ON MADNESS, ARCHITECTURE, CARPENTRY, AND JUDGMENT IN A GROWING GROWN-UP WRITER

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Here is one of the many visions of the writing process: we produce raw material in a state akin to madness, then step back and begin to discern a spine or pulse within that mess, followed by digging in and getting our hands dirty hammering together phrases, lines, sentences, paragraphs or stanzas. We finish off with the cold eye of judgment, editing and—with a little luck—publishing in one form or another.

Like many young people, the possibility that I might actually change, grow, and mature in some way was an atrocity of corruption I didn't want and didn't want to think about. And like many young people, I have been bloodied by the ironies of time and experience.

Here's how it used to be: I'd sit down every day with my notebook and either mill around in the day's events, or just burn through the surfacing words, memories, and voices. Throughout my teens, I was the spillage-idiot: I didn't care what or if the language bubbled up, erupted, oozed, or smoked, just as long as that volcano (a tired metaphor I loved back then) was active, and there wasn't much explicitly architect-, carpenter-, or judge-work going on. By my sophomore year of college, I fancied myself a machine: I revised, I re-read, I read aloud, I counted syllables and stanzas and lines, I sent my work out to magazines, went to open readings and poetry slams in DC, Maryland, and Virginia. I was both hungry for and brimming with language, and willing to fight through my fears of public speaking and the tangle of my private past.

But I was still just beginning. Much of my old work, both poetry and prose, still has that kind of finish to it, that same surface—fast, rambling, breathless, freewheeling, slick, completely absorbed in the live, physical act of writing, and the act of thinking that it represents. The formula I
 seemed to follow, half my temperament and half the influence of the Beats, was something like “one experience = one sitting = one poem.” What follows is typical of me at that time.

This Big Black Dog

was loose and runnin around
he had his big old drooly
tongue just hangin outta that
damn mouth and flappin all over
the place this big old dumb dog
look on his face and he jumped up
at some innocent passerby
and put his front paws right smack
dab in the poor guy’s crotch not
to the point it’d hurt just
embarrass him as soon as
the dog did all that he just
ran off a hit and run of sorts
and the guy didn’t hardly know
what to do but smile but all
the people walking by saw
silently understood and
kept on walking but I watched
them all every second this
poor man’s crotch just violated
in front of a bunch of strangers
by some big slobbery dog
and so I laugh at the world.

This was perhaps a 30-second experience at George Mason University during the spring of 1993, while I was walking from Fenwick Library towards Robinson. The writing took a few minutes, with the carpentry work of syllabic shaping—seven per line in sixteen lines, eight per line in the other seven—and the resulting trim taking maybe an hour, which was heavy duty for me at the time.

During high school and college, I wrote every single day, often devotedly sitting down before or after dinner, but also keeping a small notebook in my shirt pocket for the unexpected. If I had a few free moments, I wrote. If I had an hour, I wrote. If I had nothing to do or was bored, I wrote. If I was waiting in line somewhere, I pulled out my shirtpocketnotebook (nowadays filled more with names, phone numbers, grocery lists, and reminders), and sketched a phrase or two, tinkered with an image. The invaluable thing that came out of such a habit was the ability to write in stolen moments, which is how most of my writing has started over the last ten years.
The fact is, I do too much, so most of it is on the run. My wife and I have a one-year-old boy, an energetic and intelligent dog (lethal combination!), and an old house that requires too much attention; she teaches college full-time, while I teach high school English, and we both hustle extra teaching on the side or during summers; I’m also at work on my Ph.D. in Education while writing occasional book reviews and editing a poetry webzine.

This is all my fault, though, for taking on so much, especially on top of teaching high school. Years ago, other poets and teachers would tell me, “Don’t go into teaching. You might never write again. It’ll certainly put a strain on your work, and you’ll never make enough money to buy the time to get any real writing done, and it’ll just keep feeding itself on you.” Not only would this life not be easy, I was told, but it would most likely never even amount to much, unless I got lucky and won a prize early.

And they were right. My writing-teaching life has been neither glamorous nor easy. Maybe my teaching and writing have held each other back, maybe they've rounded each other off nicely, or maybe they've balanced each other but spiked my blood pressure. They were right, those friends, but they didn’t see then what I see now.

How could I count myself as anything less than lucky? The talent I’ve been given and developed with the help of many has given me artistic and material life—along with my wife, literary art has supported us, our son, our dog, two cars, and a ravenous house in tax-insane New York state. We’re barely afloat, but it’s all been done with the arts. How many can claim to live a rich internal life which provides for an external life?

So I’ll deal with it. I’ll try to understand how teaching and age have changed my work. I write less frequently, and just plain less. When I was younger, I’d flip around in my notebook, find an interesting chunk from the mountain, type it up, spontaneously add, cut, and tweak as I went, print it out, read it aloud, go over it with a pen, scribble, scratch, root, wrinkle, wrestle, wring, type in (most of) those up-fixings, print it out again, and go until it felt whole, but still fresh, still a rush. Usually, the finished product looked a good bit like the initial thrust, but certainly bore the marks of a craftsman.

Back then, I was a madman and occasional craftsman, with the judge on call, and the architect in exile. The only major change is I’m far less of a madman and much more of an architect. I spend much more time sifting through material than creating it; I’m much more concerned with building something good out of less material than building something flashy with mounds of it. I would fill up a single-subject notebook per month when I was nineteen, and now it takes me up to a year. One summer not long ago, I didn’t write a word for a month. Whereas each date used to have two or three pages of thick, rich, tangly prose, now there’s a phrase a day if I’m lucky, and an image per week.

“Sitting down to write” used to mean “sitting down to write;” now it means “sitting down to sort and arrange.” It means wandering around the garage, looking for something to play with, browsing around until I find a couplet from February that goes with a quatrain from June. Then a tiny memory squeaks up, a recent paragraph gets pared down and finds a place, and finally, usually by juxtaposition, I have a poem, much different from the kind I used to write.

Here’s one stitched together from at least four different dates, sometimes years apart:

Segue Writing on Writing
Oceanfront Christmas Eve

This time of year, suicide stands at attention,  
all I know beyond the sea's last line.  
A small, wooden boat on the washed-out  
winter shore, and as we pan to the left,  

the quiet water. At the end of that long, flat  
straight series of car dealerships  
that is Virginia Beach Boulevard,  
pink splinters the sky. How can one not wince  
at such radiance? Whoever, horizon,  
you are, we battle in the middle  
of emptiness. In the last few  
of his twenty-nine years, word was he slept  

with a gun beneath his pillow, weed  
everywhere, his Pop in the grave.  
Someone, someone give me the what for.  
The empty water. The noise that nothing makes.  

When I leave this joint at some further point  
which relative's voice will I hear out there?  
Crouch in the sand, scoop it like dice,  
let the battered hand play the hourglass.

Other times I’ll ignore fitting fragments together, and just try to finish them. After letting a notebook slowly fill up over several months, I’ll scan for little pieces which are still interesting, and add on to them, perhaps focusing on fragmentary images under five or six lines, perfecting the wording, syntax, pace, and lineation. Sometimes this “perfected fragment” spurs more writing, while other times I end up with a group of short poems.

One such example is the following sequence, “None of These Are Stories.” Many images are from trips to North Adams, Massachusetts, where my wife grew up. Maybe it was the new terrain, or the tone of our visits, but for a good year or more, trips up there got me writing, and after I had a few North Adams poems, I started noticing other short pieces in my notebook that seemed to be kin. This led to what was initially a bunch of short poems I published individually, but what now is a suite in fifteen separately-titled sections:

I. Joy
I am not
the center
of any
universe.

II. It Is Possible to Die

Do you hear the rain
on the tin roof?
It doesn’t hear you.

III. The Story Goes

Always and forever,
this breakdown
between choruses.

IV. When Does the Body Become a Voice?

A hallway with no photographs,
the sky is bright but empty.

Like a clear conscience,

my white face
evaporates into dawn.

V. “Change has come and you can’t hide in the edges”

You miss him already, and water drips from everywhere.
How much light can a pine branch hold?

VI. The Sky Knows All About Mood Lighting

No music in days really,
and I need just a few more poems to become heartbreakingly wide open,

the lone Atlas of a telephone pole still between its wires.

VII. Dusk Train Passenger

Caught a glimpse of my head in the window while all the trees on earth reeled through it.

VIII. Interlude

November’s already fog-wasted trees.

Murky strings of sleep along Greylock: ink clouds in water.

The birth of tears in a church’s belled song,

none of these are stories.

IX. Milltown

Fallen sisters, fallen brothers, forest for the trees, forest for the trees.

X. “Ever since God took all my children away”

Time passes, and death waits. I can’t get over all this quiet—
XI. Memory

Tea drunk,  
empty  
cup, steam  
still steams.

XII. Styx

Sky is made of fog today, not itself,  
like the black water of a dream lake.

The tragic flaw is to row across  
only as a man, and nothing else.

XIII. River’s Bed

In all this water’s wide whirl,  
the silent thrill of stillness.

XIV. By the Dark Northern River

Inevitable  
coast, at last:  
a yellow leaf.

XV. Crossing

God—  
that vibrant green  
creep of weeds  
over the rusting rail.

I might as well get celestial with it here: when I was eighteen, each piece of writing was a quick slash of fire in the sky, and now it’s a handful of stars the reader has to work for. Because I now tend to write in fragments, I revise in fragments, and many poems are now sequences of fragments that I hope—for lack of a better phrase—add up to something. I’m an ocean of patience,
quiet diligence in the sky, but this new habit does bother me a little. I like the poems—when they’re at their best—more than anything from when I was twenty, but it requires a lot more patience and vision than it used to. Being eighteen and a writer, you can get by with just fire. Thirty-four demands faith; thirty-four demands devotion through doubt.

I’m sure this is due to lifestyle, age, maturity, a level and array of conventional responsibilities—whatever we want to call it—and those four modes have helped immensely. I don’t mean to restrict madness, architecture, carpentry, or judgment to categorical stages of one’s life (madness is adolescence, architecture early adulthood, etc.); the process is undeniably recursive. The great thing is I don’t have to be everything at once, which is one of my flawed tendencies. Poems take years to finish now, and I mind less and less—that attitude was impossible for me at 21.

The few minutes of work I put in with my shirtpocketnotebook, then my larger notebook, then weeks or months later at the computer, still later again at the computer or rewriting by hand—all those are clock hours that don’t expire. In The Triggering Town, Richard Hugo says he believes the work we put in on one poem is work put in on all poems, so if we slave over five that fail, and the sixth succeeds with ease, then maybe we were always really working on that sixth poem. In other words, difficulty and failure are never wasted, and there’s no such thing as a lost cause. That attitude has helped me write a thousand sixth poems, and teach a hundred sixth classes.

Besides, then there still comes the period, maybe twice a year now, lasting for a week at the most, when I’ll be both writing brand new stuff and arranging things from the notebook-attic, and a dozen or more finished poems happen, quickly, without much effort, and I feel like I’m in my room at 249 Amberly Road in Virginia Beach again, reading Jack Kerouac and listening to Dinosaur Jr., jazzed by my heroes expressing what cannot be articulated, finding a momentary and marvelous frame for the transient and the troubled. It turns out all my slow diligence matters, and the poems don’t seem old at all, however long ago I may have started. I’m both young and old, on fire but also a little bit outside myself, and I feel like I’ve grown up to be what so many dream to be: a serious player.

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Notes

i The four phases of the writing process that ground this essay are terms coined by Betty Sue Flowers, and were introduced to me by Dr. Linda Hanrahan at George Mason University in an English Methods course.

ii “This Big Black Dog” appeared in Gyst and in a broadside published by Windowpanes Press.

iii “Oceanfront Christmas Eve” appeared in the chapbook Dragon Emerging from Waves (Pudding House Press, 2007).

iv “None of These Are Stories” appeared in the chapbook Dragon Emerging from Waves (Pudding House Press, 2007). Individual poems first appeared in Brevities, Cotyledon, Parting Gifts, and Lilliput Review.