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The Eleventh Draft

I didn't set out to be a writer. In chronological order, I wanted to be a baseball player, an explorer, a race car driver, a detective, a movie actor, an artist, and a forest ranger. I was a voracious reader as a child, consuming several books a week. At age ten, I asked the town librarian for a book about baseball and she gave me *Catcher in the Rye*. What I recall most is the shock that writing could be that way—personal, told in an intimate way, about family issues of supreme importance. I never read another book for juveniles.

In grade school, I kept diaries that detailed problems I had with Billy, a neighbor who lived across the creek and was a consummate bully. In Spelling class I wrote stories about battles between two knights—Sir Christophoro and Sir Billyano. Billy beat me in real life, but in the world of fiction, Sir Christophoro always won.

After leaving my native Kentucky, I spent nearly a decade working part-time jobs around the country. My writing was confined to a journal, in which I wrote an average of 30 pages a day. I usually wrote in public—on benches, in buses and trains, in restaurants and bars. It was important that people saw me writing. The perception of strangers granted a feeling of self-worth, an identity as a struggling young writer.

I began collecting photographs of my favorite writers, which I studied carefully. My greatest admiration was reserved for those writers whose faces reflected the most suffering. In my early twenties I felt that I didn't deserve to be a writer due to a lack of genuine experience, and I became grateful for the acne pocks on my jaws and the scar between my eyes. These marks of life lent the illusion of being a writer. I bought a typewriter for two hundred dollars, the most money I'd spent on an item. One day, I removed the mirror from the bathroom and fastened it to the wall above my typewriter. Around the mirror I taped the photographs of my favorite writers. When I sat at the typewriter, my face joined theirs.

If I wasn't writing, I wasn't visible.

Writing is the most difficult task I've ever undertaken, which is perhaps why I do it. For much of my life, I cared about little except the act of writing. Writing taught me to trust myself, which enabled me to trust others. This resulted in marriage, and within a year my wife convinced me to apply to an MFA program. I did so reluctantly, and with no alternative. We'd moved back to Kentucky, where we were living without benefit of plumbing, heat, or jobs. The summer I turned thirty, we borrowed a thousand dollars and headed for Iowa. This decision literally changed my life.

We rented a condemned building near the jail. Daylight showed between the wall and the floor, and the landlord's solution was stapling sheets of plastic to the exterior wall. Our house looked like a giant bread sack. The bedroom ceiling eventually fell in, but Rita and I were happy. The new place had water and a furnace. We'd moved up.

Several years before, while living in Salem, Massachusetts, I enrolled in a Dostoyevsky class through Harvard's continuing education. The class was small. A student assured me that the instructor was a genius. We sat for two hours discussing the first chapter of *Crime and Punishment*, a hundred-page section, which I'd read twice in preparation. I was excited as only a naive country

boy can be who had fought his way out of the Appalachian Mountains and into a Harvard extension program. At the end of class I left without a word to anyone. I was ashamed and embarrassed. Though I had listened carefully, I had no idea what anyone was talking about.

At Iowa, I was fearful of undergoing the same experience. The majority of my classmates held degrees in English, and possessed a unique vocabulary for the analysis and discussion of writing. Many of them were graduates of private schools. Having never taken a writing class, I was intimidated, envious, and terrified. My brain and my interests had always made me feel like an outsider, and slowly I realized that the other students felt the same way. For the first time in my life I was around people like me—devoted to the twin acts of reading and writing. Class, race, and education didn't matter. I'd spent a lifetime learning to conceal my intellect, reign in my vocabulary, and guard my personality. In Iowa I was allowed to be smart. For many years I had taken writing very seriously, but now I took myself seriously as a writer.

A first draft was like a wonderful drug that made me feel good. Revision was the horrible crash. For years I avoided the crash by refusing to revise. In order to generate a first draft, I staked everything on the act of writing. My identity and emotional well-being went into each page, paragraph, sentence, and word. Making a single change was like a surgeon performing a complex procedure on his own heart. I found it impossible.

At Iowa, I overcame this problem by simply starting a new story. Once I was emotionally involved with a fresh piece of writing, I could return to the first one with the necessary distance. It became important to have several stories underway, because work on one was always going badly. I then turned to another until becoming overwhelmed, at which time I worked on a third, and so on. The only rule I had was to complete a first draft before revising. When I switched my focus to another story, I gave the entire manuscript a full revision. To my utter surprise, I began to

accumulate story manuscripts. They were never completed, merely abandoned, a practice I still maintain.

Being among a community of writers granted me permission to write what scared me most—stories about people in Appalachia. These were essentially stories of myself, seen through the magnifying veil of my own experience in the world beyond the hills. After years of wanting to be someone else—an actor, a painter, a ranger—I suddenly realized that people are what they do, not what they want to be. And what I did was confront existence through language. I was no longer someone who wanted desperately to be. I had become someone who simply was—a writer.

The notion of submitting anything to a magazine filled me with terror. A stranger would read my precious words, judge them deficient, and reject them, which meant I was worthless. A poet friend was so astonished by my inaction that he shamed me into sending my stories out. My goal, however, was not publication, which was still too scary a thought. My goal was a hundred rejections in a year.

I mailed my stories in multiple submissions and waited eagerly for their return, which they promptly did. Each rejection brought me that much closer to my goal—a cause for celebration, rather than depression. Eventually disaster struck. The *Coe Review* published my first story in spring 1990. The magazine was in the small industrial town of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, with a circulation that barely surpassed the city limits. The payment was one copy of the magazine, and the editor spelled my name wrong. Nevertheless, I felt valid in every way—I was no longer a hillbilly with a pencil full of dreams. I was a real live writer.

The second year of school, I doubled my efforts—more discipline, more work, digging more deeply into my own life. We moved into a tiny house with a basement that was only accessible through a tornado hatch outside. I installed a plywood floor and a wall. Each morning I went outside, lifted the heavy door that was

flat to the ground, and descended into my imagination. The light was dim, the walls were close, and the ceiling low. At day's end I emerged from the earth, squinting like a mole.

My process of writing had developed until I preferred the act of revision to first draft. I printed a story and made all my changes on paper. I then inserted those changes into the computer and printed it. My files were meticulous. Each draft was numbered and dated, and I kept them in chronological order. Often I went back to previous drafts, seeking a remembered line that I'd cut along with a paragraph. Occasionally I resurrected entire scenes that I'd trimmed.

The move to revision became so complete that I no longer cared about the story as product. What mattered was the evolution of the act of creation. I spent many joyful hours simply shifting material from one narrative to another, gauging the success of the integration, attempting greater risks on the page. Plot was a loose form I could rely on in the same way that poets might utilize a sonnet or villanelle.

The more I worked, the more I understood that a writer never really stops writing. Leaving my basement didn't end the process. I continued to write in my head. My relationship with the world was one of narrative, and I engaged life eagerly while simultaneously keeping a segment of my mind detached to notice sensory detail. My pockets filled with scraps of paper that held description of light and land, snippets of conversation, and observation of character. In my basement I organized the notes, typed them under various headings, and kept them close at hand.

My first drafts are very long. The second one is a rapid chop job of all the junk I threw in during the delirium of a first draft. The third revision is workable. I pare the story down and then fatten it up. Subsequent drafts are the same—fat one, thin one, fat one, thin one. The pattern is similar to the action of a bellows—expanding and contracting, forcing oxygen to the fire of narrative. The stories get shorter in length, but thicker in detail. I add and

cut, trying to let the story dictate what it wants. My mind jumps from a ruthless objectivity to an intensely personal interaction with the story and then back to the emotional distance necessary to revision.

An average short story is a result of ten or eleven drafts over a two-year period. The longest is thirty-five versions written during eight years. It's an intensely autobiographical story, both in event and emotional content, with only the ending being written from scratch. The story was originally about my father and me. During the writing, I became a father, and the story shifted gears as my identity changed. The problem was simple—trying to control the actions of the characters. After I let them do what they wanted to do, the story quickly completed itself. I felt as if I had been on a train stalled in a rail yard that suddenly shot down the tracks with no warning. Instead of writing the story, I was a passenger.

As long as I am sitting at my desk with my imagination plugged into the world of my characters, I consider myself engaged in the act of writing. On a rare day, I'll write several pages, while other days only a page. There are times that require four hours to squeeze out a mere paragraph. The toughest writing sessions are those when not a word spills forth.

I regard all of these times as equal to one another and valid to the act of writing. Two words are the same as two pages. I am writing simply by virtue of allowing my mind to enter the world of my characters. If I go three days without writing a word, I know that the eventual sentences will be that much stronger for the time spent in the company of my characters.

The only way I can create anything worthwhile is to concern myself solely with the moment, to maintain as much freedom as possible during the interaction between my mind and narrative. This has led me to write what I need to write, instead of what I want to write. My work, both fiction and nonfiction, is about my current emotional state, my past behavior, and my recent thoughts. The years of revision enable me to understand myself.

The irony is that by the time I learn from my work, it's too late to do anything, because those difficulties are over and I'm in the midst of a whole new batch of problems.

Five years after moving to Iowa I was a father of two boys, and an author of two books. My sense of self had changed so drastically that I was at a loss of who I was anymore. My response was to write a novel about a man who leaves Kentucky, moves to Montana, and changes his identity right down to his name and Social Security number. To write it, I had a thousand-dollar yard sale and moved to Montana.

Today, ten years after Iowa, I have returned to Kentucky, where I am polishing galleys for *Out of the Woods*. It is a book of stories written over the past decade. Each story concerns someone from eastern Kentucky who has left and misses it. Some return and some don't. At this point I utterly despise the manuscript. It is the final stage before publication, and I'm reduced to changing commas to conjunctions and back to commas. I am perpetually dismayed by what the book says about me, although I cannot pinpoint any particular insight. Perhaps I can in the future. Until then, I am planning the next book.

In order to let this book go, I need to hate it, because I'll miss it so badly. Publication means snatching its life away. A part of me goes with it. Nothing will fill the absence but another project, another imaginary world. Nothing will save me but the act of writing.