Segue is published once a year in August. We accept submissions of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between January 1 and April 30 (closed May through December), and writing about writing year-round via email. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.
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In and Out

Of all the writers to be born in the last years of Nixon’s presidency, novelist Kurt Knight can probably be considered the most political because of his dedication to searching for ways in which writing -- novels in particular -- could “act politically.” In other words, Knight tried ceaselessly to discover how the act of writing itself could contribute to “change,” whatever those changes might be. He wanted authors to be more than “simply transcribers. It’s not that I don’t appreciate the concept that the author can ‘give voice,’” Knight said in an interview from the now-defunct *Novelistic* magazine, “I just think authors have been doing it for so long, it’s like giving money to a bank. I want authors,” Knight said, “to be part of the political process. I want writing to be a political act.” But how that could happen Knight couldn’t say. He couldn’t say because he had yet to discover how it was possible -- “it’s true I’ve had some setbacks, but that doesn’t mean the search is over. All great minds have had failures. And I’ve had mine.”

Among these failures were the write-in, the yawn-in, the butt-in, the ear-in, and the stab-in, all of which failed to gain wide support. The write-in, in particular, had failed to gain wide support, according to Knight, “because it was misunderstood. Everyone thought we were conducting a workshop. I think most people thought we were trying to set a world record—the largest workshop in the world.” The event which took place at Gage Park just south of the capital building was really meant to serve as a starting point: “I wanted people to come only to be inspired. They were supposed to go home after I gave them instructions, but they didn’t. They just milled about, lying on blankets, drinking wine, and passing stories around. It was about as political as a protest rally. I remember being up until almost five a.m. reading stories about break-ups and road trips.” Despite the write-in’s failure, Knight’s friends said the effect on Knight was negligible. His friend Steve Smith, for example, author of *I’ll Die Before I Go to Heaven*, said this: “The effect on Kurt was negligible.” Knight’s colleague at the Institute of Insignificant Things, Carol Boxer, author of *Hook Jab* said she “would probably use the word negligible to describe the effect the failure of the write-in had on Kurt.”

Unfortunately, the write-in didn’t deter Knight. Despite threats and criticism from the press and academic community, Knight persisted. But instead of staging yet another in his series of “ins,” Knight decided to stage an “out.” In other words, instead of bringing people together, he decided to stay home by himself and watch “some T.V.” This, surprisingly, was Knight’s most successful event since he managed to “completely convince” himself he was “working” by watch the Woody Allen marathon on AMC. Although, to be honest, he didn’t convince everyone; his dog Chester, despite Knight’s pleas, still “despised Allen,” finding his films “not worth the paper I poop on.”

The success of the “stay-out” prompted Knight to stage another “out.” The “write-out” took place on March 15 of 2004 in Kurt’s kitchen. Kurt, despite threats from his dog who was “dying to get some park-time,” sat down at the bar which separated the kitchen from his dining room, opened his laptop, and proceeded to write what he thought, at the time, was nothing more than a short story. Because the short story proved to be long enough to be a novella, Kurt felt his “write-
“out” was even more successful than his “stay-out.” Chester agreed, calling what Kurt wrote “not bad for a human.” To this he added: “can we please go to the park now?”

Kurt, to Chester’s chagrin, restaged the original “write-out” over and over again. And the outcome of these “write-outs” was a novel that Kurt was able to get published through Hedgehog Press, a small, non-for-profit publisher located in Chicago. Unfortunately, even though this new book was the result of a series of protests, the book did nothing more than Knight’s other books had. In fact, this particular book sold the least well of all of Knight’s books. In addition, it was his worst reviewed. One critic, for example, punning on Knight’s process, called it “out-rageous and out-standingly awful…What Knight seems to want,” the reviewer wrote, “is his book to change the world…good luck! Unlike other authors who are happy to simply make a living, Knight seems to want his sentences to be the bombs of a revolution. In this, Knight should be happy since his sentences, as he’d hoped, are bombs.” And although this reviewer’s comments resulted in Chester leaving teeth marks in the reviewer’s leg, they only contributed to the “failure” of the novel to make even a literary impression.

Why had Knight been so intent on making his work political? Why was he so concerned with making sure his work was, in Knight’s words, “more than art?” Knight, we can be sure, certainly did not get his political ambition from his father and mother, both of whom, according to Knight, had never read a book in their lives. And although Knight was sure they both voted regularly, they never talked about who they voted for. “It was,” Knight said, “as if politics didn’t exist. It was as if it was something for adults, as if as soon as they would start to discuss it, my mother would tell my father to be quiet—‘the boy, dear,’ she would say. I think I must have been sixteen before I realized people actually voted for the president.”

Knight’s first real experience with politics came, it seems, when he went to college. Intending to sign up for a class in statistics, Knight signed up for a class called “the History of the Sixties.” It was in this class that Knight learned, for the first time, about “what people can do to make sure their voices are being heard.” It was the first time Knight learned about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, for example. It was the first time he’d read about the SDS. He’d, of course, known who they were before he took the class, but he’d never actually studied them with “someone who’d been there.”

The person that had “been there” was the class’ instructor, Tom Keen, the department’s best known professor of history and, perhaps, the greatest influence on Knight. Keen had been part of almost every political party or group that had petitioned, polled, persuaded, paid in, pitched in, pouted, pounced, and paraded like God’s own revolutionary army. Keen, for example, had belonged to the Sunday Socialists for Satan; Constitution Yea!; Progressives, Progressives, Progressives; Citizens for Citizens; and the Dependent’s Independence Party, among others. He held memberships in the Pacific Islanders for Peace and the Afro-Pancratic League which, to his surprise, was actually a local soccer league which consisted only of black men, a requirement that eventually forced Keen to resign his membership. Their “curt and unwarranted” dismissal, according to Keen, led him to join, in retaliation, their sister league—The Second Afro-Pancratic League, which, because he wasn’t a black woman, he was just as quickly dismissed from. He even worked for a time at the Institute of Social Policy, a neoconservative think-tank comprised of ex-
politicians and scholars whose sole purpose was to design a plan that would enable the deregulation of deregulation.

But Keen’s real impact came from writing which consisted of a variety of attempts to remove himself from his own work to defy what he called “the protestations of an intestinal generation,” going so far as to claim authorship of poems he hadn’t written. These poems, he often said, were his best work. He claimed, for example, that the insertion of the author had become not simply unnecessary, but was an act of imperialism—“to speak for one’s self in the guise of art,” he said, “is like speaking for oneself at the expense of everyone else.” Keen’s mission, as he defined it in a 1982 interview with PoEthics magazine, was to create “a democratically-minded alternative to language itself. I want a language of gesture. I want a language,” he said, his hands, the interviewer noted, moving wildly in the air, “that will speak for itself.” When the interviewer suggested that’s what language already does, Paul got up, called the interviewer a parenthetical stooge, and walked out of the room. Unfortunately, Keen’s work was soon forgotten, replaced by his reputation for getting into trouble. In addition to walking out of his interview with PoEthics, what Keen is best remembered for is a fight at a conference on the sixties—The Sixties, Duh—held at a hotel in Berkeley.

Although Keen’s supporters want to think the fight was the result of some clash between passionate advocates for change, it wasn’t. The fight was the result of a comment made by Keen’s colleague Rockefeller Cohen, a professor of literature at Coleman. Cohen was rumored to have questioned the motives of the so-called “sixties radicals,” asking Keen if “it was really all about drugs, about having a good time.” Keen responded to Cohen’s question by standing up and pouring his drink over Cohen’s head. Cohen uncharacteristically responded by taking a swing at Keen, but since Cohen was as about athletic as a snail, he missed Keen and tumbled into a potted plant beside the bar. Keen, in turn, made a leap for Cohen. “I’ll show you you Nazi!” he screamed. But when Keen, who like Cohen had never exercised a day in his life, jumped, he tripped over his own feet and landed beside Cohen to the left of the potted plant beside the bar. Keen, in turn, managed to knock heads with Cohen which sent Cohen stumbling into a professor from Harvard who in falling backwards got her skirt caught on a tiny nail which was sticking out of one of the stools gathered near the end of the bar leaving her in her underwear in the middle of twenty male professors who were shocked to see she was wearing any underwear at all since they all thought she was a radical feminist. The professors who’d been watching the melee between Cohen and Keen hadn’t separated the two because it took the professors the entire time Cohen and Keen were fighting to process what was happening. After all, as one professor who was there remembers, “Professors don’t act, we think.” This would explain why the hotel manager, when arriving with hotel security, was surprised to find all the professors looking at the two well-dressed men rolling around on the floor and the woman with no pants who was walking briskly toward the elevators as if none of it was happening. When he asked why they had done anything, the professors witnessing the fight had simply answered, “My God, but we did.”

The fight was seen by the quantum physicists who were having a conference of their own in the same hotel as a great example of physical law. “The first law,” one physicist remembers, “is a body continues to maintain its state of rest unless acted upon by an external unbalanced force; the operative words being external and unbalanced. The second is force is equal to mass times
acceleration; the operative words being mass and acceleration. And the third is that for every action there's an equal and opposite action.” When asked if he meant reaction instead of action, the physicist responded by saying: “No, I mean action. You see humans never react. In other words, their actions aren’t necessarily based on another action. Thus the third law, at least where people are concerned, should be every action is simply an excuse for some other unrelated action to take place. You see people see their bodies as singular objects. They see them as these pure, unadulterated vials of potential energy, potential actions.”

This fight, and what this particular physicist said about the fight, is important considering the influence Keen had on Knight who, as a result of Keen’s influence, decided to begin what turned out to be his life-long investigation in how literature could be political. Specifically, Keen’s anger, his temper, was passed on to Knight, although Knight never actually got into a fist fight with anyone (it’s tough to say Keen did either considering the fight he had with Cohen). Knight, instead, seemed to internalize Keen’s anger, using it to radicalize his own investigations (specifically with what Knight did after the failure of his write-ins).

Knight didn’t only stage his series of “outs” after the failure of the “ins,” he also re-imagined his “ins.” In particular, Knight created the torture-in which, according to Knight, was a “radical new technique to really electrify the writing process.” The torture-in consisted of sitting down at a desk—“preferably a wooden desk with plenty of leg room”—in front of a computer (“or other writing instrument, be it a word processor, a typewriter, or pen and paper (‘torture unto itself,’ Knight said”) and writing (“I think a novel would be best since the novel form offers the most possibilities for suffering excruciating pain”). Even though it was very similar to the “write-outs,” the “torture-in” was different insofar as it required a needle to be inserted into the base of Knight’s skull which would send an electric shock to his brain every time he stopped writing. Knight had invented the process because he felt his inability to concentrate on his writing for no longer than ten minutes at a time was the reason his work wasn’t changing things. He felt the “electrical stimulus’ would “shock him out of his apathy” and into a “revolutionary fervor.”

Unfortunately, all the shocks did was to give Knight the very seizures that were, eventually, the cause of his death. Yet, even though it can be said with certainty now that Knight might have been misguided to some degree, these early “torture-ins” went a long way to advancing science’s understanding not only of writing, but of art in general, a subject science typically found, in one scientist’s words, “ridiculous and annoying. I’m not sure why they just don’t get a real job.”

Knight’s torture-in, because of the understanding it gave scientists about the artist’s process, could, in some ways, be considered Knight’s most political act (unfortunately, what the scientists learned was the result of the autopsy they performed on Knight, thankfully, after his death). What these scientists (veterinarians to be precise) found was nothing short of miraculous. They found not only that the human brain was, despite its similarities as far as intelligence, much larger than a dog’s brain, but that the electrical shocks did absolutely nothing to help Knight write. This discovery led them to assume that Knight was more of a masochist than he was a writer, enjoying the pain the electrical shocks caused him.

Yet, interestingly enough, this conclusion has since been revised. Now scientists believe that writing and masochism are one and the same and that writing is political in direct relation to the pain it not only causes the author, but the pain it causes those who read what the author has written. In layman’s terms, writing and reading, as one scientist who was a scientist simply because
both his father and brother were said, “really suck ass.” What he meant was that writing—especially creative writing—can really do nothing politically other than to get the creative writer into “deep, deep trouble. And even then,” this scientist writes, “if the author gets into trouble for his writing, it is not so much because of the writing itself, but because the author is ‘taking action’ and writing is simply the form that ‘action’ takes. What I mean is art’s capacity to be ‘political’ is more about context than it is about the art itself.”

And although Knight was not alive to refute that claim, several of Knight’s friends who were, of course, artists themselves, defended not only Knight but Knight’s desire to find in art some political capital. In particular, Knight’s longtime “lover,” Marguerite Sampras, wrote in the now-defunct *Art and Politics*: “Kurt understood that his writing, no matter what form it took was culled from society’s refuse. What I mean is that he understood how art was inextricably bound with business. You see artists don’t simply lock themselves away somewhere and work, they enter into the world like a diver into a stormy sea.” Unfortunately for both Knight and Sampras, the article was published long after the discoveries of the scientists working on Knight’s brain since Sampras was locked away in the top of a tower in an undisclosed location working “on a new project about the nature of God.”

Fortunately, Sampras wasn’t the only one of Knight’s “lovers” to come to Knight’s defense. Juan Ortiz Ortega, writer of the “underappreciated” novel *Love in the Time of Swine Flu*, found in Knight’s “dedication and ambition dedication and ambition.” For Ortega, Knight’s “sociopolitical commentary was reflective of the artist’s urge to be relevant. Unfortunately, Kurt wasn’t aware that artists don’t need to try so hard. Just by being creative,” Ortega continued, “artists are engaging with the world. They’re talking about things that aren’t talked about in everyday conversation. It’s consciousness-raising.” But when asked if things would be all that different if people weren’t having their consciousnesses raised, Ortega said he didn’t know because he didn’t hear the question.

Sampras and Ortega aside, what Knight was able to achieve was the stripping down of the artistic process. He was, in other words, able to recognize its sheer physicality— the motion of the arm, for example, in making the symbols which would be recognized as language, the sore neck, the aching back, the stiff legs all the result of working late into the night on the story that never seemed to end. He was able to acknowledge that part and parcel of writing was the gauzy teeth and oily face, the pounding headaches the result of looking too long at the computer screen. There is, Knight wrote in his novel *It’s Hurts When I Do This* and in its sequel *Well Then, Don’t Do That*, something in writing that is akin to the sit-in: “If you’ve participated in one, you’d know they’re absolutely awful. It’s typically too hot. You never get to sit next to the people you came with. You go for hours without eating or brushing your teeth. And, in the end, it’s not like you ever get anything accomplished. It sounds a lot like writing to me.” Knight’s dog Chester agreed: “I’ve never been to a protest but I have been around Kurt when he writes. Hours on end I’m sitting at his feet watching him do absolutely nothing. Once in a while he looks out the window, but most of the time he’s just typing away. I’d rather watch paint dry.”

Knight was able to see that if writing was going to be political, it was going to have to be within the writing itself. Anytime, he said, someone begins to talk about the writer’s life or their intent, they’re not talking about writing anymore. Unfortunately, it was exactly statements like these that caused Knight not only to be disliked by the public who found him and his novels to be
“pedantically boring,” but by his colleagues who found Knight to be “a pedantic bore.” “It’s not our job” said Alistair Wild, noted author of *Rules to Live By*, “to prescribe, but only to describe.” Another colleague, Arthur Avenue, author of *Politics for Sissies*—the twentieth book in a series that included *Fascism for Sissies* and *Sissies for Fascism*—said Knight’s political “program is both too weak and too dandified to be much use to anyone.” And although Avenue was an idiotic racist homophobe, he was right insofar as Knight’s name was Knight.

But perhaps the greatest criticism came from Knight’s longtime partner, Henrietta Stowe, political activist and popular lecturer, who came to conclude that “nothing Kurt said is all that interesting. I mean it’s not like I ever loved him, really. Come to think of it, I’m not sure why I was ever with him.” And when asked what she thought about Kurt’s political stance, she simply answered: “Kurt who?” Her quickness to separate herself from her longtime partner was most likely the result of the criticism Knight was getting from his colleagues, criticism Kurt himself was apparently very hurt by—“I’m not really sure why so many of my friends have been so quick to judge. My new ‘political stance,’ or so they call it, does tend to negate their entire life’s work, sure, but it also shows exactly how literature can be more effective. It at least gives us a start to understand how ‘literature’ works in our everyday life. I mean isn’t it possible that it doesn’t do anything if no one reads it? I mean the tree may fall in the forest, but who gives a shit?”

Unfortunately for Knight, his many justifications for why he was saying what he was saying fell, essentially, on deaf ears, and not only because most people stopped listening to him. Knight was, in other words, shunned. He was asked to leave Coleman. Friends who’d known him for twenty years stopped returning his phone calls. He was dropped by his publisher. Even stories he sent out under another name were somehow discovered to be written by Knight. When asked how they knew, editors said they could recognize Knight’s typewriting—“All of his letters are spaced evenly apart. All of his sentences end with a period. He typically places the noun before a verb in almost every sentence. It’s obvious.” And although Knight tried to disguise his writing by using public computers, it didn’t matter (and not only because he could only write for ten minutes at a time). Pretty soon, Knight’s opportunities for publication dried up and he was relegated to publishing on his own through leaflets and posters created on an old mimeograph machine he found in his father’s basement.

In some sense, Knight was happy about what happened since, he said, it got him “back in touch with how things used to be done. And maybe that’s what we need. Maybe we need to fall backwards instead of moving forward. Maybe we need to start over instead of just adding more and more to the great heap. Can there be too many voices? Were some people born to be quiet? Were some born to speak up? Maybe if we actually stuck our fingers in each other’s faces again, we could really do something. Maybe if we forced people to believe in what we believe, things would be O.K. Then again, none of this has to do with writing and, in the end, that’s all I really wanted to do.”
Author Notes

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About the Work

I really wish I knew why I wrote, although, the truth is, I do not. In other words, although I know I enjoy writing and reading fiction, I am not sure I know why it is important and I am not sure I ever will. Yet, I still do it and I do not think, to the chagrin of my checking account, that I will ever stop.

Yet, it is because I do not that I wrote “In and Out,” and most likely why I write every story that I do. I think what I write is an attempt to discover in writing something meaningful. At the center of "In and Out" is the question of whether or not fiction, or literature, can be politically significant. Can it effect change?

To answer this question, I felt I needed to move past what might be considered the traditional short story which can be so often built on contrivances such as “Rowdy watched the prairie dogs run across the dusty gray gravel and felt at peace” or “Rowdy, like his father, liked his cigarettes unfiltered.” In other words, I did not want to be bound to description. I wanted to feel free to speak to the story's theoretical concerns.

The biggest challenge in writing “In and Out” was walking the fine line, in the words of Spinal Tap’s David St. Hubbins, between stupid and clever. In other words, is a talking dog absolutely necessary? I guess I decided that, in the end, like everything else in the story, it was, and probably because a talking dog was just as believable as fiction that could change the world.

David Laskowski on the Web

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