-afternoon (it was all the same) a curious darkening of the sky, and a lull in everything that had made life tick; and then the way the boats suddenly swung the other way at their moorings with the coming of a breeze out of the new quarter, and the premonitory rumble. Then the kettle drum, then the snare, then the bass drum and cymbals, then crackling light against the dark, and the gods grinning and licking their chops in the hills. Afterward the calm, the rain steadily rustling in the calm lake, the return of light and hope and spirits, and the campers running out in joy and relief to go swimming in the rain, their bright cries perpetuating the deathless joke about how they were getting simply drenched, and the children screaming with delight at the new sensation of bathing in the rain, and the joke about getting drenched linking the generations in a strong indestructible chain. And the comedian who waded in carrying an umbrella.  
  
When the others went swimming my son said he was going in too. He pulled his dripping trunks from the line where they had hung all through the shower, and wrung them out. Languidly, and with no thought of going in, I watched him, his hard little body, skinny and bare, saw him wince slightly as he pulled up around his vitals the small, soggy, icy garment. As he buckled the swollen belt suddenly my groin felt the chill of death.

### THIS IS THE LIFE by Annie Dillard

Any culture tells you how to live your one and only life: to wit as everyone else does. Probably most cultures prize, as ours rightly does, making a contribution by working hard at work that you love; being in the know, and intelligent; gathering a surplus; and loving your family above all, and your dog, your boat, bird-watching. Beyond those things our culture might specialize in money, and celebrity, and natural beauty. These are not universal. You enjoy work and will love your grandchildren, and somewhere in there you die.

Another contemporary consensus might be: You wear the best shoes you can afford, you seek to know Rome's best restaurants and their staffs, drive the best car, and vacation on Tenerife. And what a cook you are!

Or you take the next tribe's pigs in thrilling raids; you grill yams; you trade for televisions and hunt white-plumed birds. Everyone you know agrees: this is the life. Perhaps you burn captives. You set fire to a drunk. Yours is the human struggle, or the elite one, to achieve... whatever your own culture tells you: to publish the paper that proves the point; to progress in the firm and gain high title and salary, stock options, benefits; to get the loan to store the beans till their price rises; to elude capture, to feed your children or educate them to a feather edge; or to count coup or perfect your calligraphy; to eat the king's deer or catch the poacher; to spear the seal, intimidate the enemy, and be a big man or beloved woman and die respected for the pigs or the title or the shoes. Not a funeral. Forget funeral. A big birthday party. Since everyone around you agrees.

Since everyone around you agrees ever since there were people on earth that land is value, or labor is value, or learning is value, or title, necklaces, degree, murex shells, or ownership of slaves. Everyone knows bees sting and ghosts haunt and giving your robes away humiliates your rivals. That the enemies are barbarians. That wise men swim through the rock of the earth; that houses breed filth, airstrips attract airplanes, tornadoes punish, ancestors watch, and you can buy a shorter stay in purgatory. The black rock is holy, or the scroll; or the pangolin is holy, the quetzal is holy, this tree, water, rock, stone, cow, cross, or mountain and it's all true. The Red Sox. Or nothing at all is holy, as everyone intelligent knows.

Who is your "everyone"? Chess masters scarcely surround themselves with motocross racers. Do you want aborigines at your birthday party? Or are you serving yak-butter tea? Popular culture deals not in its distant past, or any other past, or any other culture. You know no one who longs to buy a mule or be named to court or thrown into a volcano.

So the illusion, like the visual field, is complete It has no holes except books you read and soon forget. And death takes us by storm. What was that, that life? What else offered? If for him it was contract bridge, if for her it was copyright law, if for everyone it was and is an optimal mix of family and friends, learning, contribution, and joy of making and ameliorating, what else is there, or was there, or will there ever be?

What else is a vision or fact of time and the peoples it bears issuing from the mouth of the cosmos, from the round mouth of eternity, in a wide and parti-colored utterance. In the complex weave of this utterance like fabric, in its infinite domestic interstices, the centuries and continents and classes dwell. Each people knows only its own squares in the weave, its wars and instruments and arts, and also the starry sky.

Okay, and then what? Say you scale your own weft and see time's breadth and the length of space. You see the way the fabric both passes among the stars and encloses them. You see in the weave nearby, and aslant farther off, the peoples variously scandalized or exalted in their squares. They work on their projects they flakespear points, hoe, \*plant; they kill aurochs or one another; they prepare sacrifices as we here and now work on our projects. What, seeing this spread multiply infinitely in every direction, would you do differently? No one could love your children more; would you love them less? Would you change your project? To what? Whatever you do, it has likely brought delight to fewer people than either contract bridge or the Red Sox.

However hypnotized you and your people are, you will be just as dead in their war, our war. However dead you are, more people will come. However many more people come, your time and its passions, and yourself and your passions, weigh equally in the balance with those of any dead who pulled waterwheel poles by the Nile or Yellow rivers, or painted their foreheads black, or starved in the wilderness, or wasted from disease then or now. Our lives and our deaths count equally, or we must abandon one-man-one-vote dismantle democracy, and assign six billion people an importance-of-life ranking from one to six billion--a ranking whose number decreases, like gravity, with the square of the distance between us and them.

What would you do differently, you up on your beanstalk looking at scenes of all peoples at all times in all places? When you climb down, would you dance any less to the music you love, knowing that music to be as provisional as a bug? Somebody has to make jugs and shoes, to turn the soil, fish. If you descend the long rope-ladders back to your people and time in the fabric, if you tell them what you have seen, and even if someone cares to listen, then what? Everyone knows times and cultures are plural. If you come back a shrugging relativist or tongue-tied absolutist, then what? If you spend hours a day looking around, high astraddle the warp or woof of your people's wall, then what new wisdom can you take to your grave for worms to untangle? Well, maybe you will not go into advertising.

Then you would know your own death better but perhaps not dread it less. Try to bring people up the wall, carry children to see it to what end? Fewer golf courses? What is wrong with golf? Nothing at all. Equality of wealth? Sure; how?

The woman watching sheep over there, the man who carries embers in a pierced clay ball, the engineer, the girl who spins wool into yarn as she climbs, the smelter, the babies learning to recognize speech in their own languages, the man whipping a slave's flayed back, the man digging roots, the woman digging roots, the child digging roots what would you tell them? And the future people what are they doing? What excitements sweep peoples here and there from time to time? Into the muddy river they go, into the trenches, into the caves, into the mines, into the granary, into the sea in boats. Most humans who were ever alive lived inside one single culture that never changed for hundreds of thousands of years; archaeologists scratch their heads at so conservative and static a culture.

Over here, the rains fail; they are starving. There, the caribou fail; they are starving. Corrupt leaders take the wealth. Not only there but here. Rust and smut spoil the rye. When pigs and cattle starve or freeze, people die soon after. Disease empties a sector, a billion sectors.

People look at the sky and at the other animals. They make beautiful objects, beautiful sounds, beautiful motions of their bodies beating drums in lines. They pray; they toss people in peat bogs; they help the sick and injured; they pierce their lips, their noses, ears; they make the same mistakes despite religion, written language, philosophy, and science; they build, they kill, they preserve, they count and figure, they boil the pot, they keep the embers alive; they tell their stories and gird themselves.

Will knowledge you experience directly make you a Buddhist? Must you forfeit excitement per se? To what end?

Say you have seen something. You have seen an ordinary bit of what is real, the infinite fabric of time that eternity shoots through, and time's soft-skinned people working and dying under slowly shifting stars. Then what?

Because a gift for[*oratory*](http://grammar.about.com/od/mo/g/oratoryterm.htm)had helped propel him to the White House, expectations were high when President Barack Obama delivered his inaugural address on January 20, 2009. And because the country was mired in a deep recession, hopes were even higher. This version of the speech, transcribed from the original audio, differs in a number of minor ways from the copy of the speech that was distributed to journalists.

### The First Inaugural Address of Barack Obama

**(January 20, 2009)**

My fellow citizens:

I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors. I thank President Bush for his service to our nation, as well as the generosity and cooperation he has shown throughout this transition.

Forty-four Americans have now taken the presidential oath. The words have been spoken during rising tides of prosperity and the still waters of peace. Yet, every so often the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms. At these moments, America has carried on not simply because of the skill or vision of those in high office, but because We the People have remained faithful to the ideals of our forbearers, and true to our founding documents.

So it has been. So it must be with this generation of Americans.

That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war, against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age. Homes have been lost; jobs shed; businesses shuttered. Our health care is too costly; our schools fail too many; and each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet.

These are the indicators of crisis, subject to data and statistics. Less measurable but no less profound is a sapping of confidence across our land - a nagging fear that America’s decline is inevitable, and that the next generation must lower its sights.

Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this, America--they will be met.

On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord.

On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn out dogmas, that for far too long have strangled our politics.

We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.

In reaffirming the greatness of our nation, we understand that greatness is never a given. It must be earned. Our journey has never been one of short-cuts or settling for less. It has not been the path for the faint-hearted--for those who prefer leisure over work, or seek only the pleasures of riches and fame. Rather, it has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things--some celebrated but more often men and women obscure in their labor, who have carried us up the long, rugged path towards prosperity and freedom.

For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life.

For us, they toiled in sweatshops and settled the West; endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth.

For us, they fought and died, in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sanh.

Time and again these men and women struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might live a better life. They saw America as bigger than the sum of our individual ambitions; greater than all the differences of birth or wealth or faction.

For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus--and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.

To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect. To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society’s ills on the West--know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy. To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history; but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.

To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow; to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds. And to those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to suffering outside our borders; nor can we consume the world’s resources without regard to effect. For the world has changed, and we must change with it.

As we consider the road that unfolds before us, we remember with humble gratitude those brave Americans who, at this very hour, patrol far-off deserts and distant mountains. They have something to tell us today, just as the fallen heroes who lie in Arlington whisper through the ages. We honor them not only because they are guardians of our liberty, but because they embody the spirit of service; a willingness to find meaning in something greater than themselves. And yet, at this moment - a moment that will define a generation--it is precisely this spirit that must inhabit us all.

For as much as government can do and must do, it is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which this nation relies. It is the kindness to take in a stranger when the levees break, the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job which sees us through our darkest hours. It is the firefighter’s courage to storm a stairway filled with smoke, but also a parent’s willingness to nurture a child, that finally decides our fate.

Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends--hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism--these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history. What is demanded then is a return to these truths. What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility--a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task.

This is the price and the promise of citizenship.

This is the source of our confidence--the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny.

This is the meaning of our liberty and our creed--why men and women and children of every race and every faith can join in celebration across this magnificent mall, and why a man whose father less than sixty years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath.

So let us mark this day with remembrance, of who we are and how far we have traveled. In the year of America’s birth, in the coldest of months, a small band of patriots huddled by dying campfires on the shores of an icy river. The capital was abandoned. The enemy was advancing. The snow was stained with blood. At a moment when the outcome of our revolution was most in doubt, the father of our nation ordered these words be read to the people:

"Let it be told to the future world . . . that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive . . . that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it]."

America. In the face of our common dangers, in this winter of our hardship, let us remember these timeless words. With hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come. Let it be said by our children’s children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God’s grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.

Thank you. God bless you. And God bless the United States of America.

*John Kennedy's inaugural address is one of the most memorable political speeches of the past century. The young president's reliance on biblical*[*quotations*](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/quoterm.htm)*,*[*metaphors*](http://grammar.about.com/od/mo/g/metaphorterm.htm)*,*[*parallelism*](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/parallelismterm.htm)*, and*[*antithesis*](http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/antithesis.htm)*recall some of the powerful speeches of*[*Abraham Lincoln*](http://grammar.about.com/od/60essays/a/GettysburgSpch.htm)*. The most famous line in Kennedy's address ("Ask not . . .") is a classic example of*[*chiasmus*](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/chiasmusterm.htm)*.*

*In his book*White House Ghosts*(Simon & Schuster, 2008), journalist Robert Schlesinger (the son of historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a Kennedy adviser) outlines some of the distinctive qualities of John Kennedy's oratorical style:*

Short words and clauses were the order, with simplicity and clarity the goal. A self-described "idealist without illusions," JFK preferred a cool, cerebral approach and had little use for florid expressions and complex prose. He liked [alliteration](http://grammar.about.com/od/terms/g/alliteration.htm), "not solely for reasons of [rhetoric](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/rhetoricterm.htm) but to reinforce the audience's recollection of his reasoning." His taste for contrapuntal phrasing--never negotiating out of fear but never fearing to negotiate--illustrated his dislike of extreme opinions and options.

*As you read Kennedy's speech, consider how his methods of expression contribute to the forcefulness of his message.*

### The Inaugural Address of John F. Kennedy

**(January 20, 1961)**

Vice President Johnson, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Chief Justice, President Eisenhower, Vice President Nixon, President Truman, reverend clergy, fellow citizens, we observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom--symbolizing an end, as well as a beginning--signifying renewal, as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago.

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe--the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans--born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

This much we pledge--and more.

To those old allies whose cultural and spiritual origins we share, we pledge the loyalty of faithful friends. United there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided there is little we can do--for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at odds and split asunder.

To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom--and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.

To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required--not because the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

To our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge: to convert our good words into good deeds, in a new alliance for progress, to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty. But this peaceful revolution of hope cannot become the prey of hostile powers. Let all our neighbors know that we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas. And let every other power know that this hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house.

To that world assembly of sovereign states, the United Nations, our last best hope in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the instruments of peace, we renew our pledge of support--to prevent it from becoming merely a forum for invective, to strengthen its shield of the new and the weak--and to enlarge the area in which its writ may run.

Finally, to those nations who would make themselves our adversary, we offer not a pledge but a request: that both sides begin anew the quest for peace, before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction.

We dare not tempt them with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed.

But neither can two great and powerful groups of nations take comfort from our present course--both sides overburdened by the cost of modern weapons, both rightly alarmed by the steady spread of the deadly atom, yet both racing to alter that uncertain balance of terror that stays the hand of mankind's final war.

So let us begin anew--remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate.

Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us. Let both sides, for the first time, formulate serious and precise proposals for the inspection and control of arms, and bring the absolute power to destroy other nations under the absolute control of all nations.

Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce.

Let both sides unite to heed, in all corners of the earth, the command of Isaiah--to "undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free."

And, if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor--not a new balance of power, but a new world of law--where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.

All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.

In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe.

Now the trumpet summons us again--not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need--not as a call to battle, though embattled we are--but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation," a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.

Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility--I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it. And the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country.

My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking his blessing and his help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.

*Delivered at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on November 19, 1863, President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address has been called "the world’s foremost statement of freedom and democracy and the sacrifices required to achieve and defend them" (James McPherson). It has also been described as "perhaps the perfect combination of* [*eloquence*](http://grammar.about.com/od/e/g/eloquencetrem.htm)*, elegance, and economy in our history, shining* [*rhetorical*](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/rhetoricterm.htm)*proof of the design axiom, 'Less is more'" (Owen Edwards).*

### The Gettysburg Address\* by President Abraham Lincoln

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow, this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

(November 19, 1863)

\**This version of the Gettysburg Address is the so-called "Bliss text," the last from Lincoln's hand. Garry Wills treats this version as the standard text in his Pulitzer Prize-winning study*Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*(Simon & Schuster, 1992).*

### Homeless by Anna Quindlen

     Her name was Ann, and we met in the Port Authority Bus Terminal several Januarys ago. I was doing a story on homeless people. She said I was wasting my time talking to her; she was just passing through, although she'd been passing through for more than two weeks. To prove to me that this was true, she rummaged through a tote bag and a manila envelope and finally unfolded a sheet of typing paper and brought out her photographs.

     They were not pictures of family, or friends, or even a dog or cat, its eyes brown-red in the flashbulb's light. They were pictures of a house. It was like a thousand houses in a hundred towns, not suburb, not city, but somewhere in between, with aluminum siding and a chain-link fence, a narrow driveway running up to a one-car garage, and a patch of backyard. The house was yellow. I looked on the back for a date or a name, but neither was there. There was no need for discussion. I knew what she was trying to tell me, for it was something I had often felt. She was not adrift, alone, anonymous, although her bags and her raincoat with the grime shadowing its creases had made me believe she was. She had a house, or at least once upon a time had had one. Inside were curtains, a couch, a stove, potholders. You are where you live. She was somebody.

     I've never been very good at looking at the big picture, taking the global view, and I've always been a person with an overactive sense of place, the legacy of an Irish grandfather. So it is natural that the thing that seems most wrong with the world to me right now is that there are so many people with no homes. I'm not simply talking about shelter from the elements, or three square meals a day, or a mailing address to which the welfare people can send the check--although I know that all these are important for survival. I'm talking about a home, about precisely those kinds of feelings that have wound up in cross-stitch and French knots on samplers1 over the years.

     Home is where the heart is. There's no place like it. I love my home with a ferocity totally out of proportion to its appearence or location. I love dumb things about it: the hot-water heater, the plastic rack you drain dishes in, the roof over my head, which occasionally leaks. And yet it is precisely those dumb things that make it what it is--a place of certainty, stability, predictability, privacy, for me and for my family.It is where I live. What more can you say about a place than that? That is everything.

     Yet it is something that we have been edging away from gradually during my lifetime and the lifetimes of my parents and grandparents. There was a time when where you lived often was where you worked and where you grew the food you ate and even where you were buried. When that era passed, where you lived at least was where your parents had lived and where you would live with your children when you became enfeebled. Then, suddenly, where you lived was where you lived for three years, until you could move on to something else and something else again.

     And so we have come to something else again, to children who do no understand what it means to go to their rooms because they have never had a room, to men and women whose fantasy is a wall they can paint a color of their own choosing, to old people reduced to sitting on molded plastic chairs, their skin blue-white in the lights of a bus station, who pull pictures of houses out of their bags. Homes have stopped being homes. Now they are real estate.

     People find it curious that those without homes would rather sleep sitting up on benches or huddled in doorways than go to shelters. Certainly some prefer to do so because they are emotionally ill, because they have been locked in before and they are determined not to be locked in again. Others are afraid of the violence and trouble they may find there. But some seem to want something that is not available in shelters, and they will not compromise, not for a cot, or oatmeal, or a shower with special soap that kills the bugs. "One room," a woman with a baby who was sleeping on her sister's floor once told me, "painted blue." That was the crux2 of it; not the size or location, but pride of ownership. Painted blue.

     This is a difficult problem, and some wise and compassionate people are working hard at it. But in the main I think we work around it, just as we walk around it when it is lying on the sidewalk or sitting in the bus terminal--the problem, that is. It has been customary to take people's pain and lessen our own participation in it by turning it into an issue, not a collection of human beings. We turn an adjective into a noun: the poor, not poor people; the homeless, not Ann or the man who lives in the box or the woman who sleeps on the subway grate.

     Sometimes I think we would be better off if we forgot about the broad strokes and concentrated on the details. Here is a woman without a bureau. There is a man with no mirror, no wall to hang it on. They are not the homeless. They are people who have no homes. No drawer that holds the spoons. No window to look out upon the world. My God. That is everything.

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**1. cross-stitch and French knots on samplers:** two kinds of fancy stiches on hand-embroidered cloths.

**2. crux:** the most important point.

### “Total Eclipse” by Annie Dillard

from*Teaching a Stone to Talk*

It had been like dying, that sliding down the mountain pass. It had been like the death of someone, irrational, that sliding down the mountain pass and into the region of dread. It was like slipping into fever, or falling down that hole in sleep from which you wake yourself whimpering. We had crossed the mountains that day, and now we were in a strange place – a hotel in central Washington, in a town near Yakima. The eclipse we had traveled here to see would occur early in the next morning.

I lay in bed. My husband, Gary, was reading beside me. I lay in bed and looked at the painting on the hotel room wall. It was a print of a detailed and lifelike painting of a smiling clown’s head, made out of vegetables. It was a painting of the sort which you do not intend to look at, and which, alas, you never forget. Some tasteless fate presses it upon you; it becomes part of the complex interior junk you carry with you wherever you go. Two years have passed since the total eclipse of which I write. During those years I have forgotten, I assume, a great many things I wanted to remember – but I have not forgotten that clown painting or its lunatic setting in the old hotel. The clown was bald. Actually, he wore a clown’s tight rubber wig, painted white; this stretched over the top of his skull, which was a cabbage. His hair was bunches of baby carrots. Inset in his white clown makeup, and in his cabbage skull, were his small and laughing human eyes. The clown’s glance was like the glance of Rembrandt in some of the self-portraits: lively, knowing, deep, and loving. The crinkled shadows around his eyes were string beans. His eyebrows were parsley. Each of his ears was a broad bean. His thin, joyful lips were red chili peppers; between his lips were wet rows of human teeth and a suggestion of a real tongue. The clown print was framed in gilt and glassed.

To put ourselves in the path of the total eclipse, that day we had driven five hours inland from the Washington coast, where we lived. When we tried to cross the Cascades range, an avalanche had blocked the pass.

A slope’s worth of snow blocked the road; traffic backed up. Had the avalanche buried any cars that morning? We could not learn. This highway was the only winter road over the mountains. We waited as highway crews bulldozed a passage through the avalanche. With two-by-fours and walls of plywood, they erected a one-way, roofed tunnel through the avalanche. We drove through the avalanche tunnel, crossed the pass, and descended several thousand feet into central Washington and the broad Yakima valley, about which we knew only that it was orchard country. As we lost altitude, the snows disappeared; our ears popped; the trees changed, and in the trees were strange birds. I watched the landscape innocently, like a fool, like a diver in the rapture of the deep who plays on the bottom while his air runs out.

The hotel lobby was a dark, derelict room, narrow as a corridor, and seemingly without air. We waited on a couch while the manager vanished upstairs to do something unknown to our room. Beside us on an overstuffed chair, absolutely motionless, was a platinum-blond woman in her forties wearing a black silk dress and a strand of pearls. Her long legs were crossed; she supported her head on her fist. At the dim far end of the room, their backs toward us, sat six bald old men in their shirtsleeves, around a loud television. Two of them seemed asleep. They were drunks. “Number six!” cried the man on television, “Number six!”

On the broad lobby desk, lighted and bubbling, was a ten-gallon aquarium containing one large fish; the fish tilted up and down in its water. Against the long opposite wall sang a live canary in its cage. Beneath the cage, among spilled millet seeds on the carpet, were a decorated child’s sand bucket and matching sand shovel.

Now the alarm was set for six. I lay awake remembering an article I had read downstairs in the lobby, in an engineering magazine. The article was about gold mining.

In South Africa, in India, and in South Dakota, the gold mines extend so deeply into the earth’s crust that they are hot. The rock walls burn the miners’ hands. The companies have to air-condition the mines; if the air conditioners break, the miners die. The elevators in the mine shafts run very slowly, down, and up, so the miners’ ears will not pop in their skulls. When the miners return to the surface, their faces are deathly pale.

Early the next morning we checked out. It was February 26, 1979, a Monday morning. We would drive out of town, find a hilltop, watch the eclipse, and then drive back over the mountains and home to the coast. How familiar things are here; how adept we are; how smoothly and professionally we check out! I had forgotten the clown’s smiling head and the hotel lobby as if they had never existed. Gary put the car in gear and off we went, as off we have gone to a hundred other adventures.

It was dawn when we found a highway out of town and drove into the unfamiliar countryside. By the growing light we could see a band of cirro-stratus clouds in the sky. Later the rising sun would clear these clouds before the eclipse began. We drove at random until we came to a range of unfenced hills. We pulled off the highway, bundled up, and climbed one of these hills.

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The hill was five hundred feet high. Long winter-killed grass covered it, as high as our knees. We climbed and rested, sweating in the cold; we passed clumps of bundled people on the hillside who were setting up telescopes and fiddling with cameras. The top of the hill stuck up in the middle of the sky. We tightened our scarves and looked around.

East of us rose another hill like ours. Between the hills, far below, 13 was the highway which threaded south into the valley. This was the Yakima valley; I had never seen it before. It is justly famous for its beauty, like every planted valley. It extended south into the horizon, a distant dream of a valley, a Shangri-la. All its hundreds of low, golden slopes bore orchards. Among the orchards were towns, and roads, and plowed and fallow fields. Through the valley wandered a thin, shining river; from the river extended fine, frozen irrigation ditches Distance blurred and blued the sight, so that the whole valley looked like a thickness or sediment at the bottom of the sky. Directly behind us was more sky, and empty lowlands blued by distance, and Mount Adams. Mount Adams was an enormous, snow-covered volcanic cone rising flat, like so much scenery.

Now the sun was up. We could not see it; but the sky behind the band of clouds was yellow, and, far down the valley, some hillside orchards had lighted up. More people were parking near the highway and climbing the hills. It was the West. All of us rugged individualists were wearing knit caps and blue nylon parkas. People were climbing the nearby hills and setting up shop in clumps among the dead grasses. It looked as though we had all gathered on hilltops to pray for the world on its last day. It looked as though we had all crawled out of spaceships and were preparing to assault the valley below. It looked as though we were scattered on hilltops at dawn to sacrifice virgins, make rain, set stone stelae in a ring. There was no place out of the wind. The straw grasses banged our legs.

Up in the sky where we stood the air was lusterless yellow. To the west the sky was blue. Now the sun cleared the clouds. We cast rough shadows on the blowing grass; freezing, we waved our arms. Near the sun, the sky was bright and colorless. There was nothing to see.

It began with no ado. It was odd that such a well advertised public event should have no starting gun, no overture, no introductory speaker. I should have known right then that I was out of my depth. Without pause or preamble, silent as orbits, a piece of the sun went away. We looked at it through welders’ goggles. A piece of the sun was missing; in its place we saw empty sky.

I had seen a partial eclipse in 1970. A partial eclipse is very interesting. It bears almost no relation to a total eclipse. Seeing a partial eclipse bears the same relation to seeing a total eclipse as kissing a man does to marrying him, or as flying in an airplane does to falling out of an airplane. Although the one experience precedes the other, it in no way prepares you for it. During a partial eclipse the sky does not darken – not even when 94 percent of the sun is hidden. Nor does the sun, seen colorless through protective devices, seem terribly strange. We have all seen a sliver of light in the sky; we have all seen the crescent moon by day. However, during a partial eclipse the air does indeed get cold, precisely as if someone were standing between you and the fire. And blackbirds do fly back to their roosts. I had seen a partial eclipse before, and here was another.

What you see in an eclipse is entirely different from what you know. It is especially different for those of us whose grasp of astronomy is so frail that, given a flashlight, a grapefruit, two oranges, and fifteen years, we still could not figure out which way to set the clocks for Daylight Saving Time. Usually it is a bit of a trick to keep your knowledge from blinding you. But during an eclipse it is easy. What you see is much more convincing than any wild-eyed theory you may know.

You may read that the moon has something to do with eclipses. I have never seen the moon yet. You do not see the moon. So near the sun, it is as completely invisible as the stars are by day. What you see before your eyes is the sun going through phases. It gets narrower and narrower, as the waning moon does, and, like the ordinary moon, it travels alone in the simple sky. The sky is of course background. It does not appear to eat the sun; it is far behind the sun. The sun simply shaves away; gradually, you see less sun and more sky.

The sky’s blue was deepening, but there was no darkness. The sun was a wide crescent, like a segment of tangerine. The wind freshened and blew steadily over the hill. The eastern hill across the highway grew dusky and sharp. The towns and orchards in the valley to the south were dissolving into the blue light. Only the thin river held a trickle of sun.

Now the sky to the west deepened to indigo, a color never seen. A dark sky usually loses color. This was a saturated, deep indigo, up in the air. Stuck up into that unworldly sky was the cone of Mount Adams, and the alpenglow was upon it. The alpenglow is that red light of sunset which holds out on snowy mountain tops long after the valleys and tablelands are dimmed. “Look at Mount Adams,” I said, and that was the last sane moment I remember.

I turned back to the sun. It was going. The sun was going, and the world was wrong. The grasses were wrong; they were platinum. Their every detail of stem, head, and blade shone lightless and artificially distinct as an art photographer’s platinum print. This color has never been seen on earth. The hues were metallic; their finish was matte. The hillside was a nineteenth-century tinted photograph from which the tints had faded. All the people you see in the photograph, distinct and detailed as their faces look, are now dead. The sky was navy blue. My hands were silver. All the distant hills’ grasses were finespun metal which the wind laid down. I was watching a faded color print of a movie filmed in the Middle Ages; I was standing in it, by some mistake. I was standing in a movie of hillside grasses filmed in the Middle Ages. I missed my own century, the people I knew, and the real light of day.

I looked at Gary. He was in the film. Everything was lost. He was a platinum print, a dead artist’s version of life. I saw on his skull the darkness of night mixed with the colors of day. My mind was going out; my eyes were receding the way galaxies recede to the rim of space. Gary was lighters away, gesturing inside a circle of darkness, down the wrong end of a telescope. He smiled as if he saw me; the stringy crinkles around his eyes moved. The sight of him, familiar and wrong, was something I was remembering from centuries hence, from the other side of death: yes, that is the way he used to look, when we were living. When it was our generation’s turn to be alive. I could not hear him; the wind was too loud. Behind him the sun was going. We had all started down a chute of time. At first it was pleasant; now there was no stopping it. Gary was chuting away across space, moving and talking and catching my eye, chuting down the long corridor of separation. The skin on his face moved like thin bronze plating that would peel.

The grass at our feet was wild barley. It was the wild einkorn wheat which grew on the hilly flanks of the Zagros Mountains, above the Euphrates valley, above the valley of the river we called River. We harvested the grass with stone sickles, I remember. We found the grasses on the hillsides; we built our shelter beside them and cut them down. That is how he used to look then, that one, moving and living and catching my eye, with the sky so dark behind him, and the wind blowing. God save our life.

From all the hills came screams. A piece of sky beside the crescent sun was detaching. It was a loosened circle of evening sky, suddenly lighted from the back. It was an abrupt black body out of nowhere; it was a flat disk; it was almost over the sun. That is when there were screams. At once this disk of sky slid over the sun like a lid. The sky snapped over the sun like a lens cover. The hatch in the brain slammed. Abruptly it was dark night, on the land and in the sky. In the night sky was a tiny ring of light. The hole where the sun belongs is very small. A thin ring of light marked its place. There was no sound. The eyes dried, the arteries drained, the lungs hushed. There was no world. We were the world’s dead people rotating and orbiting around and around, embedded in the planet’s crust, while the earth rolled down. Our minds were light-years distant, forgetful of almost everything. Only an extraordinary act of will could recall to us our former, living selves and our contexts in matter and time. We had, it seems, loved the planet and loved our lives, but could no longer remember the way of them. We got the light wrong. In the sky was something that should not be there. In the black sky was a ring of light. It was a thin ring, an old, thin silver wedding band, an old, worn ring. It was an old wedding band in the sky, or a morsel of bone. There were stars. It was all over.

III    
It is now that the temptation is strongest to leave these regions. We have seen enough; let’s go. Why burn our hands any more than we have to? But two years have passed; the price of gold has risen. I return to the same buried alluvial beds and pick through the strata again.

I saw, early in the morning, the sun diminish against a backdrop of sky. I saw a circular piece of that sky appear, suddenly detached, blackened, and backlighted; from nowhere it came and overlapped the sun. It did not look like the moon. It was enormous and black If I had not read that it was the moon, I could have seen the sight a hundred times and never thought of the moon once. (If, however, I had not read that it was the moon – if, like most of the world’s people throughout time, I had simply glanced up and seen this thing – then I doubtless would not have speculated much, but would have, like Emperor Louis of Bavaria in 840, simply died of fright on the spot.) It did not look like a dragon, although it looked more like a dragon than the moon. It looked like a lens cover, or the lid of a pot. It materialized out of thin air – black, and flat, and sliding, outlined in flame.

Seeing this black body was like seeing a mushroom cloud. The heart screeched. The meaning of the sight overwhelmed its fascination. It obliterated meaning itself. If you were to glance out one day and see a row of mushroom clouds rising on the horizon, you would know at once that what you were seeing, remarkable as it was, was intrinsically not worth remarking. No use running to tell anyone. Significant as it was, it did not matter a whit. For what is significance? It is significance for people. No people, no significance. This is all I have to tell you.

In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warmed us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world’s rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil. Its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.

The world which lay under darkness and stillness following the closing of the lid was not the world we know. The event was over. Its devastation lay around about us. The clamoring mind and heart stilled, almost indifferent, certainly disembodied, frail, and exhausted. The hills were hushed, obliterated. Up in the sky, like a crater from some distant cataclysm, was a hollow ring.

You have seen photographs of the sun taken during a total eclipse. The corona fills the print. All of those photographs were taken through telescopes. The lenses of telescopes and cameras can no more cover the breadth and scale of the visual array than language can cover the breadth and simultaneity of internal experience. Lenses enlarge the sight, omit its context, and make of it a pretty and sensible picture, like something on a Christmas card. I assure you, if you send any shepherds a Christmas card on which is printed a three-by-three photograph of the angel of the Lord, the glory of the Lord, and a multitude of the heavenly host, they will not be sore afraid. More fearsome things can come in envelopes. More moving photographs than those of the sun’s corona can appear in magazines. But I pray you will never see anything more awful in the sky.

You see the wide world swaddled in darkness; you see a vast breadth of hilly land, and an enormous, distant, blackened valley; you see towns’ lights, a river’s path, and blurred portions of your hat and scarf; you see your husband’s face looking like an early black-and-white film; and you see a sprawl of black sky and blue sky together, with unfamiliar stars in it, some barely visible bands of cloud, and over there, a small white ring. The ring is as small as one goose in a flock of migrating geese – if you happen to notice a flock of migrating geese. It is one 360th part of the visible sky. The sun we see is less than half the diameter of a dime held at arm’s length.

The Crab Nebula, in the constellation Taurus, looks, through binoculars, like a smoke ring. It is a star in the process of exploding. Light from its explosion first reached the earth in 1054; it was a supernova then, and so bright it shone in the daytime. Now it is not so bright, but it is still exploding. It expands at the rate of seventy million miles a day. It is interesting to look through binoculars at something expanding seventy million miles a day. It does not budge. Its apparent size does not increase. Photographs of the Crab Nebula taken fifteen years ago seem identical to photographs of it taken yesterday. Some lichens are similar. Botanists have measured some ordinary lichens twice, at fifty-year intervals, without detecting any growth at all. And yet their cells divide; they live.

The small ring of light was like these things – like a ridiculous lichen up in the sky, like a perfectly still explosion 4,200 light-years away: it was interesting, and lovely, and in witless motion, and it had nothing to do with anything.

It had nothing to do with anything. The sun was too small, and too cold, and too far away, to keep the world alive. The white ring was not enough. It was feeble and worthless. It was as useless as a memory; it was as off-kilter and hollow and wretched as a memory.

xxWhen you try your hardest to recall someone’s face, or the look of a place, you see in your mind’s eye some vague and terrible sight such as this. It is dark; it is insubstantial; it is all wrong.

The white ring and the saturated darkness made the earth and the sky look as they must look in the memories of the careless dead. What I saw, what I seemed to be standing in, was all the wrecked light that the memories of the dead could shed upon the living world. We had all died in our boots on the hilltops of Yakima, and were alone in eternity. Empty space stoppered our eyes and mouths; we cared for nothing. We remembered our living days wrong. With great effort we had remembered some sort of circular light in the sky – but only the outline. Oh, and then the orchard trees withered, the ground froze, the glaciers slid down the valleys and overlapped the towns. If there had ever been people on earth, nobody knew it. The dead had forgotten those they had loved. The dead were parted one from the other and could no longer remember the faces and lands they had loved in the light. They seemed to stand on darkened hilltops, looking down.

IV  
We teach our children one thing only, as we were taught: to wake up. We teach our children to look alive there, to join by words and activities the life of human culture on the planet’s crust. As adults we are almost all adept at waking up. We have so mastered the transition we have forgotten we ever learned it. Yet it is a transition we make a hundred times a day, as, like so many will-less dolphins, we plunge and surface, lapse and emerge. We live half our waking lives and all of our sleeping lives in some private, useless, and insensible waters we never mention or recall. Useless, I say. Valueless, I might add – until someone hauls their wealth up to the surface and into the wide-awake city, in a form that people can use.

I do not know how we got to the restaurant. Like Roethke, “I take my waking slow.” Gradually I seemed more or less alive, and already forgetful. It was now almost nine in the morning. It was the day of a solar eclipse in central Washington, and a fine adventure for everyone. The sky was clear; there was a fresh breeze out of the north.

The restaurant was a roadside place with tables and booths. The other eclipse-watchers were there. From our booth we could see their cars’ California license plates, their University of Washington parking stickers. Inside the restaurant we were all eating eggs or waffles; people were fairly shouting and exchanging enthusiasms, like fans after a World Series game. Did you see . . .  ? Did you see  
 . . . ? Then somebody said something which knocked me for a loop.

A college student, a boy in a blue parka who carried a Hasselblad, said to us, “Did you see that little white ring? It looked like a Life Saver. It looked like a Life Saver up in the Sky,”

And so it did. The boy spoke well. He was a walking alarm clock. I myself had at that time no access to such a word. He could write a sentence, and I could not. I grabbed that Life Saver and rode it to the surface. And I had to laugh. I had been dumbstruck on the Euphrates River, I had been dead and gone and grieving, all over the sight of something which, if you could claw your way up to that level, you would grant looked very much like a Life Saver. It was good to be back among people so clever; it was good to have all the world’s words at the mind’s disposal, so the mind could begin its task. All those things for which we have no words are lost. The mind – the culture – has two little tools, grammar and lexicon: a decorated sand bucket and a matching shovel. With these we bluster about the continents and do all the world’s work. With these we try to save our very lives.

There are a few more things to tell from this level, the level of the restaurant. One is the old joke about breakfast. “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.” Wallace Stevens wrote that, and in the long run he was right. The mind wants to live forever, or to learn a very good reason why not. The mind wants the world to return its love, or its awareness; the mind wants to know all the world, and all eternity, and God. The mind’s sidekick, however, will settle for two eggs over easy.

The dear, stupid body is as easily satisfied as a spaniel. And, incredibly, the simple spaniel can lure the brawling mind to its dish. It is everlastingly funny that the proud, metaphysically ambitious, clamoring mind will hush if you give it an egg.

Further: while the mind reels in deep space, while the mind grieves or fears or exults, the workaday senses, in ignorance or idiocy, like so many computer terminals printing out market prices while the world blows up, still transcribe their little data and transmit them to the warehouse in the skull. Later, under the tranquilizing influence of fried eggs, the mind can sort through this data. The restaurant was a halfway house, a decompression chamber. There I remembered a few things more.

The deepest, and most terrifying, was this: I have said that I heard screams. (I have since read that screaming, with hysteria, is a common reaction even to expected total eclipses.) People on all the hillsides, including, I think, myself, screamed when the black body of the moon detached from the sky and rolled over the sun. But something else was happening at that same instant, and it was this, I believe, which made us scream.

The second before the sun went out we saw a wall of dark shadow come speeding at us. We no sooner saw it than it was upon us, like thunder. It roared up the valley. It slammed our hill and knocked us out. It was the monstrous swift shadow cone of the moon. I have since read that this wave of shadow moves 1,800 miles an hour. Language can give no sense of this sort of speed – 1,800 miles an hour. It was 195 miles wide. No end was in sight – you saw only the edge. It rolled at you across the land at 1,800 miles an hour, hauling darkness like plague behind it. Seeing it, and knowing it was coming straight for you, was like feeling a slug of anesthetic shoot up your arm. If you think very fast, you may have time to think, “Soon it will hit my brain.” You can feel the deadness race up your arm; you can feel the appalling, inhuman speed of your own blood. We saw the wall of shadow coming, and screamed before it hit.

This was the universe about which we have read so much and never before felt: the universe as a clockwork of loose spheres flung at stupefying, unauthorized speeds. How could anything moving so fast not crash, not veer from its orbit amok like a car out of control on a turn?

Less than two minutes later, when the sun emerged, the trailing edge of the shadow cone sped away. It coursed down our hill and raced eastward over the plain, faster than the eye could believe; it swept over the plain and dropped over the planet’s rim in a twinkling It had clobbered us, and now it roared away. We blinked in the light It was as though an enormous, loping god in the sky had reached down and slapped the earth’s face.

Something else, something more ordinary, came back to me along about the third cup of coffee. During the moments of totality, it was so dark that drivers on the highway below turned on their cars’ headlights. We could see the highway’s route as a strand of lights. It was bumper-to-bumper down there. It was eight-fifteen in the morning, Monday morning, and people were driving into Yakima to work. That it was as dark as night, and eerie as hell, an hour after dawn, apparently meant that in order to see to drive to work, people had to use their headlights. Four or five cars pulled off the road. The rest, in a line at least five miles long, drove to town. The highway ran between hills; the people could not have seen any of the eclipsed sun at all. Yakima will have another total eclipse in 2086. Perhaps, in 2086, businesses will give their employees an hour off.

From the restaurant we drove back to the coast. The highway crossing the Cascades range was open. We drove over the mountain like old pros. We joined our places on the planet’s thin crust; it held. For the time being, we were home free.

Early that morning at six, when we had checked out, the six bald men were sitting on folding chairs in the dim hotel lobby. The television was on. Most of them were awake. You might drown in your own spittle, God knows, at any time; you might wake up dead in a small hotel, a cabbage head watching TV while snows pile up in the passes, watching TV while the chili peppers smile and the moon passes over the sun and nothing changes and nothing is learned because you have lost your bucket and shovel and no longer care. What if you regain the surface and open your sack and find, instead of treasure, a beast which jumps at you? Or you may not come back at all. The winches may jam, the scaffolding buckle, the air conditioning collapse. You may glance up one day and see by your headlamp the canary keeled over in its cage. You may reach into a cranny for pearls and touch a moray eel. You yank on your rope; it is too late.

Apparently people share a sense of these hazards, for when the total eclipse ended, an odd thing happened.

When the sun appeared as a blinding bead on the ring’s side, the eclipse was over. The black lens cover appeared again, back-lighted, and slid away. At once the yellow light made the sky blue again; the black lid dissolved and vanished. The real world began there. I remember now: we all hurried away. We were born and bored at a stroke. We rushed down the hill. We found our car; we saw the other people streaming down the hillsides; we joined the highway traffic and drove away.

We never looked back. It was a general vamoose, and an odd one, for when we left the hill, the sun was still partially eclipsed – a sight rare enough, and one which, in itself, we would probably have driven five hours to see. But enough is enough. One turns at last even from glory itself with a sigh of relief. From the depths of mystery, and even from the heights of splendor, we bounce back and hurry for the latitudes of home.

## CONSIDER THE LOBSTER by [DAVID FOSTER WALLACE](http://www.gourmet.com/profiles/david_foster_wallace/search?contributorName=David%20Foster%20Wallace)

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**For 56 years, the Maine Lobster Festival has been drawing crowds with the promise of sun, fun, and fine food. One visitor would argue that the celebration involves a whole lot more.**



The enormous, pungent, and extremely well marketed Maine Lobster Festival is held every late July in the state’s midcoast region, meaning the western side of Penobscot Bay, the nerve stem of Maine’s lobster industry. What’s called the midcoast runs from Owl’s Head and Thomaston in the south to Belfast in the north. (Actually, it might extend all the way up to Bucksport, but we were never able to get farther north than Belfast on Route 1, whose summer traffic is, as you can imagine, unimaginable.) The region’s two main communities are Camden, with its very old money and yachty harbor and five-star restaurants and phenomenal B&Bs, and Rockland, a serious old fishing town that hosts the Festival every summer in historic Harbor Park, right along the water.**1**

Tourism and lobster are the midcoast region’s two main industries, and they’re both warm-weather enterprises, and the Maine Lobster Festival represents less an intersection of the industries than a deliberate collision, joyful and lucrative and loud. The assigned subject of this article is the 56th Annual MLF, July 30 to August 3, 2003, whose official theme was “Lighthouses, Laughter, and Lobster.” Total paid attendance was over 80,000, due partly to a national CNN spot in June during which a Senior Editor of a certain other epicurean magazine hailed the MLF as one of the best food-themed festivals in the world. 2003 Festival highlights: concerts by Lee Ann Womack and Orleans, annual Maine Sea Goddess beauty pageant, Saturday’s big parade, Sunday’s William G. Atwood Memorial Crate Race, annual Amateur Cooking Competition, carnival rides and midway attractions and food booths, and the MLF’s Main Eating Tent, where something over 25,000 pounds of fresh-caught Maine lobster is consumed after preparation in the World’s Largest Lobster Cooker near the grounds’ north entrance. Also available are lobster rolls, lobster turnovers, lobster sauté, Down East lobster salad, lobster bisque, lobster ravioli, and deep-fried lobster dumplings. Lobster Thermidor is obtainable at a sit-down restaurant called The Black Pearl on Harbor Park’s northwest wharf. A large all-pine booth sponsored by the Maine Lobster Promotion Council has free pamphlets with recipes, eating tips, and Lobster Fun Facts. The winner of Friday’s Amateur Cooking Competition prepares Saffron Lobster Ramekins, the recipe for which is available for public downloading at www.mainelobsterfestival.com. There are lobster T-shirts and lobster bobblehead dolls and inflatable lobster pool toys and clamp-on lobster hats with big scarlet claws that wobble on springs. Your assigned correspondent saw it all, accompanied by one girlfriend and both his own parents—one of which parents was actually born and raised in Maine, albeit in the extreme northern inland part, which is potato country and a world away from the touristic midcoast.**2**

For practical purposes, everyone knows what a lobster is. As usual, though, there’s much more to know than most of us care about—it’s all a matter of what your interests are. Taxonomically speaking, a lobster is a marine crustacean of the family Homaridae, characterized by five pairs of jointed legs, the first pair terminating in large pincerish claws used for subduing prey. Like many other species of benthic carnivore, lobsters are both hunters and scavengers. They have stalked eyes, gills on their legs, and antennae. There are dozens of different kinds worldwide, of which the relevant species here is the Maine lobster, Homarus americanus. The name “lobster” comes from the Old English loppestre, which is thought to be a corrupt form of the Latin word for locust combined with the Old Englishloppe, which meant spider.

Moreover, a crustacean is an aquatic arthropod of the class Crustacea, which comprises crabs, shrimp, barnacles, lobsters, and freshwater crayfish. All this is right there in the encyclopedia. And an arthropod is an invertebrate member of the phylum Arthropoda, which phylum covers insects, spiders, crustaceans, and centipedes/millipedes, all of whose main commonality, besides the absence of a centralized brain-spine assembly, is a chitinous exoskeleton composed of segments, to which appendages are articulated in pairs.

The point is that lobsters are basically giant sea-insects.**3** Like most arthropods, they date from the Jurassic period, biologically so much older than mammalia that they might as well be from another planet. And they are—particularly in their natural brown-green state, brandishing their claws like weapons and with thick antennae awhip—not nice to look at. And it’s true that they are garbagemen of the sea, eaters of dead stuff,**4** although they’ll also eat some live shellfish, certain kinds of injured fish, and sometimes each other.

But they are themselves good eating. Or so we think now. Up until sometime in the 1800s, though, lobster was literally low-class food, eaten only by the poor and institutionalized. Even in the harsh penal environment of early America, some colonies had laws against feeding lobsters to inmates more than once a week because it was thought to be cruel and unusual, like making people eat rats. One reason for their low status was how plentiful lobsters were in old New England. “Unbelievable abundance” is how one source describes the situation, including accounts of Plymouth pilgrims wading out and capturing all they wanted by hand, and of early Boston’s seashore being littered with lobsters after hard storms—these latter were treated as a smelly nuisance and ground up for fertilizer. There is also the fact that premodern lobster was often cooked dead and then preserved, usually packed in salt or crude hermetic containers. Maine’s earliest lobster industry was based around a dozen such seaside canneries in the 1840s, from which lobster was shipped as far away as California, in demand only because it was cheap and high in protein, basically chewable fuel.

Now, of course, lobster is posh, a delicacy, only a step or two down from caviar. The meat is richer and more substantial than most fish, its taste subtle compared to the marine-gaminess of mussels and clams. In the U.S. pop-food imagination, lobster is now the seafood analog to steak, with which it’s so often twinned as Surf ’n’ Turf on the really expensive part of the chain steak house menu.

In fact, one obvious project of the MLF, and of its omnipresently sponsorial Maine Lobster Promotion Council, is to counter the idea that lobster is unusually luxe or rich or unhealthy or expensive, suitable only for effete palates or the occasional blow-the-diet treat. It is emphasized over and over in presentations and pamphlets at the Festival that Maine lobster meat has fewer calories, less cholesterol, and less saturated fat than chicken.**5** And in the Main Eating Tent, you can get a “quarter” (industry shorthand for a 1‰-pound lobster), a 4-ounce cup of melted butter, a bag of chips, and a soft roll w/ butter-pat for around $12.00, which is only slightly more expensive than supper at McDonald’s.

Be apprised, though, that the Main Eating Tent’s suppers come in Styrofoam trays, and the soft drinks are iceless and flat, and the coffee is convenience-store coffee in yet more Styrofoam, and the utensils are plastic (there are none of the special long skinny forks for pushing out the tail meat, though a few savvy diners bring their own). Nor do they give you near enough napkins, considering how messy lobster is to eat, especially when you’re squeezed onto benches alongside children of various ages and vastly different levels of fine-motor development—not to mention the people who’ve somehow smuggled in their own beer in enormous aisle-blocking coolers, or who all of a sudden produce their own plastic tablecloths and try to spread them over large portions of tables to try to reserve them (the tables) for their little groups. And so on. Any one example is no more than a petty inconvenience, of course, but the MLF turns out to be full of irksome little downers like this—see for instance the Main Stage’s headliner shows, where it turns out that you have to pay $20 extra for a folding chair if you want to sit down; or the North Tent’s mad scramble for the NyQuil-cup-size samples of finalists’ entries handed out after the Cooking Competition; or the much-touted Maine Sea Goddess pageant finals, which turn out to be excruciatingly long and to consist mainly of endless thanks and tributes to local sponsors. What the Maine Lobster Festival really is is a mid­level county fair with a culinary hook, and in this respect it’s not unlike Tidewater crab festivals, Midwest corn festivals, Texas chili festivals, etc., and shares with these venues the core paradox of all teeming commercial demotic events: It’s not for everyone.**6** Nothing against the aforementioned euphoric Senior Editor, but I’d be surprised if she’d spent much time here in Harbor Park, watching people slap canal-zone mosquitoes as they eat deep-fried Twinkies and watch Professor Paddywhack, on six-foot stilts in a raincoat with plastic lobsters protruding from all directions on springs, terrify their children.

Lobster is essentially a summer food. This is because we now prefer our lobsters fresh, which means they have to be recently caught, which for both tactical and economic reasons takes place at depths of less than 25 fathoms. Lobsters tend to be hungriest and most active (i.e., most trappable) at summer water temperatures of 45–50°F. In the autumn, some Maine lobsters migrate out into deeper water, either for warmth or to avoid the heavy waves that pound New England’s coast all winter. Some burrow into the bottom. They might hibernate; nobody’s sure. Summer is also lobsters’ molting season—specifically early- to mid-July. Chitinous arthropods grow by molting, rather the way people have to buy bigger clothes as they age and gain weight. Since lobsters can live to be over 100, they can also get to be quite large, as in 20 pounds or more—though truly senior lobsters are rare now, because New England’s waters are so heavily trapped.**7** Anyway, hence the culinary distinction between hard- and soft-shell lobsters, the latter sometimes a.k.a. shedders. A soft-shell lobster is one that has recently molted. In midcoast restaurants, the summer menu often offers both kinds, with shedders being slightly cheaper even though they’re easier to dismantle and the meat is allegedly sweeter. The reason for the discount is that a molting lobster uses a layer of seawater for insulation while its new shell is hardening, so there’s slightly less actual meat when you crack open a shedder, plus a redolent gout of water that gets all over everything and can sometimes jet out lemonlike and catch a tablemate right in the eye. If it’s winter or you’re buying lobster someplace far from New England, on the other hand, you can almost bet that the lobster is a hard-shell, which for obvious reasons travel better.

As an à la carte entrée, lobster can be baked, broiled, steamed, grilled, sautéed, stir-fried, or microwaved. The most common method, though, is boiling. If you’re someone who enjoys having lobster at home, this is probably the way you do it, since boiling is so easy. You need a large kettle w/ cover, which you fill about half full with water (the standard advice is that you want 2.5 quarts of water per lobster). Seawater is optimal, or you can add two tbsp salt per quart from the tap. It also helps to know how much your lobsters weigh. You get the water boiling, put in the lobsters one at a time, cover the kettle, and bring it back up to a boil. Then you bank the heat and let the kettle simmer—ten minutes for the first pound of lobster, then three minutes for each pound after that. (This is assuming you’ve got hard-shell lobsters, which, again, if you don’t live between Boston and Halifax, is probably what you’ve got. For shedders, you’re supposed to subtract three minutes from the total.) The reason the kettle’s lobsters turn scarlet is that boiling somehow suppresses every pigment in their chitin but one. If you want an easy test of whether the lobsters are done, you try pulling on one of their antennae—if it comes out of the head with minimal effort, you’re ready to eat.

A detail so obvious that most recipes don’t even bother to mention it is that each lobster is supposed to be alive when you put it in the kettle. This is part of lobster’s modern appeal: It’s the freshest food there is. There’s no decomposition between harvesting and eating. And not only do lobsters require no cleaning or dressing or plucking (though the mechanics of actually eating them are a different matter), but they’re relatively easy for vendors to keep alive. They come up alive in the traps, are placed in containers of seawater, and can, so long as the water’s aerated and the animals’ claws are pegged or banded to keep them from tearing one another up under the stresses of captivity,**8** survive right up until they’re boiled. Most of us have been in supermarkets or restaurants that feature tanks of live lobster, from which you can pick out your supper while it watches you point. And part of the overall spectacle of the Maine Lobster Festival is that you can see actual lobstermen’s vessels docking at the wharves along the northeast grounds and unloading freshly caught product, which is transferred by hand or cart 100 yards to the great clear tanks stacked up around the Festival’s cooker—which is, as mentioned, billed as the World’s Largest Lobster Cooker and can process over 100 lobsters at a time for the Main Eating Tent.

So then here is a question that’s all but unavoidable at the World’s Largest Lobster Cooker, and may arise in kitchens across the U.S.: Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure? A related set of concerns: Is the previous question irksomely PC or sentimental? What does “all right” even mean in this context? Is it all just a matter of individual choice?

As you may or may not know, a certain well-known group called People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals thinks that the morality of lobster-boiling is not just a matter of individual conscience. In fact, one of the very first things we hear about the MLF …well, to set the scene: We’re coming in by cab from the almost indescribably odd and rustic Knox County Airport**9** very late on the night before the Festival opens, sharing the cab with a wealthy political consultant who lives on Vinalhaven Island in the bay half the year (he’s headed for the island ferry in Rockland). The consultant and cabdriver are responding to informal journalistic probes about how people who live in the midcoast region actually view the MLF, as in is the Festival just a big-dollar tourist thing or is it something local residents look forward to attending, take genuine civic pride in, etc. The cabdriver—who’s in his seventies, one of apparently a whole platoon of retirees the cab company puts on to help with the summer rush, and wears a U.S.-flag lapel pin, and drives in what can only be called a very deliberate way—assures us that locals do endorse and enjoy the MLF, although he himself hasn’t gone in years, and now come to think of it no one he and his wife know has, either. However, the demilocal consultant’s been to recent Festivals a couple times (one gets the impression it was at his wife’s behest), of which his most vivid impression was that “you have to line up for an ungodly long time to get your lobsters, and meanwhile there are all these ex–flower children coming up and down along the line handing out pamphlets that say the lobsters die in terrible pain and you shouldn’t eat them.”

And it turns out that the post-hippies of the consultant’s recollection were activists from PETA. There were no PETA people in obvious view at the 2003 MLF,**10** but they’ve been conspicuous at many of the recent Festivals. Since at least the mid-1990s, articles in everything from The Camden Herald toThe New York Times have described PETA urging boycotts of the MLF, often deploying celebrity spokespeople like Mary Tyler Moore for open letters and ads saying stuff like “Lobsters are extraordinarily sensitive” and “To me, eating a lobster is out of the question.” More concrete is the oral testimony of Dick, our florid and extremely gregarious rental-car guy, to the effect that PETA’s been around so much in recent years that a kind of brittlely tolerant homeostasis now obtains between the activists and the Festival’s locals, e.g.: “We had some incidents a couple years ago. One lady took most of her clothes off and painted herself like a lobster, almost got herself arrested. But for the most part they’re let alone. [Rapid series of small ambiguous laughs, which with Dick happens a lot.] They do their thing and we do our thing.”

This whole interchange takes place on Route 1, 30 July, during a four-mile, 50-minute ride from the airport**11** to the dealership to sign car-rental papers. Several irreproducible segues down the road from the PETA anecdotes, Dick—whose son-in-law happens to be a professional lobsterman and one of the Main Eating Tent’s regular suppliers—articulates what he and his family feel is the crucial mitigating factor in the whole morality-of-boiling-lobsters-alive issue: “There’s a part of the brain in people and animals that lets us feel pain, and lobsters’ brains don’t have this part.”

Besides the fact that it’s incorrect in about 11 different ways, the main reason Dick’s statement is interesting is that its thesis is more or less echoed by the Festival’s own pronouncement on lobsters and pain, which is part of a Test Your Lobster IQ quiz that appears in the 2003 MLF program courtesy of the Maine Lobster Promotion Council: “The nervous system of a lobster is very simple, and is in fact most similar to the nervous system of the grasshopper. It is decentralized with no brain. There is no cerebral cortex, which in humans is the area of the brain that gives the experience of pain.”

Though it sounds more sophisticated, a lot of the neurology in this latter claim is still either false or fuzzy. The human cerebral cortex is the brain-part that deals with higher faculties like reason, metaphysical self-awareness, language, etc. Pain reception is known to be part of a much older and more primitive system of nociceptors and prostaglandins that are managed by the brain stem and thalamus.**12** On the other hand, it is true that the cerebral cortex is involved in what’s variously called suffering, distress, or the emotional experience of pain—i.e., experiencing painful stimuli as unpleasant, very unpleasant, unbearable, and so on.

Before we go any further, let’s acknowledge that the questions of whether and how different kinds of animals feel pain, and of whether and why it might be justifiable to inflict pain on them in order to eat them, turn out to be extremely complex and difficult. And comparative neuroanatomy is only part of the problem. Since pain is a totally subjective mental experience, we do not have direct access to anyone or anything’s pain but our own; and even just the principles by which we can infer that others experience pain and have a legitimate interest in not feeling pain involve hard-core philosophy—metaphysics, epistemology, value theory, ethics. The fact that even the most highly evolved nonhuman mammals can’t use language to communicate with us about their subjective mental experience is only the first layer of additional complication in trying to extend our reasoning about pain and morality to animals. And everything gets progressively more abstract and convolved as we move farther and farther out from the higher-type mammals into cattle and swine and dogs and cats and rodents, and then birds and fish, and finally invertebrates like lobsters.

The more important point here, though, is that the whole animal-cruelty-and-eating issue is not just complex, it’s also uncomfortable. It is, at any rate, uncomfortable for me, and for just about everyone I know who enjoys a variety of foods and yet does not want to see herself as cruel or unfeeling. As far as I can tell, my own main way of dealing with this conflict has been to avoid thinking about the whole unpleasant thing. I should add that it appears to me unlikely that many readers of gourmet wish to think hard about it, either, or to be queried about the morality of their eating habits in the pages of a culinary monthly. Since, however, the assigned subject of this article is what it was like to attend the 2003 MLF, and thus to spend several days in the midst of a great mass of Americans all eating lobster, and thus to be more or less impelled to think hard about lobster and the experience of buying and eating lobster, it turns out that there is no honest way to avoid certain moral questions.

There are several reasons for this. For one thing, it’s not just that lobsters get boiled alive, it’s that you do it yourself—or at least it’s done specifically for you, on-site.**13** As mentioned, the World’s Largest Lobster Cooker, which is highlighted as an attraction in the Festival’s program, is right out there on the MLF’s north grounds for everyone to see. Try to imagine a Nebraska Beef Festival**14** at which part of the festivities is watching trucks pull up and the live cattle get driven down the ramp and slaughtered right there on the World’s Largest Killing Floor or something—there’s no way.

The intimacy of the whole thing is maximized at home, which of course is where most lobster gets prepared and eaten (although note already the semiconscious euphemism “prepared,” which in the case of lobsters really means killing them right there in our kitchens). The basic scenario is that we come in from the store and make our little preparations like getting the kettle filled and boiling, and then we lift the lobsters out of the bag or whatever retail container they came home in …whereupon some uncomfortable things start to happen. However stuporous the lobster is from the trip home, for instance, it tends to come alarmingly to life when placed in boiling water. If you’re tilting it from a container into the steaming kettle, the lobster will sometimes try to cling to the container’s sides or even to hook its claws over the kettle’s rim like a person trying to keep from going over the edge of a roof. And worse is when the lobster’s fully immersed. Even if you cover the kettle and turn away, you can usually hear the cover rattling and clanking as the lobster tries to push it off. Or the creature’s claws scraping the sides of the kettle as it thrashes around. The lobster, in other words, behaves very much as you or I would behave if we were plunged into boiling water (with the obvious exception of screaming).**15** A blunter way to say this is that the lobster acts as if it’s in terrible pain, causing some cooks to leave the kitchen altogether and to take one of those little lightweight plastic oven timers with them into another room and wait until the whole process is over.

There happen to be two main criteria that most ethicists agree on for determining whether a living creature has the capacity to suffer and so has genuine interests that it may or may not be our moral duty to consider.**16** One is how much of the neurological hardware required for pain-experience the animal comes equipped with—nociceptors, prostaglandins, neuronal opioid receptors, etc. The other criterion is whether the animal demonstrates behavior associated with pain. And it takes a lot of intellectual gymnastics and behaviorist hairsplitting not to see struggling, thrashing, and lid-clattering as just such pain-behavior. According to marine zoologists, it usually takes lobsters between 35 and 45 seconds to die in boiling water. (No source I could find talked about how long it takes them to die in superheated steam; one rather hopes it’s faster.)

There are, of course, other fairly common ways to kill your lobster on-site and so achieve maximum freshness. Some cooks’ practice is to drive a sharp heavy knife point-first into a spot just above the midpoint between the lobster’s eyestalks (more or less where the Third Eye is in human foreheads). This is alleged either to kill the lobster instantly or to render it insensate—and is said at least to eliminate the cowardice involved in throwing a creature into boiling water and then fleeing the room. As far as I can tell from talking to proponents of the knife-in-the-head method, the idea is that it’s more violent but ultimately more merciful, plus that a willingness to exert personal agency and accept responsibility for stabbing the lobster’s head honors the lobster somehow and entitles one to eat it. (There’s often a vague sort of Native American spirituality-of-the-hunt flavor to pro-knife arguments.) But the problem with the knife method is basic biology: Lobsters’ nervous systems operate off not one but several ganglia, a.k.a. nerve bundles, which are sort of wired in series and distributed all along the lobster’s underside, from stem to stern. And disabling only the frontal ganglion does not normally result in quick death or unconsciousness. Another alternative is to put the lobster in cold salt water and then very slowly bring it up to a full boil. Cooks who advocate this method are going mostly on the analogy to a frog, which can supposedly be kept from jumping out of a boiling pot by heating the water incrementally. In order to save a lot of research-summarizing, I’ll simply assure you that the analogy between frogs and lobsters turns out not to hold.

Ultimately, the only certain virtues of the home-lobotomy and slow-heating methods are comparative, because there are even worse/crueler ways people prepare lobster. Time-thrifty cooks sometimes microwave them alive (usually after poking several extra vent holes in the carapace, which is a precaution most shellfish-microwavers learn about the hard way). Live dismemberment, on the other hand, is big in Europe: Some chefs cut the lobster in half before cooking; others like to tear off the claws and tail and toss only these parts in the pot.

And there’s more unhappy news respecting suffering-criterion number one. Lobsters don’t have much in the way of eyesight or hearing, but they do have an exquisite tactile sense, one facilitated by hundreds of thousands of tiny hairs that protrude through their carapace. “Thus,” in the words of T.M. Prudden’s industry classic About Lobster, “it is that although encased in what seems a solid, impenetrable armor, the lobster can receive stimuli and impressions from without as readily as if it possessed a soft and delicate skin.” And lobsters do have nociceptors,**17** as well as invertebrate versions of the prostaglandins and major neurotransmitters via which our own brains register pain.

Lobsters do not, on the other hand, appear to have the equipment for making or absorbing natural opioids like endorphins and enkephalins, which are what more advanced nervous systems use to try to handle intense pain. From this fact, though, one could conclude either that lobsters are maybe evenmore vulnerable to pain, since they lack mammalian nervous systems’ built-in analgesia, or, instead, that the absence of natural opioids implies an absence of the really intense pain-sensations that natural opioids are designed to mitigate. I for one can detect a marked upswing in mood as I contemplate this latter possibility: It could be that their lack of endorphin/enkephalin hardware means that lobsters’ raw subjective experience of pain is so radically different from mammals’ that it may not even deserve the term pain. Perhaps lobsters are more like those frontal-lobotomy patients one reads about who report experiencing pain in a totally different way than you and I. These patients evidently do feel physical pain, neurologically speaking, but don’t dislike it—though neither do they like it; it’s more that they feel it but don’t feel anything about it—the point being that the pain is not distressing to them or something they want to get away from. Maybe lobsters, who are also without frontal lobes, are detached from the neurological-registration-of-injury-or-hazard we call pain in just the same way. There is, after all, a difference between (1) pain as a purely neurological event, and (2) actual suffering, which seems crucially to involve an emotional component, an awareness of pain as unpleasant, as something to fear/dislike/want to avoid.

Still, after all the abstract intellection, there remain the facts of the frantically clanking lid, the pathetic clinging to the edge of the pot. Standing at the stove, it is hard to deny in any meaningful way that this is a living creature experiencing pain and wishing to avoid/escape the painful experience. To my lay mind, the lobster’s behavior in the kettle appears to be the expression of a preference; and it may well be that an ability to form preferences is the decisive criterion for real suffering.**18** The logic of this (preference p suffering) relation may be easiest to see in the negative case. If you cut certain kinds of worms in half, the halves will often keep crawling around and going about their vermiform business as if nothing had happened. When we assert, based on their post-op behavior, that these worms appear not to be suffering, what we’re really saying is that there’s no sign that the worms know anything bad has happened or would prefer not to have gotten cut in half.

Lobsters, however, are known to exhibit preferences. Experiments have shown that they can detect changes of only a degree or two in water temperature; one reason for their complex migratory cycles (which can often cover 100-plus miles a year) is to pursue the temperatures they like best.**19** And, as mentioned, they’re bottom-dwellers and do not like bright light: If a tank of food lobsters is out in the sunlight or a store’s fluorescence, the lobsters will always congregate in whatever part is darkest. Fairly solitary in the ocean, they also clearly dislike the crowding that’s part of their captivity in tanks, since (as also mentioned) one reason why lobsters’ claws are banded on capture is to keep them from attacking one another under the stress of close-quarter storage.

In any event, at the Festival, standing by the bubbling tanks outside the World’s Largest Lobster Cooker, watching the fresh-caught lobsters pile over one another, wave their hobbled claws impotently, huddle in the rear corners, or scrabble frantically back from the glass as you approach, it is difficult not to sense that they’re unhappy, or frightened, even if it’s some rudimentary version of these feelings …and, again, why does rudimentariness even enter into it? Why is a primitive, inarticulate form of suffering less urgent or uncomfortable for the person who’s helping to inflict it by paying for the food it results in? I’m not trying to give you a PETA-like screed here—at least I don’t think so. I’m trying, rather, to work out and articulate some of the troubling questions that arise amid all the laughter and saltation and community pride of the Maine Lobster Festival. The truth is that if you, the Festival attendee, permit yourself to think that lobsters can suffer and would rather not, the MLF can begin to take on aspects of something like a Roman circus or medieval torture-fest.

Does that comparison seem a bit much? If so, exactly why? Or what about this one: Is it not possible that future generations will regard our own present agribusiness and eating practices in much the same way we now view Nero’s entertainments or Aztec sacrifices? My own immediate reaction is that such a comparison is hysterical, extreme—and yet the reason it seems extreme to me appears to be that I believe animals are less morally important than human beings;**20** and when it comes to defending such a belief, even to myself, I have to acknowledge that (a) I have an obvious selfish interest in this belief, since I like to eat certain kinds of animals and want to be able to keep doing it, and (b) I have not succeeded in working out any sort of personal ethical system in which the belief is truly defensible instead of just selfishly convenient.

Given this article’s venue and my own lack of culinary sophistication, I’m curious about whether the reader can identify with any of these reactions and acknowledgments and discomforts. I am also concerned not to come off as shrill or preachy when what I really am is confused. Given the (possible) moral status and (very possible) physical suffering of the animals involved, what ethical convictions do gourmets evolve that allow them not just to eat but to savor and enjoy flesh-based viands (since of course refined enjoyment, rather than just ingestion, is the whole point of gastronomy)? And for those gourmets who’ll have no truck with convictions or rationales and who regard stuff like the previous paragraph as just so much pointless navel-gazing, what makes it feel okay, inside, to dismiss the whole issue out of hand? That is, is their refusal to think about any of this the product of actual thought, or is it just that they don’t want to think about it? Do they ever think about their reluctance to think about it? After all, isn’t being extra aware and attentive and thoughtful about one’s food and its overall context part of what distinguishes a real gourmet? Or is all the gourmet’s extra attention and sensibility just supposed to be aesthetic, gustatory?

These last couple queries, though, while sincere, obviously involve much larger and more abstract questions about the connections (if any) between aesthetics and morality, and these questions lead straightaway into such deep and treacherous waters that it’s probably best to stop the public discussion right here. There are limits to what even interested persons can ask of each other.

### FOOTNOTES:

**1** There’s a comprehensive native apothegm: “Camden by the sea, Rockland by the smell.”

**2** N.B. All personally connected parties have made it clear from the start that they do not want to be talked about in this article.

**3** Midcoasters’ native term for a lobster is, in fact, “bug,” as in “Come around on Sunday and we’ll cook up some bugs.”

**4** Factoid: Lobster traps are usually baited with dead herring.

**5** Of course, the common practice of dipping the lobster meat in melted butter torpedoes all these happy fat-specs, which none of the Council’s promotional stuff ever mentions, any more than potato-industry PR talks about sour cream and bacon bits.

**6** In truth, there’s a great deal to be said about the differences between working-class Rockland and the heavily populist flavor of its Festival versus comfortable and elitist Camden with its expensive view and shops given entirely over to $200 sweaters and great rows of Victorian homes converted to upscale B&Bs. And about these differences as two sides of the great coin that is U.S. tourism. Very little of which will be said here, except to amplify the above-mentioned paradox and to reveal your assigned correspondent’s own preferences. I confess that I have never understood why so many people’s idea of a fun vacation is to don flip-flops and sunglasses and crawl through maddening traffic to loud hot crowded tourist venues in order to sample a “local flavor” that is by definition ruined by the presence of tourists. This may (as my Festival companions keep pointing out) all be a matter of personality and hardwired taste: The fact that I just do not like tourist venues means that I’ll never understand their appeal and so am probably not the one to talk about it (the supposed appeal). But, since this note will almost surely not survive magazine-editing anyway, here goes:

As I see it, it probably really is good for the soul to be a tourist, even if it’s only once in a while. Not good for the soul in a refreshing or enlivening way, though, but rather in a grim, steely-eyed, let’s-look-honestly-at-the-facts-and-find-some-way-to-deal-with-them way. My personal experience has not been that traveling around the country is broadening or relaxing, or that radical changes in place and context have a salutary effect, but rather that intranational tourism is radically constricting, and humbling in the hardest way—hostile to my fantasy of being a real individual, of living somehow outside and above it all. (Coming up is the part that my companions find especially unhappy and repellent, a sure way to spoil the fun of vacation travel:) To be a mass tourist, for me, is to become a pure late-date American: alien, ignorant, greedy for something you cannot ever have, disappointed in a way you can never admit. It is to spoil, by way of sheer ontology, the very unspoiledness you are there to experience. It is to impose yourself on places that in all noneconomic ways would be better, realer, without you. It is, in lines and gridlock and transaction after transaction, to confront a dimension of yourself that is as inescapable as it is painful: As a tourist, you become economically significant but existentially loathsome, an insect on a dead thing.

**7** Datum: In a good year, the U.S. industry produces around 80 million pounds of lobster, and Maine accounts for more than half that total.

**8** N.B. Similar reasoning underlies the practice of what’s termed “debeaking” broiler chickens and brood hens in modern factory farms. Maximum commercial efficiency requires that enormous poultry populations be confined in unnaturally close quarters, under which conditions many birds go crazy and peck one another to death. As a purely observational side-note, be apprised that debeaking is usually an automated process and that the chickens receive no anesthetic. It’s not clear to me whether most gourmet readers know about debeaking, or about related practices like dehorning cattle in commercial feedlots, cropping swine’s tails in factory hog farms to keep psychotically bored neighbors from chewing them off, and so forth. It so happens that your assigned correspondent knew almost nothing about standard meat-industry operations before starting work on this article.

**9** The terminal used to be somebody’s house, for example, and the lost-luggage-reporting room was clearly once a pantry.

**10** It turned out that one Mr. William R. Rivas-Rivas, a high-ranking PETA official out of the group’s Virginia headquarters, was indeed there this year, albeit solo, working the Festival’s main and side entrances on Saturday, August 2, handing out pamphlets and adhesive stickers emblazoned with “Being Boiled Hurts,” which is the tagline in most of PETA’s published material about lobster. I learned that he’d been there only later, when speaking with Mr. Rivas-Rivas on the phone. I’m not sure how we missed seeing him in situ at the Festival, and I can’t see much to do except apologize for the oversight—although it’s also true that Saturday was the day of the big MLF parade through Rockland, which basic journalistic responsibility seemed to require going to (and which, with all due respect, meant that Saturday was maybe not the best day for PETA to work the Harbor Park grounds, especially if it was going to be just one person for one day, since a lot of diehard MLF partisans were off-site watching the parade (which, again with no offense intended, was in truth kind of cheesy and boring, consisting mostly of slow homemade floats and various midcoast people waving at one another, and with an extremely annoying man dressed as Blackbeard ranging up and down the length of the crowd saying “Arrr” over and over and brandishing a plastic sword at people, etc.; plus it rained)).

**11** The short version regarding why we were back at the airport after already arriving the previous night involves lost luggage and a miscommunication about where and what the local National Car Rental franchise was—Dick came out personally to the airport and got us, out of no evident motive but kindness. (He also talked nonstop the entire way, with a very distinctive speaking style that can be described only as manically laconic; the truth is that I now know more about this man than I do about some members of my own family.)

**12** To elaborate by way of example: The common experience of accidentally touching a hot stove and yanking your hand back before you’re even aware that anything’s going on is explained by the fact that many of the processes by which we detect and avoid painful stimuli do not involve the cortex. In the case of the hand and stove, the brain is bypassed altogether; all the important neurochemical action takes place in the spine.

**13** Morality-wise, let’s concede that this cuts both ways. Lobster-eating is at least not abetted by the system of corporate factory farms that produces most beef, pork, and chicken. Because, if nothing else, of the way they’re marketed and packaged for sale, we eat these latter meats without having to consider that they were once conscious, sentient creatures to whom horrible things were done. (N.B. PETA distributes a certain video—the title of which is being omitted as part of the elaborate editorial compromise by which this note appears at all—in which you can see just about everything meat--related you don’t want to see or think about. (N.B.**2**Not that PETA’s any sort of font of unspun truth. Like many partisans in complex moral disputes, the PETA people are -fanatics, and a lot of their rhetoric seems simplistic and self-righteous. Personally, though, I have to say that I found this unnamed video both credible and deeply upsetting.))

**14** Is it significant that “lobster,” “fish,” and “chicken” are our culture’s words for both the animal and the meat, whereas most mammals seem to require euphemisms like “beef” and “pork” that help us separate the meat we eat from the living creature the meat once was? Is this evidence that some kind of deep unease about eating higher animals is endemic enough to show up in English usage, but that the unease diminishes as we move out of the mammalian order? (And is “lamb”/“lamb” the counterexample that sinks the whole theory, or are there special, biblico-historical reasons for that equivalence?)

**15** There’s a relevant populist myth about the high-pitched whistling sound that sometimes issues from a pot of boiling lobster. The sound is really vented steam from the layer of seawater between the lobster’s flesh and its carapace (this is why shedders whistle more than hard-shells), but the pop version has it that the sound is the lobster’s rabbitlike death scream. Lobsters communicate via pheromones in their urine and don’t have anything close to the vocal equipment for screaming, but the myth’s very persistent—which might, once again, point to a low-level cultural unease about the boiling thing.

**16** “Interests” basically means strong and legitimate preferences, which obviously require some degree of consciousness, responsiveness to stimuli, etc. See, for instance, the utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, whose 1974 Animal Liberation is more or less the bible of the modern animal-rights movement: “It would be nonsense to say that it was not in the interests of a stone to be kicked along the road by a schoolboy. A stone does not have interests because it cannot suffer. Nothing that we can do to it could possibly make any difference to its welfare. A mouse, on the other hand, does have an interest in not being kicked along the road, because it will suffer if it is.”

**17** This is the neurological term for special pain receptors that are (according to Jane A. Smith and Kenneth M. Boyd’s Lives in the Balance) “sensitive to potentially damaging extremes of temperature, to mechanical forces, and to chemical substances which are released when body tissues are damaged.”

**18** “Preference” is maybe roughly synonymous with “interest,” but it is a better term for our purposes because it’s less abstractly philosophical—“preference” seems more personal, and it’s the whole idea of a living creature’s personal experience that’s at issue.

**19** Of course, the most common sort of counterargument here would begin by objecting that “like best” is really just a metaphor, and a misleadingly anthropomorphic one at that. The counterarguer would posit that the lobster seeks to maintain a certain optimal ambient temperature out of nothing but unconscious instinct (with a similar explanation for the low-light affinities about to be mentioned in the main text). The thrust of such a counterargument will be that the lobster’s thrashings and clankings in the kettle express not unpreferred pain but involuntary reflexes, like your leg shooting out when the doctor hits your knee. Be advised that there are professional scientists, including many researchers who use animals in experiments, who hold to the view that nonhuman creatures have no real feelings at all, only “behaviors.” Be further advised that this view has a long history that goes all the way back to Descartes, although its modern support comes mostly from behaviorist psychology.

To these what-look-like-pain-are-really-only-reflexes counterarguments, however, there happen to be all sorts of scientific and pro-animal-rights countercounterarguments. And then further attempted rebuttals and redirects, and so on. Suffice to say that both the scientific and the philosophical arguments on either side of the animal-suffering issue are involved, abstruse, technical, often informed by self-interest or ideology, and in the end so totally inconclusive that as a practical matter, in the kitchen or restaurant, it all still seems to come down to individual conscience, going with (no pun) your gut.

**20** Meaning a lot less important, apparently, since the moral comparison here is not the value of one human’s life vs. the value of one animal’s life, but rather the value of one animal’s life vs. the value of one human’s taste for a particular kind of protein. Even the most diehard carniphile will acknowledge that it’s possible to live and eat well without consuming animals.

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