

I Try Hard

I try. I try hard. I run sometimes. I have good intentions. I try to keep that in mind. I go up into the mountains. I go down into the low part of the desert and look up and around at the lip of the vast, wide bowl I live in. I don't know what to do with that. Sometimes it seems like a mess.

I'm not looking for readers. I want someone who's going to help me work this out.

I pay attention.

I saw a single large bird come low across the neighbor's yard, and then a simple flock of small ones swoop up in the distance and decorate a tree.

This is not what I had imagined. I had imagined long stretches of peaceful, lengthy concentration, activities to get lost in. Busy hands. Something to carry me through difficulty.

I am primitive. I exhaust all resources. I am restless. I stall at the keyboard. I am a reactionary. I need a stimulus. Maybe I should have been a plein air painter. I have more words lined up if these fail —these are just examples, but also documentation. No one else is ever going to tell this story.

As you can see, I write. The problem is that the characters in my stories don't tell me what they want like all the other writers say their characters do. Mine mostly keep to themselves, remain silent. They merely stare back at me, look away, make obvious side glances. Then they say, "You have an odd, halting manner to your speech, and it's very confusing to talk to you." And they walk away. I am ambivalent about their return. I make no effort.

Yet I keep writing. Some of it I don't really mean. Some is not a reflection of my experience, but rather merely what I have read or overheard that I've wondered about, and though some of it may sound truthful, and maybe I even attempt to live by it or use it in my life in some way, they are fabrications. Other things, I elide and reserve for a future contingency—you never know—despite being of little apparent use. The idea is to be open to both truths and falsehoods. That said, I believe they're all conspiring against me.

I live as if I will be rewarded for goodness and punished for badness. And even when it is difficult, I know that my life is a good life. I try to follow the rules. For example: you can't write like Chekhov anymore.

Yet, it is calm now at the start of day: A clear sky with washes of moisture that filter the blue, distant mountain ridges. Insipid thoughts spread weakly into that advancing distance. Can you recognize latent events this early in the morning? I don't think so. What may come later of all of this innocent speculation? In the afternoon I will be on guard for rising cloud columns. Solid forms. Consequential shadow-casters. Crowd-pleasers.

Every day at the desk I start something new. This is my gift: I can sit and begin to write spontaneously. Each day it's as if I initiate a new epic—like a gentle refutation of all that's come before. Rather than build upon yesterday's thoughts, I launch into new ones. All manner of impressions present themselves at the start, and as I attempt to give them form a strange thought arises: the sequential nature of time seems a burden, an inadequate feature, and I have a desire for a single moment that contains and resolves every trajectory of sense and sensation that affects me as I sit. Why not all of life in a single moment? I absurdly lament that I would have to progress through each single aspect one after the other. But the hunger seems a contradiction of constitution: what's the use of a desire for a complete, instantaneous unity of all experience?

I try to capture the thoughts that come along like weather events before they're on their way out of my mind and into someone else's.

I proceed of course, but from that burst of potential, after a few hours of work, capturing what I can, I am suddenly assailed by a vacuum—all images immediately vanish, and I would be left sitting alone with a pencil and absolutely nothing in mind except the image of myself sitting with the pencil hovering over the page wondering again exactly how I got here.

But there are always multiple ways to go about things. The first objective is to establish all of the possibilities. The possibilities are the potential of the form, and the best one can hope for is to lose as little of its promise as slowly as you can. The best line of any work is the first, the one that breaks the silence, that marks the difference between nothing and something. After that, all of it is an effort to hold on to that initial spark.

I'm full of portentous statements, and I do not save them for special occasions.

For example: My hatred came blooming with the spring. Fantasies were like this: Women want me; Other men want the women; Men and women attack me.

Something had come loose like sunken sea treasure suddenly dislodged from an ancient, doomed ship—the displaced cargo rising slowly, emerging into the sunlight and bobbing up onto the surface of a new day—and then I was beset by the freedom of my imagination to arbitrarily delight and assault me, and thus ultimately discovered that I was not capable of the liberties of my mind.

Alas, there can be no anonymity to oneself.

Then in the fall, I brought myself out here.

There may have been a real attack, but I couldn't remember those sorts of details. All that remained

in mind were flashes of images. The difficulty was that I had fantasized about the moment of attack for so long that I couldn't separate fact from fiction. And these images included also other stories and others' stories of being attacked. At the door of my apartment, city teenagers leapt from hiding to smash me in the face with broomsticks. Native Americans attacked me in the dead of night in a parking lot of a bar at the edge of a reservation. I was stuffed into a car trunk and driven into dark woods to be beaten. I hadn't paid an ill-advised debt and punishment was meted out with heavy chain. One way or another, I was injured severely, but not without some satisfaction: my fantasies were vindicated—the attack took place. I was a prophet.

I can't keep track of all of this. The middle period. Wandering. Aimless and unproductive. The grey part of the story.

Each of the past four months, I have sublet a different apartment, migrating among these places bearing a subset of my belongings—the larger remainder packed to the concrete ceiling of a downtown storage center in a city far away where the lights snap on as I step forward into the corridors, and the man sitting in a chair outside the unit he sleeps in silently pulls in the door in as I pass.

It is a strange existence. I cannot even tell you if I'm happy. I am fatigued everyday by the writing, and it delimits my life in many ways. There is so much that I am not doing, that I will never do, and that I always thought I would do. But every morning is automatic. I return to the project. Sometimes it seems purely physical, a linked sequence of movements of the body. As a pair, I raise both knees to my chest and swing my legs over the side of the bed and touch my feet to the floor. Engage the core, rise, feel the tension in the quads. I drink water. I make coffee, I sit. Read absent-mindedly whatever printed thing is sitting in front of me and within minutes I am writing. I keep going. Much is made of the idea of getting into a state of flow, and I am sure my actions qualify. I am fully en-

gaged and the day will pass quickly while I lose myself in that work. Yet, it is not redemptive. Indeed, it is tiring, and no matter how much I have accomplished at the end of day, I spend the last hour of it wondering if I had wasted all the previous ones. Weren't there ideas? To travel. To tend a garden. Learn to fly. Sharpen my sensitivities to the varieties of cheese and tree leaves.

I spent most of the afternoon arguing in an imaginary conversation with a real friend about imaginary circumstances of my real life.

Often, I have not kept the covenant of exploration I aspire to. I have let the offers of too many moments pass. I am not trustworthy. If I tell you what I want with conviction and clarity, eye me with suspicion and wonder of the opposite.

You're only going to get so many chances.

No matter how long one has lived, even when one is in the final stages of life—not that I am!—the specter of what one has not done can make you think that life has barely begun. Projecting a future is a capacity and routine of the mind that does not seem to diminish with age. The future does not contract in proportion to the past. It is as infinite as it ever was.

I was stopped in this town by something. I sensed it—this place—it had something I needed and may bring me into a state where I could return to the good graces of my mind. Perhaps it's the deep mountain passes and their rocky trails, wet with trickles of life-sustaining snowmelt that cross and uncross the footpath—like liquid, moving casts of stepping stones.

I open and close the freezer door without noticing what's inside. What's inside is wild condensation.

The lack of a dishwasher has done small wonders for my writing. I need the breaks. To turn real objects over in hand under running water. Repetitive acts that cleanse away whatever I was hanging on

to. Just let it run right down the drain and make way for new thoughts. Maybe I'll catch a new one running after an old one.

People keep saying you need a story, a structure for meaning. Maybe that formula is fantasy. You think you can have something that will draw you forward, and you'll just be along for the ride, reporting, sprinkling the path with details.

But perhaps a story is nothing more than a container, a box, five sides of a cube and an open one. Its only attribute is its ability to keep whatever is placed inside from rolling away. Or say, a support structure for small moments of revelation. Or, a series or collection of things come together under one roof like a community rallying around a favorite daughter. The reader may push aside what doesn't interest them.

I maintain an odd faith that I, or anyone, can stand anywhere at all in time and space, and with patience and attention the important matter of all the world will reach you. In this scenario there are no inadequate responses. What reaches you is what is true.

Outside, the cottonwoods are sprouting fresh, young green leaves from their arcing yellow branches. It's a uniform, healthy, fast growth. So much evident fresh upward energy. The business of photosynthesis. Through the summer like that, then in fall they fall. They'll dry until they pop off the branch and drift down to the grass as light as sinking ships. Underfoot, ants appear and disappear among the shadows of desiccated cottonwood chips that make a spongy base.

It's not all gloom. If the rising crackles of a broiling slice of salmon as it approaches the final stages of its oven transformation has ever raised your spirits, then you'll know what kind of good mood I can get myself into.

I watch through a window trees get pushed around in a buffeting start to a storm. It's silent inside. The

wind is blowing out of the mountains in hurried gushes. But it isn't the usual natural force—the suggestion of the ephemeral—it's just angry orographic grunting.

I see a hole in a cloud the shape of a cloud.

On the trip out here, I stopped in Savannah and connected with the only person I knew within 500 miles, an acquaintance who had left New York because he said he couldn't take the tease of so much inaccessible money and female beauty all around. He told me I was on a visionquest, and that gave me an amusing sense of hope.

But then I remember when A said she thought this was going to be a great year for me. Thinking back, that may have been a dagger turned against me. Or rather it was my naive faith in the prognostication. My life has always been about potential like that. Potential as an end in itself. I thought I thought about the future, but it was only about the present, about thinking about the future in the present.

I've had successes. Once upon a time, I wrote a story about a homeless violin player that came true. That's a fact.

Also, in the 9th grade, a teacher, liked by none of my friends and made fun of out of all proportion to fairness—an easy target for the simple cruelty of kids—had requested I read a sentence aloud from the assignment the class was working on quietly and independently. "You write such beautiful sentences." I heard snickers all around. I had in fact only written a single sentence, and I read it aloud red-faced, thumping-hearted, and sweaty-templed. Good sentences can do that to you.

There was that friend from undergrad, the born-again addict, rich from the payout of a helicopter accident that fucked up his back, who said one day,

"I just realized that you're a real artist. Like a real one."

I guess I'm building a case for continuing. Seeing an imperative in the potential. Have patience with me.

There had also been a new relationship. A hope for redemption. Approached with caution.

I didn't know what she would be like, but that one night I just did it. I poured the old self out into every spare container I could find and left on that night out as a stranger escaping from himself. It surprised me how easy it was to let go. It still does.

When I left the apartment for an evening with her I was someone else. Or someone I used to be or might have been had even a few events rolled out differently. Perhaps it only takes one small change that over time can expand like a rolling snowball into something so formidable it becomes difficult to imagine its weak, crude start. (Is that a defense?)

Anyway, It wasn't hard. It was nothing. I simply dressed and turned handles in order to pass through thresholds, and walked in the manner accustomed to all men and women and thought as little as I could. I couldn't tell if I was acting.

Above all, when I saw her dance—the practiced athleticism, the moving muscles, the agonists and antagonists—I thought of intent, I thought of a will that excluded trifles from the world, the clean and pure actions of being. It was as though she offered a proposition, and it took hold of me.

She spoke three languages that I didn't understand, and there was nothing better than closing my eyes and listening to her make those mysterious sounds.

As I listened to a friend describe her—"the one with blonde, or strawberry blonde hair, kind of angelic features, a little mousey"—and as she checked my reactions after each phrase for approval—yes, kind of, that's her, I was silently stunned by hearing

someone else's description of her, or perhaps by realizing the simple fact that other perceptions existed, that there were in fact many perceptions of her out there in the open waters of others' memories. And she described someone I didn't know. Angelic?

Even now, I can see you. You are calm. You have a light touch. You look more than you talk. I am afraid to affect you. I could be wrong, and I don't want to change you.

She was an artist living in Brooklyn. Once, she had a dinner party for friends recently returned from India. They had gathered with the idea that everyone look at and discuss her work after dinner, but talk of difficult issues in India prevailed, and eventually, a few moments after someone said, "Art doesn't seem to matter anymore after seeing all we have," she excused herself, walked into her studio, unpinned her work from the walls, crouched to the floor and cried.

The first thing I ever wrote she loved. I think it really impressed her, and her enthusiasm convinced me that I could do something with it and kept me going. But then she hated everything else that came after. I could not recapture that swell of her admiration. We each saw something completely different in that story.

Then later, I hated that she asked me after I spoke about my father, "Do you feel like that too? Like nobody understands how you live your life?" That proposition sent me speeding away to a distant shore, mad and alone. There was some more after that, but that might have been the beginning of the end. And here I am.

You're not aware of this because we don't talk much now, but I think of you often, and you are in my mind like a monument around which I orient myself. You are immortal for as long as I am.

"You are no different than anyone else. The fact that you believe you are—you know, everyone else

does too—that makes you all the more the same. All the more indistinguishable."

It is the effect of story—its singular, lasting monument—that so many other stories spinoff from the one being told. The stories not told are the subject of all stories.

Yesterday, I visited a small, single-story museum on a very bright afternoon in which the shadows cast by buildings seemed to cut their own exterior rooms out of the open air. The museum was set in a dry lot cleared of the sagebrush that otherwise overwhelmed the surrounding desert. Inside under glass cases were several examples of the black and white pottery of the Ancestral Puebloans—unbroken, intact, ancient forms of delicate, unsmooth white clay walls that tapered thinner at their mouths, laid over with bold, black, geometric patterns like mad mazes that roared over and ran my eyes around the forms that supported them. The marvelous is indeed enjoyable.

Another man walked in who looked just like me, and I had the thought that I was not wild enough.

Writing changes me somehow even more than reading, and I made progress today.

Approaching dusk, sunlight beamed low across the desert under elongated clouds and cast an orange glow on the lower half of the mountains to the east. The light—like a double-pane patch of sunlight reaching the bottom of a floral print sofa—made the mountains look small and domestic. A fly had buzzed and bounced up between the window and screen. In lieu of swatting it, I had trapped it there hours ago. Now it was a black spot in the composition of a setting sun.

Nothing will ever be the same again. I'm counting on it.