
Don't Just Sit There: Writing as a Polymorphous Perverse Pleasure

Sometimes it's a good thing—like reflecting on the kind of adult you thought you'd become when you were a child, when thinking wasn't yet complicated by knowledge—for a writer to remember what writing felt like back at the beginning.

This is probably most useful to those who were, as I was, resolved to be writers at an early age. I was nine when words began to serve their extraordinary purposes for me: I was lonely and they kept me company, they materialized whenever and wherever I called on them, without an argument or a competitive leer. No one knew or judged how well I did them. This was not jumping in as the two ropes turned and came whipping down like a great moving parenthesis around me and slapped the ground and snarled my feet. This was not trying to connect the broad side of the bat with a ball that got miraculously smaller as it approached the scuff of dirt we called the plate. The words were purely mine at first, a secret transaction between inner and outer, between silence and speech, between what I knew—or *knew* that I knew—and what I didn't recognize as knowing, but that I could bring up like a brimming pail from a deep unlighted well.

What I wrote as a child I wrote for comfort, for invisible power, for the astonished pleasure of the *feel* of the letters—for their look, which was shape and color: every letter had a color for me, *E* yellow-orange and *K* and *P* blue and purple, like shadows on snow, *W* brown; *I* transparent as ice. There was a private ad hoc physics at work in the form those letters took; and sound, the fricatives and glottals and aspirates as satisfying to move around, for me, as tin soldiers or matchbox cars for someone who liked to wage different kinds of fantasy wars. This was a time of polymorphous perverse pleasure in language, with no end outside the moment, no end outside myself.

So I wrote murder mysteries: My first, whose plot (because even then I was no good at plotting) lifted in part from a Sherlock Holmes Classic Comic, was called "Murder Stalks at Midnight," which I thought marvelously original until my brother, a musician, showed me a record—Ray McKinley or Lionel Hampton, I can't remember whose—called "Celery Stalks at Midnight." I enacted dreams beyond achieving, namely ownership of a black horse with a perfect white star on its forehead, and a stint at boarding school with girls whose names—Ashley du Lac and Cynthia Weatheringham—came from the trickle-down of debutante lists I'd seen in the newspaper and English gothic novels I hadn't read. I wrote rhyming doggerel—"In the wonder-

ful land of Rin-tin-tin.” We lived in Los Angeles at the time, just up the block from Hollywood, but I had never gotten the word that Rin-tin-tin was a *dog*: the sound of the name, its syllables that drummed like rain on the roof, conjured up a misty fantasy kingdom to me, and reality was nothing but intrusion.

But I had entered phase 2 of the writer’s life by then—the power of words deployed on the page for my own delight had inevitably asserted itself in public, in school. Like a talent for numbers, only more ubiquitous, a talent for words will eventually come to someone’s attention, and then, having blown your cover you find you have happened upon a skill that is, as they say, marketable; that can serve to disarm, to amuse, to make itself pragmatically useful in the communal intercourse of children: *You’re* the one who does slogans, news stories, yearbook jingles, class shows, petitions—you’re available and you’re unbeatable at all the odd lots of verbal communication most people lack the grace to execute easily or well. It is, in fact, the area in which, quite possibly, all your panache puddles, and your élan, and whatever other French nouns have never been used in your direction. You’ve got rhythm, you’ve got dash and dazzle, you’ve got a voice that cuts like a sharp beam through the fogs of verbal confusion, you’ve got something almost like a sixth sense about organization and metaphor that operates somewhere between your tongue and your hand, that is not quite art, not yet, but (unless you abandon it, and even then it’s persistent) will someday perhaps *become* art.

I was recently reading a 1934 essay by E. B. White about the St. Nicholas League, a group of children across America “who wrote poems and prose, took snapshots with box cameras, drew pictures at random and solved puzzles.” They submitted the results of their fervor, White wrote, to the League, which was a permanent competition sponsored by *St. Nicholas Magazine*, and the lucky winners pocketed the Gold or the Silver Badge of extreme merit: this was clearly the point at which the young artists-in-potentia had reached phase 2, the moment at which they realized their secret ardor could buy them respect or even local fame. “We were an industrious and fiendishly competitive band of tots,” White says. “And if some of us, in the intervening years of careless living, have lost or mislaid our silver badge, we still remember the day it came in the mail: the intensity of victory, the sweetness of young fame. . . .” In the first few years of this century Edna St. Vincent Millay won all the trophies the judges had to give; Robert Benchley and Elinor Wylie excelled at drawing, Conrad Aiken and Babette Deutsch wrote poems. Ring Lardner won his laurels for verse and puzzles. Cornelia Otis Skinner wrote a poem; Janet Flanner, famous later for her essays dispatched from Paris, won for a drawing, and Vita Sackville-West sent a rather immodest, though matter-of-fact, little essay about the house she lived in, which had once belonged to Queen Elizabeth—that’s the first Queen Elizabeth—and possessed 365 rooms, fifty-two staircases and an altar in the chapel that was given by Mary Queen of Scots before she was executed. A huge number of the contributors to the magazine have familiar names, though they may not be so to this generation of readers. Most of them put those as-yet-unnotable names on record in the great access of non-specific energy of creative children—they were talented at just about everything solitary and crafty and made of ink, undoubtedly the kinds of children whose mothers tried to get

them outside on sunny days to play with the kids on the block. Half a century later I recognized the loose rules of the club: had it still been around, surely I'd have wanted to join it.

But to return to ourselves. Phase 3 in the life of the young writer-to-be commences when your academic essays begin to bring home superlatives. Your teacher has her eye on you. You write without outlines, your ideas just line up in neat formation, at times the elegance of your style is a camouflage under which huddle insufficiencies of fact and comprehension and you write a paper on an economic theory you don't understand or an analysis of *The Golden Bowl* which you actually didn't finish reading *but it doesn't show*, and you get an A, and then you do a book report that debones an inferior author and holds his little spine up before the class to be laughed at for its puniness and insufficiency and you realize, a little sheepishly, that this thing you drive has a lot more power than the family car you're not yet allowed to take out alone and, if you're decent and honest, you'd better be careful with it.

Unless you are unnaturally shy and not academically and personally ambitious and you keep this skill hidden like a weapon, then you become the quasi-public commodity called the Class Writer. Your secret pleasure, like a terrific voice or face or even body, has become negotiable currency.

There is one thing I want to say about all this writing, the small child's innocent self-delighting scrawl and the cynical college student's paper on the Regressive Tax and Its Effects on the National Debt: they were committed to paper, all of them, but especially the child's, when as a writer walking among ideas and stories and characters and themes, you would take all comers. You had no commitment to a style, to an attitude and—least of all—to a genre. At nine, like the versatile members of the St. Nicholas League, I was not a poet or a short story writer or, God forbid, a novelist. (Though at twelve I admit I delivered up in three secretarial notebooks a huge opus about Mickey Mantle, in which Mickey was Mickey but I was his pre-liberation love, a pony-tailed, saddle-shoed fan who had broken through the membrane of his fame like a girl leaping out of a cake and, having brought myself flamboyantly to his attention, now reaped the reward of his grateful love. "With you I can be just plain *me* again," he said as he took me in his muscular arms. I repeat, this writing business brought a lot of power in its wake. Illusory power but satisfying nonetheless.)

One of the things that separates the child writer, whose only interest is in pleasurable discovery, from the adult, aside from our entry into the lists of competition, of the need for mastery, for patience and energy and for an outside source of income, is that most writers have, like kids on the ball field, chosen up sides. Give or take a shockingly small number of writers, most of us are poets or fiction writers, sub-species short story writers or novelists or playwrights. With the hard-won expertise that allows us to do only one thing well, and that if we're lucky, has come a sort of tightness of the muscles that makes it hard and maybe even makes it feel unnecessary to adapt from one form to another, and I think it's a shame and a loss.

Because with versatility come a lot of benefits, chief of which is a constant openness to possibility and its sister, serendipity. To revert to my first love, Mickey Mantle, you can face a lot more pitchers comfortably and go for a lot more kinds of pitches if you

can swing from both sides. You stay closer to a memory of the sources of your writing, the sheer improvisatory joy of it, if you can remember that first you were writing the way you swam or sang or roller-skated, just because it felt good to do so.

Let me assume some of you know all this and are now, or are getting ready to be, working in more than one genre. Let me assume the rest of you have to be coerced. Here is a miscellany of observations, caveats, threats, promises and speculations arranged for you by the writer who made the list of the best and worst post-office kissers in fifth grade, the official grievances of a seventh grade class abused by a malicious teacher, and, latterly, of questions I *really* wanted to see answered by my college class for our 30th reunion. I have never given up my love of lists: I even published a story called “All This” that dumps out the contents of a particular woman’s mind as if it were her purse overturned on a desktop. I recommend the form to you. Here are the confessions and caveats of a switch-hitter.

1. Steal from yourself. Cannibalize your own work. Handel stole from himself constantly: you aren’t given so many terrific melodies that you can afford to waste any. If you have been writing out of an obsessive interest in something, say in the form of poems—I remember, for example, a spell of guilty motherhood, full of fears and doubts—do not hesitate to use those poems somewhat but not wholly altered in a prose piece, in a story or a pastiche of prose and poetry that makes its own rules. My own witch-mother poems surfaced, revised, in a story about a hyperactive child who was nothing like my own; thus they were considerably distanced by the time they found their most effective setting. But their rhythm was compact, their imagery arresting. Their intensity, in other words, was a poet’s, not a prose writer’s, and what they enriched was not story but an interior landscape. It is a fact that sounds more cynical than it is that a so-so-line of poetry, journeyman stuff, can make a lovely line of prose. It is a fact, however sad, that readers do not expect prose to be “written”—by which I mean *wrought*, with an attention to sound, to syllabic weight and echo, to varying sentence-length and phrase-length which are the fundamentals in the armament of poetry. You also have at your disposal, as a poet, an appreciation for silences, ellipses, leaps in the narrative, and a talent for compression that can make an interestingly spare superstructure for certain kinds of prose. E.L. Doctorow, discussing his impatience with the realistic novel, quotes Marcel Duchamp at a point when he seemed to have given up painting. “Someone said, ‘Marcel, why have you stopped painting?’ and he said ‘Because too much of it was ‘filling in.’” If you can play fast and loose with the rhythms and strategies of another genre you will be that much less likely to spend your time filling in or, as Virginia Woolf called it, padding out your work with the “cotton-batting” of everyday activity.

I recently came upon two references in Raymond Carver’s miscellany *Fires* to the basic situation in his well-known story “Why Won’t You Dance?” That story begins: “In the kitchen, he poured another drink and looked at the bedroom suite in his front yard. The mattress was stripped and the candy-striped sheets lay beside two pillows on the chiffonier. Except for that, things looked much the way they had in the bedroom—nightstand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, nightstand and reading lamp on her side.” In *Fires*, there is a poem called “Distress Sale”:

Early one Saturday morning everything outside—
the child's canopy bed and vanity table,
the sofa, end tables and lamps, boxes
of assorted book and records. We carried out
kitchen items, a clock radio, hanging
clothes, a big easy chair
with them from the beginning
and which they called Uncle.
Lastly, we brought out the kitchen table itself
and they set up around that to do business . . .
I slept on that canopy bed last night. . . .

In the same book, in his interview with the *Paris Review*, Carver tells this story, or rather anecdote: “I was visiting some writer friends in Missoula back in the mid-70s. We were all sitting around drinking and someone told a story about a barmaid named Linda who got drunk with her boyfriend one night and decided to move all of her bedroom furnishings into the backyard. They did it, too, right down to the carpet and the bedroom lamp, the bed, the nightstand, everything. There were about four or five writers in the room, and after the guy finished telling the story, someone said, ‘Well, who’s going to write it?’ I don’t know who else might have written it, but I wrote it. Not then, but later. About four or five years later, I think.” And wrote it, apparently—this is me, not Carver—as a poem, not a particularly noteworthy one but as evidence of the idea in process, working at him, before it became one of his most characteristic stories of suppressed hostility and loss, the kind that is almost a play, all that furniture on the sidewalk a little clot of props, oddly, almost luridly back-lit, set up in isolation on what feels like a stage facing an audience of tranced onlookers.

Writers are, as this might illustrate, a peculiar hybrid: we are half obsessives who can’t get those melodies out of our heads, and half—to change the metaphor mid-sentence—half frugal housewives, practical cooks and seamstresses who will find a way to use a turnip or carrot or leftover end of meat to make a stew or cotton to sew a pillow-cover rather than let it go to waste. Just as every experience is useful to a writer, joy and misery included, so is every intuition of a useable situation if you’ve got the craft to bend it to your will. It’s worth checking our pockets from time to time to see what’s lurking in the corners, still to be aired and used. And it’s necessary to be comfortable in many genres so that we don’t have to pass on it, let it go, or give it away to someone else.

I remember when I was a young writer, a poet and nothing but a poet, and I lived in Mississippi in the mid-60s—exciting times. Quite frequently something fascinating would happen, either violent or contradictory or otherwise too complex for the kind of poetry I knew how to write. And I would utter, without recognizing its stupidity and lack of resourcefulness, the most helpless of all sentences: “If only I knew how to write stories”—and sigh and pass up a priceless opportunity because I thought I had a license that limited me to poetry, like the code on my driver’s license that allowed me a car but specifically forbade me to drive a motorcycle.

2. If you have written something you like and it doesn’t work in its original form, you are hereby enjoined to borrow or invent a form to contain it. Play fast and loose

with definitions and categories. We write in an age that has lost a lot of the old comforts and courtesies of form but what we have in their place is a wonderfully fluid, fanciful sense of form that makes few rigid demands of us. Consider books like Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines*, poetry like Frank Bidart's monologues, Phillip Lopate's personal essays that read like fiction, Max Frisch's unique series of notations in *Man in the Holocene*, including many from the encyclopedia; pseudo-historical fiction like Doctorow's *Ragtime* or *Billy Bathgate*. The list of works that use old forms with new license is endless. My own first book of prose, the stories in *Street Games*, began as a set of vignettes which I published as what I thought of as an essay called "Mainlanders." The magazine in which the essay appeared forgot, that quarter, to differentiate in their index between fiction and essays, and the story won third in the *O. Henry Prize Stories for 1973*. I didn't argue. Instead I went on to take apart the pieces of "Mainlanders" and make them into fuller, more conventional stories; add new ones to the mix, and there was a whole book of interrelated narratives. Back to my first rule: steal from yourself relentlessly.

Another time I sent around a story I was calling "Justice of the Peace" that concerned a woman I knew in Mississippi in the mid-60s who had tried to become the first black justice of the peace of her little Delta town. (This is a woman—my daughter's godmother, in fact—who makes appearances, though in different situations and different language, in a poem I wrote in the 60s and a novel I wrote in the 80s.) But in the case of the story, it was not being published and, I suspected, it was not being read with an appreciation for its tone, which, though it wasn't exactly didactic, might have been called exemplary: it was an angry little tale about small town politics, jealousy, vote-buying and the defeat of modest ideals—half politics, half art. In frustration, to clarify its intent, I renamed it (re-aimed it, in a sense) "Justice of the Peace: An Essay in the Form of a Story" and immediately sold it to a good little magazine. I could almost hear *those* readers saying "Ohh, in *that* case. . . ."

3. Ask yourself nery questions, such as: Must I really use this hunk of subject matter, or this intriguing character, or this haunting atmosphere or glimmer of emotional insight *whole*, or might I use a slice or a chip of it, cast it in a form that can absorb it or enlarge it, shrink it, spaces, blanks, unknowns and all? Let me give you some examples by way of elucidation. One is the suite of poems. Take Margaret Atwood's *Journals of Susannah Moody* or Ruth Whitman's *A Woman's Journey*, her poems about Tamsen Donner and the Donner party, or her recent book of poems about the World War Two resistance martyr Hannah Senesh. Or Carole Oles's booklength poem *Nighwatches*, which introduces us to the astronomer Maria Mitchell. What is gained and what lost that these are not full prose biographies? That, of course, is not where their authors' talents or interests lie, they aren't researchers or scholars. Whitman, I know, actually travelled the path of the Donner party to its ill-fated end of the road en route to California, and she went to Israel and to Hungary to meet the family of Senesh: treated her subject, in other words, with the fullness of attention that might have issued in a factual book. But she wanted to distill an essence other than factual from all that study, and especially in the Tamsen Donner poems she has made a moving elegy, part specific, part generic, to a woman who, in a very different time in America, did what she had to do, and died of it.

I have two instances of my own which I think are instructive for those who are saying, But why? If you write prose, why turn to poetry? For the first few years after I moved to New Hampshire I had promised myself that I'd write about a neighbor born and raised right on our small town road. She was a good friend who fascinated me partly for her differentness from anyone I'd known growing up, and I thought I'd write something about the two of us, contrasting neighbors. But, blessedly, I had to come to terms with how little I really knew about her life—knew of its dark close-up places—and, lacking a story I wanted to tell, how little I could find to say about that life. What I really wanted was not exhaustive but rather a glancing impression. Not a superficial one but not a fully circumstantial one either. My friend was worth more than a single glimpse to me. Thus *Cora Fry*, eighty-four spare little syllabic poems that work like a mosaic to compose a modest life out of tiny pieces of experience. There is as much missing here as there is present, as much empty space as there is speech. But a picture emerges and even a bit of a story that illuminates the character. My challenge, especially because it came after I'd finished my first very wordy novel, was to see how few words I could use in the composition of that face and figure, town and time. I could not have done that in any prose I know.

A corollary to command 3: Find a form to contain the little you know without lying. Prose fiction, especially the novel, but even the story, is an accretion of fact, knowledge, insight, observation. Poetry can be a quick hit, a fast high, a light touch. I was in the Soviet Union for a short while a few years ago; I wouldn't have *dared* make fiction or even an essay out of that trip, but ah, my pathetic pallet of a bed in a once-grand hotel in Leningrad yielded a poem, and so did my confrontation with the ghost of Anna Karenina beside the train track, and so did dozens of other small moments, experiences, visions and the dreams they engendered. Taken together they work like mirrors to expand and reflect an experience too meager and, really, too incoherent to make lucid statements, let alone characters.

If you, a fiction writer, are not prepared to make a set of poems out of your stalled novel, have you considered any of the other “odd lots and broken sizes” of form that are, these days, so enticingly available to you? In his small book *Little Lives*, Richard Elman, writing under the name Spuyker, composed a whole small town, like a prose-bound Edgar Lee Masters, as a cemetery full of ghosts speaking their audacious headstones. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, the British novelist Julian Barnes creates a character, a doctor named Geoffrey Braithwaite, who deconstructs Flaubert's life with an attention to fact and probability so obsessive and inventive that he traces every clue *ad absurdum*—for one example, the effect of railway travel on Flaubert's affair with Louise Colet. Braithwaite includes a short Dictionary of Accepted Ideas to parallel Flaubert's own, thus reminding us that the “father of Realism” had a few playful bones in his own staid body. Barnes has invented, or at least made use of, a form halfway between biography and anti-biography—if there's such a thing as the anti-novel there ought to be anti-biography—that reminds us in turn of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, which played fast and loose with poetic form as serio-comic case history.

A second corollary: If it begins to feel too easy to do something, change forms. Make yourself an amateur in a new genre. Professionalism is something we want in

airplane pilots and plumbers. But writers should always be doing something new and therefore dangerous, putting their feet down carefully the first time, feeling themselves walking over an abyss, or leaping into space without any idea where they'll come down.

A few years ago I ran headlong into a story—I should say a plot—that was so perfect I felt as if I'd already written the novel about it. So I'm writing a play to surprise myself. Half the play—the only half I've written—was performed in Houston. There was an audience there right before my eyes. There were actors who couldn't say certain lines and sound human. There was a whole new conception of acceptable, not to say engaging, action. The old virtues would not serve. Good conversation wasn't enough, in fact it was a blight because, contrary to a lot of people's understanding, conversation is not what theater is about. I learned so much so fast about play-making my teeth ached. I may turn out a good play, more likely I'll turn out a bad one, but I won't feel that I've danced the same old steps, which would have been the novel which was coming to me pre-shrunk to fit the idea, and prematurely softened up, like stone-washed jeans.

4. When you've worked for a long time in a long form, your stomach will stretch, or your muscles, or whatever part of your body you care to locate the hard work in. When I'm caught in the intricate and slow-grinding machinery of a novel I begin to long, understandably, for the speed with which a story can be written, the fact that it can be finished during the same calendar year in which I began it. For its streamlined elegance, its canny capacity to do so many things at once. Just before I'd got sprung from my newest novel I looked at a list of Pushcart Prize winners, for which I hadn't been eligible because I'd published nothing that year while the large and deformed body of my novel hulked over me like Quasimodo's shadow, and, deprived of the pleasures of variety and visibility, murmured to myself self-pityingly, "I used to be a writer but now I'm a *novelist*."

But when I was set free to return to those lost lamented forms, I remembered from the last time: they feel puny. They feel inadequate. Eventually, if you blow on them long enough, or read enough good ones by other people, they take on size and vitality again. But it's always hard and you have to expect that. You get used to the slow cumulative movement of the novel, the way your effects gather at their leisure from all the words you've laid down; the structure is broad and carefully articulated; you have flow-charts that tell you how recently certain characters have been heard from and which chapters hang together to make part I or part IV. But the story is bare and time in it rushes by with a hummingbird flash. The play, after a novel, snaps like new elastic—wham. So few words. Nothing on the page, but on the stage space filled with tension, potentiality. You can write four scenes in a morning, a whole act on a good day. Then you can revise on another morning. And when you get onto the stage itself you can wipe another quarter of the words away—superfluous. It isn't any easier to write a play, not one bit, but it certainly is quicker.

Consider, though, how great the odds that as a fiction writer, especially a novelist, plump with narrative flab, you'll never write a really good play: almost none have ever done so. Henry James and Thomas Wolfe wanted more than anything to write

plays. Using those two baggy monsters as examples you might say ruins my argument that we should be conversant with all the available use of words, but in fact it doesn't. It only underlines the fact that, without free movement across the borders of genres, all of us could be stuck where we accidentally began. The Israeli novelist A.B. Yehoshua began as a playwright and somewhere along the way realized that he could take the form of the dramatic monologue into the novel with him: thus his two spectacularly interesting books, *The Lover* and *A Late Divorce*, which are almost all confidences, speech to an audience. ("It was the *stage* through which I moved from short stories to the novel," he said in an interview. "I wanted to get out from under the first person, the 'I,' the one character who dominated the short story and move to other characters without putting all the extra stuff around them. I just let them speak, as in a play, and eventually from these speeches came the novel.") Once inside the capacious house of the novel, Yehoshua says it occurred to him that there were other rooms as well. His newest novel, *Molkho*, called *The Fifth Season* in English, is a more formally conventional book. He has walked through a door I am trying to walk out of, each of us in search of the right size and shape of vessel, not so much to contain new matter as to make the old new, thus transforming it for ourselves.

5. In the eyes of others you have something called a Career. Certain people, should you be lucky enough to have them, like your agent or your editor, will hasten to tell you that what you need now for that career is another novel, or another book of the same kind of poems that everyone loved last time. It is very difficult to ignore the practical exhortations of such parental figures in your life, but if you can afford to, you ought to ignore them with a gleeful sense of relief. The voice of responsibility can all too easily shout down the small shaky voice of your originality and your need to find another way, a road you, at least, have not yet traveled. And your need, if necessary, to fail at it.

It doesn't need saying that the world is not set up to honor your as-yet-unfulfilled hopes. It tends to reward what is called a track record, implying that it is all a foot-race with winners, losers and also-rans, and a race with a clock, a race around a narrow unchanging track. Not only is your reputation at stake when you walk off attending to a distant voice, like Ferdinand the Bull who wanted to sit pacifically under a cork tree rather than fight, but every time you ask some foundation or writer's colony or whatever to buy into your uncertain future, of course all they can expect to go on is past work and project description. To answer truthfully at a moment of change would be like a suitor for someone's hand in marriage answering the inevitable question about career prospects by saying "I think I'm going to walk barefoot across America" or "I'm going to spend my time developing a blue rose." We shouldn't be surprised if our patrons are too dismayed simply to hand over the purse full of cash—we are declaring ourselves subject to a master other than nurturance of career, following a vagrant singer into the wild. Sometimes it leads us out the other side resplendent, sometimes we're never heard from again. And so we tend to perjure ourselves and say More of the same.

Needless to say your internal doubts are by far the hardest to deal with: To make yourself an amateur is painful, it is like hitting the keyboard with gloves on. Why

abandon what you do well? Why allow a long interruption in your visible output? Why take the chance, perhaps a long chance, that you'll *become* a good poet or whatever is the new skill needed? Why all this uncertainty? Each writer has to answer the question for herself, himself. But the writing child I was never thought much about habit or ease, and certainly not about career. She thought about how to use the word *cascade* as often as possible, or to find a place for *halcyon*, or wondered why there was no English rhyme for "orange."

6. Have a bag of miscellaneous stop-gap ideas for the days when nothing "important" will come, or when there isn't time for a project with much heft to it. Re-tell old stories, fairy tales, myths, in new forms. Translate; translate from a language you don't know—I've seen fantastic poems bloom from intentional mistranslation. Make a list of all the things you know: how to make fudge, how to give the Heimlich maneuver, how to get from N.Y. to Miami on five dollars. You will have a new respect for all you have mastered and all you might write out of. Make a list of all the things you'd like to know: How many of them can you learn, how many might you fake with a book or two and an on-site visit or a consultation with an expert?

Read Jamaica Kincaid's marvelous little story "Girl," which is essentially a list of the wisdom her mother passed on to her, cynical and insulting, loving and necessary. Can you do the same? Better, can you adapt the idea of the list, with its secret order and shapeliness, to your own obsessions? Write a scene for impossible characters: Biblical. Comic strip. TV anchormen. Government officials. Re-cast one of your stories as a play. Eavesdrop and write it down from memory. Lorrie Moore wrote her wonderful book *Self-Help* as if she were constructing a manual for the proper use of the machinery of our emotions. Lydia Davis, in her odd and beguiling book *Break It Down*, demonstrates how you can create something as unlikely as a murder mystery in the form of a French lesson, in which the newly mastered but rudimentary words end up describing a scene of carnage.

Walk through a graveyard, meeting the people beneath the stones. I did a project with a photographer in which I wrote alternative stories, two apiece, for every suggestive gravestone he had photographed. Collaborate. The most pleasure I've ever had from my writing was a musical I wrote from a children's book. It made writing alone, after all those people who had shared my passion (director, actors, set and costume and lighting designers) the loneliest thing I had ever done.

Take a written line you love or a line you don't understand, someone else's, and write from it. Take a minimalist poem or story and convert it to maximalism, at least in style; fill in the blanks, like a detail of a painting enlarged. Find something old and terrible that you abandoned without hope. Re-cast it, preferably in a different genre. If you've never written a poem, take a list of interesting words— wildflowers, carparts, names of cities in Albania—and arrange them in their best-sounding order, listening to them in juxtaposition. If you've never written a novel, think about it. What would it demand of you to take your favorite, or your least favorite, story and make it into a two-hundred-page book? Would you kill it or cure it?

Unless you are in desperate need of a fallow period, a period of passivity, don't just sit there. Think of your words as molecules in constant movement, hot to cold, cold

to hot. Religious Jews on the sabbath, when they, and presumably the whole universe, are enjoined from doing work, do nothing that will encourage anything to change form. They are not to use hard soap because it becomes bubbles, they are not to make steam or tear paper, any kind, not even toilet paper. They recognize that a change of form entails an exchange of energy. It is work.

But it is also play. It is the best exercise to forestall the hardening postures of middle-age. It raises the adrenalin level. Gabriel García Márquez is possibly the world's most stunning proponent of change and flexibility at the moment. He has just, for example, written six screenplays from his own stories; he likens the imagination to a car battery: "When you leave it inactive," he says, "is when it runs down." One of his directors calls him "an amphibian" who moves easily between the written story and the film. "I have a lot of stories that occur to me," he says casually, "but when I am in the middle of working on them, I realize that they are not suited to literature, that they are more visual. So I have to tell myself that this one is good for a novel, this one for a story, this for a movie and this for television. . . . I'm a story-teller," García Márquez concludes. "It doesn't matter to me if the stories are written, shown on a screen, over television, or passed from mouth to mouth. The important thing is that they be told."

I, who can't tell his kind of story for love or money but who can tell my own kind, agree. Whether essence precedes existence or the other way around I surely can't say. But I know that *words precede the form that contains them*, and all of us, if we want to, can reach elbow-deep into the world of syllables and syntax and pull up a generous handful and arrange it to satisfy ourselves. We can do so exactly as we did when we first learned how to write words down and, in the silence of our own concentration, read them back to ourselves.