David Guy

Experiences of the Void

When I look back on my beginnings as a writer, when I consider the question of what writing really is, I always bring to mind a place called the Pittsburgh Academy of Medicine, a society of physicians which met in a huge ancient house in a rundown part of the city, with an extensive medical library in the basement. My father was an officer in the organization, and had gotten my brother and me summer jobs there, dusting books or watching over the place while the regular librarian—an ex-lawyer and recovering alcoholic named Allen Lynch—was on vacation.

The basement was huge, and filled with the kind of heavy glassed-in wooden bookcases that distinguished houses used to have in the early years of the century. The floor was a creaky hardwood, lined with rubber mats where you were supposed to walk. The building ran down a hill, so there were windows not only in the basement—high wide windows that let in plenty of light—but also in the sub-basement, a dank dark place with a cement floor and stone walls that housed some of the older books and also contained an extensive library on sex. The upper basement was a still, musty, dusty place, hot in the summer and deadly quiet. The mail arrived in the morning—the highlight of the day—and a Latin American doctor came in for a while in the afternoon to study for his boards, but the place wasn't otherwise much used. A whole day might go by without a patron.

I worked there several summers, sometimes with my brother and sometimes alone, but the period I associate with writing was the summer after my father died, when I was 16 and substituting for Mr. Lynch during his six-week vacation. I had to check in the journals as they arrived, and I was supposed to dust all the books and bookshelves in the library (though the dust was so embedded in those old volumes that you could hardly tell the difference, before and after), but I could do an ample job of all that in three or four hours a day and have the rest of the time to myself. I was a solitary studious person, with lots that summer that I wanted to do. It seemed a perfect job for me.

I knew at that age that I wanted to be a writer. I had already read my way through most of Hemingway, and had recently read a biography of Theodore Dreiser that had thrilled and inspired me. I wanted to be a writer like Dreiser, a city writer and an ex-journalist, an iconoclast, who pondered the big questions and fearlessly expressed his unacceptable opinions, who fought the censors all his life and shocked the middle class both by what he wrote and by the way he lived. I was similarly thrilled by his

contemporaries and cohorts, Edgar Lee Masters and Sherwood Anderson, men whom I had learned about in the Dreiser biography and whose books I had subsequently read. They were among the heroic writers in their day who had been brave enough to tell the truth as they saw it, and who subsequently faced the wrath and scorn that is always accorded to truth tellers.

I believed that, in coming to the shabby part of town where the Academy was housed, I was abandoning the protected middle class life I had grown up in and coming to where people really lived. On my way to work in the morning, when the air was still cool—the mid-day heat a veiled threat off in the smoggy sky—I would pass the winos sitting on the stoops of the neighborhood bars, waiting for opening time. At the drugstore where I took my brown bag lunch and drank a coke at the counter, one enormously fat waitress had a glass eye that was slightly askew, so it glanced off crazily at the ceiling, while the other waitress, short and wiry, stumped around behind the counter with a clubfoot. At a large tenement behind the Academy, four floors of the grubby back porches of apartments, a wizened old woman would lean over the railing and dry in the sun her huge head of long witch-like gray hair. The Latin American doctor, middle-aged and balding, got a call every day from his wife and one from another woman; once when that woman called and I told her he had gone, she laughed slyly and provocatively. One afternoon a strangely intense man, sweating profusely and breathing hard, came in and started describing symptoms he'd been having, pains in his back and at his side, asking if I could recommend some books for him to read. I was obviously a teenage kid who knew nothing about medicine, but he kept describing the symptoms in more and more detail, waiting for me to reply. And one day when I was dusting, I looked out our window into the alley and saw a boy masturbating. He was short and thin and poorly dressed, standing behind the building next door, perhaps fifty feet away. He had a huge cock, and was pumping away like crazy. In about half a minute he finished, and stuffed himself back into his pants. I figured he must not have any place to do it at home. A couple of days later, I saw him on the street with a woman whom I assumed to be his mother. She was older than I would have expected, and didn't look especially well. She was holding his arm tightly as they walked.

But these incidents, these striking memories, took place over a period of years, and for the most part I had trouble filling my time. I wanted to write, I wanted desperately to write, I wanted to write about the lives that were revealing themselves all around me—I felt that Dreiser, for instance, could have made a whole novel out of the clubfooted woman—but I couldn't do it. I couldn't imagine the first thing about those lives, and I certainly couldn't think of anything that rounded into a story. I wanted to *see* a story, something I could write up just as it happened. I longed for some new experience in my own life. I dreamed that an attractive woman from the neighborhood would stumble into the building some hot afternoon, looking for a place to sit down; I would get her a glass of water and we would talk for a while about my work at the library; she would find me a little young but so friendly and easy to talk to . . .

Such thoughts turned my mind to that special collection of books downstairs, and I would soon find myself in that dank cool basement, a lightbulb shining from a cord above my head. The hours would fly by down there, while I stood reading Havelock

Ellis and *Psychopatha Sexualis* and an absolutely wonderful book that would have been too short if it had been five times as long and that thrilled me by its very title, *Female Sexual Perversions*. I would fight the urge to masturbate (You can't do that here! You're being paid for this time!) but would often give in (I guess I'll take my break now). The excitement that those volumes generated was just too great. One day I did it right there in the basement, hearing my seed fall in little plops on the floor and thinking of that guy I had seen out the window. At that moment I felt like the weirdest guy in that whole weird neighborhood, reading dirty books in the basement and jerking off.

What I believed in those days about writing was that somehow—through some process I didn't understand but was desperate to discover—you became a writer. A writer was a person of extraordinary vision, who would have looked at that club-footed woman and seen into her very soul, would have known what she hoped and dreamed and what kind of apartment she lived in and what she did when she went home (she listened to the radio and had her favorite supper of Campbell's Cream of Tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich, which she liked slightly burnt, and once a week—her special treat!—an eclair from the bakery; then she would say her rosary and go to bed). A writer could easily write about those things, in sentences that were gracefully formed and paragraphs that fit together like bricks in a wall.

If someone had told me when I was 16 that writing would always be the same for me as it was then, that I would always begin with no idea of what I wanted to say, fear in my heart and an ache of dread in my stomach; that my sentences would always seem clumsy and amateurish and would require hours of work before I thought them even presentable; that I would never think I was possessed of an extraordinary vision, never think I knew any more about people than anybody else; that I would always think I hadn't lived enough, that life was *out there* while I was in here trying to write about it; that I would never feel competent and on top of things, I would always be bothered by sexual fantasies, I would sit down to write fighting feelings of boredom, distraction, and a steadily creeping despair; if someone had told me all that when I was 16 I would have risen from my chair and shouted No! There *is* such a thing as a writer. Dreiser was a writer, and Masters and Anderson and Hemingway. Someday *I* will be a writer, and I will know what to write; I won't sit here feeling lazy and stupid and inadequate. I know what I want and I know that I'm going to find it. I want to love and be loved! I want to live! I want to be a writer!

II.

Fifteen years later, in 1980, I was living in a large house on a quiet street near Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. It was actually an eleven-room house, with three bedrooms upstairs, though I was living in it with just my wife and my six-year-old son. For various reasons—but largely, I'm sure, because the place was in terrible shape, with sagging floors and ancient plumbing and holes in the plaster—the rent was dirt cheap. We lived on the first floor and didn't use the second floor at all, to save on heating, except that I did use one of the second floor rooms for writing. One

of the major reasons we had moved to that house was that it had such a room; for the two years before that, I had gone off to the university library to write, my legal pad strapped to the back of my bicycle. Now I had a room to write in, though I had to take a space heater up there in the winter, and wear a heavy sweater, and drape a blanket across my legs. Sometimes I could see my breath in the air.

I was 31 at that point, and though I'd been writing steadily since my college years, I still hadn't published any fiction. I had published two or three short essays, and was doing book reviews regularly for a local magazine, but I had made virtually no money from my writing. In the afternoons I worked at the library, and my wife had a weekend job at a greenhouse, so one of us could be with our son all the time. Added together, we made a meager but adequate salary. More important to both of us was the fact that we were doing what we wanted.

In the six years following my graduation from college, during which I had taught full-time at a secondary school, I had written some twenty stories, most of which I had circulated, and one novel, which had made the rounds of publishing houses for a couple of years. In a kind of nervous breakdown after the first rejections of my novel, I had decided to quit teaching and devote myself to what I wanted to do most in the world; I would make money at something that was less emotionally demanding and that gave me more time to write. In the years since that decision I had written a second novel—about a boy who had set out to prove himself to his father, and to the world, by playing football—which had been taken by an agent but had circulated for a year without finding a publisher. At the end of that year an editor at a small house told me she would give me a contract on the book if I would agree to rewrite it, shifting the novel away from its emphasis on sports and making it focus on the relationship between the father and son, where she felt the real story lay. That, she said—rather glibly, it seemed to me—would add about 150 pages to the manuscript.

The idea of revising a novel in such a wholesale fashion was new to me. I was trying to be an artist; I believed that a book grew organically and that its structure, however awkward and flawed, was as much a part of it as its characters. To speak of revamping the structure was to speak not of revising this book but of writing an entirely new one. I considered the editor who would make such a suggestion a dangerous lunatic.

But the depression I experienced after turning down her offer was one of the worst I'd ever gone through. One Saturday morning, while my son was watching cartoons—not a normal workday for me—I decided that I couldn't make my depression any worse, so I went up to my study to sketch out an outline and see what this book looked like. I didn't do much—just put the old events in chronological order and sketched in some likely new ones—but I was astonished by what I saw. I still wasn't willing to admit that the book I'd written wasn't good, but I could see that this new one was incomparably better. I had the feeling I'd often had when I thought of a story or novel, the feeling I'd been having for years (and that, in light of the way my life had gone, could seem a fatal feeling): I wanted to write this book. Furthermore, in some peculiar way—though someone else had gotten the idea for the restructuring—this new book seemed to be mine; the plot was mine and the characters were mine; the book seemed to be mine before I had written it. I felt now that I didn't

want the old version to be published even if someone wanted it. I wanted to write this new book.

Once I had made this decision, there was a comedy of errors of delays, but within a few months I had submitted my outline to the publisher—the same little outline I had sketched out that Saturday morning—and signed a contract. Immediately there was talk of a publication date and of catalog copy; the deadline my publisher assigned me was a tight one. I'd had some choice in that, but what my editor told me was that if I didn't accept a fall date they didn't know when they would schedule the book, and the idea of an actual publication date, after all my years of not getting into print, was irresistible. I went up to my study every morning with all kinds of feelings boiling around in my chest, excitement and hope and vague disbelief and fear. The whole thing was not what you would call a happy experience, but it was an extremely intense one. The art that I'd practiced for years by myself was about to include a public.

But one morning I went up to my study and was stumped. I'd written my outline months before, scrawling down scenes that seemed likely; I'd stitched up old sections with new ones and created chapters that I thought went together remarkably well. But now I'd come to an event in the outline that I didn't remember. It seemed integral to the plot, connecting two other episodes, but I couldn't remember what I'd been thinking when I wrote it. I should have written a more detailed treatment at the time. I'd been afraid something like this would happen. The more I looked at those words in the outline, the less sense they made to me.

That moment, of course, echoed many moments in my past, especially from that summer when I was 16 and sat in the Pittsburgh Academy of Medicine trying to think up stories. I felt a similar sense of frustration and inadequacy. I also, at that point, felt like an imposter. I had just signed a contract for a book when I obviously didn't know how to write. A real writer, I felt sure, would have known what his characters would do. I couldn't believe I'd gotten away with this. I had swindled the publisher, and the only thing left to do was to return the advance.

The difference between that moment and those days when I was 16 was that I now had behind me years of what the world calls failure, before me the opportunity of a lifetime. I was staring into the old familiar void with the familiar feeling of emptiness, but my thoughts around that feeling had changed. (I don't think I had yet decided there was no such thing as a real writer, but I was beginning to think that I would never be one, that I would always write with the same feelings I'd had when I was 16.) At 31, with a couple of serious periods of depression behind me and a collection of rejection slips that could have papered the walls of my study, failure seemed more than just a possibility. I knew the taste of it. And I was beginning to see that the future had a limit, if only because I couldn't take too much more depression.

I didn't have time to wallow in those feelings. I had a deadline, and I had to produce a fair amount of writing every day. I knew my characters, of course. I knew my setting. I allowed myself—as I had learned through the years—to sink into the mood of the scene, the crisp autumn air, the late afternoon sunlight, the smell of burning leaves drifting up over the hill, the hollow thump of a ball being kicked at the other end of the field, the clumsy constricted feeling of shoulder pads chafing at my neck. I wrote

one sentence that was true to what I was seeing. That sentence led rather naturally to another. I was sitting at my desk with enormous energy, the kind of energy that can be made up of various things, but that seemed at that point about ninety percent desperation. The second sentence led to a third.

I was later to think of that as one of my favorite chapters.

III.

Our story moves ahead another eight years. I have moved to a much smaller house on another quiet street. I have published three novels, a number of essays and articles, scores of book reviews. I am scratching along making a living—not a handsome living, but an adequate one—as a writer. I have no other job. I spend a long morning writing, then go out and run some errands, shop for food. Always at some point in the afternoon I get some exercise. I generally spend my evenings reading.

In what is known as my personal life (there is no such thing. No part of our lives is separate from the others, and no part is more personal. Nothing is more personal than writing), things were not going as well. My wife had moved out, and a love affair I'd been having toward the end of my marriage had also ended, abruptly and, I thought, rather cruelly.

I had the reactions one would expect under such circumstances. I was depressed and couldn't sleep. I went through enormous mood swings, terrible rages followed by deep sadness. I was nervous and distracted and had trouble working. But I also had another reaction I had not anticipated. I began to be afraid to be alone at night.

It wasn't as if I had never faced the fact of being alone. Any writer has faced it, both its good and bad sides. (I have also always thought that most writers are people who constitutionally enjoy being alone. They start off being solitaries, then take up writing.) I had faced the question several years before when I'd begun making enough money from writing to quit my part-time job. I knew that quitting my job would give me more time to write (though I wouldn't use all of it); it would make my life less frantic and provide enormous savings in nervous energy. But I would also see almost no human beings during the day, no one until my wife and son came home in the evening.

Now, however, with my wife gone, I was alone nearly all the time. Three days a week my son was with me in the mornings and evenings, but the other days I woke up alone in the morning and went to bed alone at night, and spent the whole day that way if I didn't make other plans. I did fine with that most of the time, but at night, when I had to turn off the lights and get into bed, I got scared. It is hard to say just what I was afraid of. I was afraid, for one thing, that I wouldn't sleep (so naturally I didn't), that I would be awake and alone all night. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to take it. But what was it that I wouldn't be able to take? What was going to drive me crazy?

I have always remembered—and have written about before—a time when I was ten years old and went through a period when I couldn't sleep. I mark that moment as the dawning of a new awareness in my life. I had for some reason begun to think

about the concepts of eternity and infinity, eternal time and infinite space, and the ideas overwhelmed me. It wasn't that I had just heard about them for the first time; it was that I had just begun to ponder them. I would picture myself moving through infinite space, on and on into an endless blackness, with nothing changing. I would try to imagine what it would be like to live eternally, some kind of life—even a perfectly happy one—which I knew would never end. Those ideas terrified me. They crushed me as if that infinite space were infinite weight. In the daytime I could distract myself from thinking about them, but there was nothing at night to keep them away. I would go to my father and talk to him. I remember the feeling of being held by him—my small frightened body in his large warm one—and he would sometimes let me sleep with him. But though he said different things to me, nothing he said really eased my fears. In time, I suppose, I got used to them. They became a part of who I was.

I had certainly slept alone on many nights of my marriage. If my wife had just gone away for a week's vacation, I would rather have enjoyed that kind of being alone. What was bothering me was another kind of being alone: the thought, at the age of 38, that I had no one in the world. I was facing infinite space and eternal time with no one to comfort and protect me. That is our true condition, of course. No embrace protects us from the vast spaces of the empty universe, and, however many people we surround ourselves with, we are all ultimately alone. Most of the time my life had given me the illusion that things were otherwise. But events had conspired at that point to make me see how they really are.

Ultimately, I think, there is no escape from that fear. We try to fill that emptiness with many things—love, sex, romance, friendship, work, food, drink, drugs, religion, art, the life of the mind—but every attempt to fill it involves a certain anxiety, and we all come to moments in our lives when nothing fills the emptiness. We have to accept the fact of it and our terror in the face of it. On those nights after my marriage broke up, when I was afraid of being alone in the dark, it never did any good when I tried to fill the time with books or music. My anxiety lurked behind everything I did. The only thing that did any good was when I faced it. I walked through the rooms of my house and repeated the sad and frightening fact. I am alone. I am alone. I am alone.

Having this experience did give me a new insight into writing, an art which I have practiced now for twenty-five years (after those innocent beginnings) and which often seems a metaphor for life: the problems of writing are the problems of living. I see more clearly what the real difficulty of writing is. Every time you sit down to write, you stare into that same emptiness. The formless void before the world began. You are as profoundly alone in writing as in any activity in the world. No one can help you. You face that emptiness and grow anxious, desperate to fill it, fill it with anything. You want to know what to write, you want to know how to write, you want to know human nature, you want to have had experience, you want to be a real writer, you want to know how to become a writer, you want to go down in the basement and look at the sex books, you wish some woman would come in here and fuck you, you want to get out of this place and live! Inasmuch as you succeed in making any of

these escapes—and all writers make them, all the time—you fail as a writer. But inasmuch as you are able to stare into that blackness with no escape, stare into it and admit that it is empty, an energy springs up (born perhaps of desperation), and the pen starts to move, and—out of the formless void, by some process you don't understand—a new world is born.