

## Logoplexy · *Stephen Wing*

WHEN I WAS TEN, eleven, twelve years old, I played games with the dictionary. I remember one day wondering whether to consider what the book had to say about certain arcana of astrology, weather, heraldry—or if I should white out definition with a blank gaze and imagine the nations and flickering flags of Trine, Isobar, Gemel?

I have an earlier memory—one of my earliest—of telling a story. My audience consisted of several misty children and my neighbor, Mrs. Wells. It was midsummer, mid-afternoon, but we were all in the house, in Mrs. Wells's living room. The ice tinkled in her cocktail. She liked her two or three cocktails, every afternoon. I remember her laughing her smoky laugh. I have no idea now what my story was about, but I remember Mrs. Wells smoking and drinking and laughing. It seems to me that in my telling I used a variety of voices, and that I whirled about in front of her huge picture window, that I waved my arms to encompass, and perhaps to point out, or claim as counters or props, the mountains, the sun on the cottonwood trees, my brother's poison-green bicycle hissing down the sidewalk. It seems to me that, in short, I was conjuring, calling forth aspects of the world with names and gestures, and that I rearranged these aspects to make something else, something new.

In those days, I apparently made little clear distinction between stories and games and what might be happening around a corner we just didn't know how to get to yet.

I know that I sometimes went further than that, that I sometimes tried to play these stories out with other children, to in fact direct play, a toybox tyrant. I couldn't seem to help myself: in the anarchy of the playground, when the spirit was upon me, I would run the other five-year-olds with a heavy hand. I was not big, nor athletic, but they rarely resisted what seems to have been a ferocious imagination. I remember a Saturday morning down on the corner, near a house under construction. We were carrying the attack to the enemy, laying siege to a big pile of dirt that happened to be a killer whale. We were interrupted—I think one of my sisters called me to lunch—and I remember giving strict instructions on how the game was to be carried on in my absence, how to kill the whale, how to bring it back to

life, how to ride the whale triumphantly, cruising the Corner Sea. Then I turned to a dissident who had earlier that morning suggested King of the Mountain, or some such pastime. “And as for you: I’m just warning you right now. You just listen. You just better play this game right.” To the others I proclaimed: “If he doesn’t—throw . . . him . . . to . . . the . . . SHARKS.” And I walked away without a look back.

I was confident that the words I had left behind would be followed, simply because they were words. To me, a word didn’t *stand for* an object, the object and the word were part of each other. Conjuring: if you could say *green* with the proper spin, you might find yourself trapped in the heart of an emerald. This is of course a common myth, a relic of the associative process of learning language in the first place. (Pythagoras claimed that people named names in resonance with the harmonic ring inherent to all things—linguists refer to this as the Ding Dong theory of language origin.)

I seem to have been sure that every object had a word to it—and that anything with a name had to be an object—as it might a color or flavor or other essential aspect: something is hot, is sticky, is silver, and has a name. Words and the things of the world were therefore intimately connected. This was obvious to me as a child. Didn’t the word *onion* sometimes have a bite to it? Couldn’t *secret* rest in the ear, a velvety cricket to soothe away an ache? And wasn’t *promise* a piece of sunrise held in the palm? (Once, in college, I meditated on *America* until the word became a striated wave, a muscular harp, a rising, a trailing off, and then the cruel blue spark of a tail.)

Not too long after the episode of the killer whale, something happened to me. For a long time, I wasn’t sure if it was one particular event, or a chain of events, or several unrelated blows, or if it was some internal change unrelated to the outside world. But, somehow, I became shyer, calmer, more inward, more self-conscious. After thinking back on this as well as I could, and after talking to those who knew me then, I have come to conclude that this change was directly related to my learning to read.

I think that when I was small, reading was a mystery that I very much needed to crack. If to say a name was to conjure or reflect something of a presence, reading implied that words must every once in a while slip their tethers and duck out to assume secret identities. It was as though the quality *warm* could be extracted from the sun, then bottled, a wind of swiftness skimmed from *run* and wound about a spindle, a veil of *silver* lifted

gleaming from the flank of a fish and pressed between pages. And later released, when someone who knew the code opened the book.

Exactly *how* I learned to read is clear enough, for my older brother and all of my sisters learned in the same way. That is, my first written word was *Westinghouse*, and I knew the word well before I could actually read it: Westinghouse blazoned the building where my father worked, his bowling shirt (oh, my dad bled Westinghouse blue), the refrigerator, the television (sometimes, impressively, Westinghouse was *on television*), the light bulbs, and a medley of buzzing, blinking small appliances all over the house. And we all talked about it.

As a spoken word, Westinghouse was somehow airy, and *tall*. There was something of the sky about it. To say *General Electric* (my father's chief competitor), on the other hand, was to say something sly and jagged and shocking. I didn't always recognize the written General Electric right away, but I knew the famous GE trademark very early on, as an evil rune, a crest of devious curves. Even now, I sometimes see in cursive a sinister twist.

At some point, my parents and older brother and older sister began to show me that other words could be found *inside* Westinghouse: this is the *we* that means everyone here, and then we have the *sting* from the bee outside, and this is the *house* all around us now. While I was learning these, they would every once in a while casually toss me another: *west*, *tin*, *ho*, *use*. And later, in a rush of rearrangement, tricky as an old shell game, *stew* and *ghost* and *shine*. And then, dazzling, they cracked the word open completely, popped out the letters, added more from a source not immediately apparent, and handed over the alphabet. (Later I realized that I wasn't totally satisfied—could they have been holding out on me? Weren't there more letters somewhere? I had a feeling I might need them.) They partnered each letter up to a particular sound (a puff or a hum, a tick or a bubble), helped me puzzle these loose letters back into words, and I was off and reading.

Learning to read provided a world without end of stories, and, at first, a new force in my domination of play. But as I spent more and more time holed up with *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*, or *The Story of the Atom from Democritus to Alamagordo*, I didn't get around as much to the vacant lots, the rainy day basements. I played fewer and fewer games. When I did join in, I was rusty, had clearly lost my edge. And my friends were learning too, moving on to the formality of schoolyard games, games bound by tradition and physics, games that seemed to be played with the stories sucked out of

them, as far as I could tell. There seemed little room for my kind of open-ended maneuver. My friends often couldn't see the point of my new suggestions, my complex and foggy notions based on discoveries from the books; of course, many of the connections were in my own head. Even when I brought the books with me and I read passages aloud and showed pictures, I couldn't seem to relate to others what had so seized me. And sometimes, even when I could, these things simply took too long to explain, with the sun dancing in the grass. A shrug rippled around the circle. My rivals gained ascendance.

But, don't get me wrong. I don't want to overstate the case (besides, every time I try to, it comes as a whine). I was considered slightly peculiar, but I really did have a pretty fair time of it as a kid. I had cronies. I learned to talk dirty. I traded comic books. I explored the odd town of Butte, Montana, where I was growing up. I played naked games in the garage. I blew up ant hills with firecrackers. I played Brothers and Hide-and-Seek and Poker. I even came to play football in the park, with the fat kids and the frail kids. I sledded and camped out and watched television.

And . . . marked for life by reading, I read, ravenously. Even today, I still often read myself to sleep. Once asleep, I still have the occasional dream wherein the narrative switches from images to printed words and back again. When I was a student at the University of Montana, with material ready at hand in the nest of paper and blankets and words I had bedded down in, I could and did read as soon as my eyes opened in the morning. I'd read my way through breakfast—the cereal box if nothing else—and then I'd read my way down the street to my first class.

If I happen to pick up and open a book to find myself facing a page of upside down print, I still often feel the lightest flitting vertigo before I can snap the book right way around. Another oddity: I'm one of those people whose vestigial ear muscles still function. I can wriggle my ears at will, but more to the point, they move on their own, lightly pricking up and fanning out, though not so much at predatory growls, or the crack of a dry twig, as at words, tricks and turns of language, felicitous phrases, serendipitous sentences, sometimes spoken but especially on the page.

I took it for granted as a child that many of the things I read about in stories would become parts of my own life some day. Or, at least, I would

undergo experiences of the same general sort, and of course I would be ready for them, since I had read about them beforehand. I would know what to do, what to say, would have an enviable ease of manner, a savvy. Moreover I seemed to think that I could be a whirlybird pilot one day, a cartoonist the next. Thursday afternoons I might reserve for the Holy Grail.

I gradually began to realize that, No, things probably wouldn't work out that way, that I would probably have to restrict myself to a single particular career, and one from a grievously restricted list of choices at that. At the same time, though, I was learning that most of the stories I read came from the pens of particular people. Well, then, of course, *that* was what I would do. I had after all collaborated in the creation of a good many stories—for where would they be if I hadn't read them? To switch over to the writing side must have seemed an easy enough transition, a slight change of angle and focus and degree.

I was so sure of this goal that for a long time I couldn't be bothered with making any actual moves towards it. Actually, I didn't know that there were moves to make, other than reading—but I had no doubt that I would become a writer, when the time came. Of course, I had had no doubt that I would become an inventor, after reading a biography of Thomas Alva Edison. One day I confidently sat down to take a derelict radio apart. Classically, in the tradition of bright youth tales, I was then supposed to zero in on why the radio didn't work, correct the problem, and then rebuild the radio better than new, picking up stations it never could before (and perhaps with a few parts left over for future projects). But after I pried the brown corkboard back off of that cream-and-red radio, I looked inside—and invented a game, involving a miniature close-packed city with odd slick towers and tubes and brass temples.

In grade school, vocabulary was supposed to be a power of mine, a specialty. That's why I pored over dictionaries, they surmised. But I had found to my surprise that the dictionary was a book riddled with narrative, rife with dramatic fragment. Suggestive dollops of story tumbled right out at me, batted about my ears as I browsed the pages. I often lost my way looking things up, hijacked by those bold guide words at the tops of pages. I read *defenestration*, and imagined a rain of counter-conspirators from high mullioned windows down onto slick cobbles. Or, I could be distracted by the way one word, one definition, might lead to another, and that to

another, and to yet another, on the trail of meaning. And, oh, it was some kind of narrative triumph the first time I traversed from definition to definition until I had made my way around a perfect circle, back to the original word without discovering what it meant. Sometimes I kept to business, steeling myself, and might merely note in passing the three classes of diamonds, might merely whip up, in passing, the ghost of a tale of a triad: lovely Gem, stolid Bort, the dark and daring Carbonado. Even today, when fiction pleads and journalism palls, I'll cruise Webster's.

I remember making lists. Of musical instruments: *krummhorn*, *bombardon*. Of musical terms: *tremolando*, *glorioso*, *pizzicati*. I planned to someday take the opportunity to pick a fresh bouquet of *tormentil*, *checkerbloom*, and *downheal*. Bemused, I contemplated the things that people had determined to name, and the names that they had then discovered. A *plastron* is the undershell of a turtle. A *chalaza* is either of the two membraneous strings that hold the yolk to the ends of the egg.

Once, I tried for length and came up with *pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis*, a word to trump the Mary Poppins chirpings of my younger sisters. And the meaning touched home, also, for the word was a miner's disease (silicosis, actually) and I lived in a mining town. Perhaps, I mused, the word aided diagnosis. If a miner couldn't make it to the last syllable on one breath, the doctor knew what ailed him.

It was startling to find, in a word I had never encountered before, in a book I was reading for distraction, true connection. During adolescence, especially, I began to have this experience. Often, I seemed to encounter a word just when I needed it, and I breathed more easily to know that someone had been through the woods ahead of me. Other people had *floaters* in their eyes—my field of vision was not being nibbled away by voracious amoebae. Later, I was gratified to find floaters a significant enough phenomenon to have been dignified and enriched to *muscae volitante*.

To know *non sequitur* was to realize that an occasional disconnection was to be expected, and understood as part of the pattern. *Scapegoat* . . . *oblique* . . . *arbitrary* . . . *déjà vu* . . . *solipsism* . . . These conditions had not only applied to other people, but had disturbed with such force that new words shot out into the language in response. To name an affliction is to have some semblance of control. *Agnostic* created an island of sense and space amid the roil of teenage theology. (Sexual terms were an exception. Instead of providing a way of dealing with my overheated condition, they only

irritated. But, so did grass and sky, then, so did a particular deep, fast, and darkly plush old Pontiac.)

When I was fourteen, my middle younger sister and her friends put together a dictionary of their own invented words. They walked around saying, “We’re lexicographers, you know.” They were proud. Of course I was charmed, and inspired to create my own word on the spot. I knew I had to keep it to myself. How could I have anything to do with ten-year-old girls? My reputation was odd enough already. But a day came just lonely enough to tip the balance of my caution. I mentioned to my sister that I had a word—when she set her jaw, I at once tried to save face—I think I offered to sell the word to her. But she was not fooled and reacted fiercely—it was *their* dictionary. Stung, I retreated.

But I still had my word: *venitile*. I told no one. I would whisper *venitile*, savoring. I knew where it would live in the book, between venison and Venn diagram.

At first *venitile* seemed so pure as to have no meaning at all, though I mulled possibilities as if selecting delicacies or souvenirs: perhaps this gliding creature, half-mineral, half-insect. Perhaps this sleek light sarcasm, of just the sort I then aspired to (“a *most* *venitile* individual,” I could hear them say). I can’t recall what I eventually decided upon, perhaps because I lost interest in the word soon after defining it.

I seem to have been swinging between two poles of language, then. The pole concerned with the discovery of the right word, the precise definition, the clean-edged, firm and shapely piece of the puzzle, the word that snaps into place with the larger culture—we might call this the pole of connection. The other pole seemed to tell of the urge to swim in language as a solitary fish does in water, free of the net. Or, sometimes, of the urge to wing it, to take imaginative flight. Or perhaps—but the metaphors buzz multitudinous about this pole, which we might call the pole of flight. (Or—)

The intimately connected word and the word whipping free of the tether. Sometimes I clung to the pole of connection; that seemed to be what it was for, after all. The pole of flight? There were days lost reading when I hardly seemed to touch down at all. Sometimes, I swung to the pole of flight, and up the pole, and from there shot off into the tropopause, to the region where the words have no meaning: *venitile*. I had discovered that in words without meaning there is sometimes a great pleasure, one by definition hard to define. Consider glossolalia, the gift of tongues. The scriptural justifica-

tion may be garbled, but imagine the pleasure of scat-singing a prayer. You could hardly purify praise to a greater degree. Or imagine scat-singing itself. Or consider the grand mystery of operatic language before you learn what the bathetic words mean. Imagine “Jabberwocky.” Alice said, “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don’t know exactly what they are.”

How far can one go in this direction? The linguist Mario Pei somewhere remarks on the “peculiar charm” of words coined by the insane: *sirrope*, *astaerideo*, *tschario*, *farizitocercia*.

The University had plenty of words. Take Botany: I may be hazy on photosynthesis, but I do recall the classes of fruits, the beautiful names: *pome*, *hesperidium*, *siliqua*. And *utricle*, *samara*, *pepo*. In Ethics, I examined the *categorical imperative* (the image of a lordly horned feline sprang to mind). From Anatomy and Physiology, I recall odd parts of the body: *filtrum*, *cochlea*, *frenum*. In Religious Studies, I nodded to the old gods: *Ganesha*, *Dagon*, *Finn McCool*. Little remains of my foreign languages, but I remember practicing over and over *frisson*: a fluff of the lips swallowed back and rolled up to a nasal thrill like the frisk of a tickly French moustache.

I studied Etymology, though it seemed to me then more like the entomology I often confused it with: the categorization and dissection of words considered as insects. I was willing to consider words as insects, but not all the time. Linguistics was impressive, and yet only provided another occasion that informed against me, distracted as I often was. For example: phonetically, the sound Y represents is described as a *Labiovelar Glide*. To me, a Labiovelar Glide sounded more like a recently imported Sumatran method of love. *Velar Fricative* seemed the sobriquet of some Heep or Vader of a villain, some General Electric, though it actually referred to the *ch* of Bach. This is a sound long gone from English, though evidence that we had it once is there in writing: thought, might, bough. (And of course we should keep it there, in our written language. For, reform spelling and drop away the dark silent Velar Fricative and nite will never be as black as night, though this does not explain why lite is not so light as light, nor as brilliant.)

But what was I doing, with my Skydiving and Ornithology and Symbolic Logic? Dabbling or drowning? Not to mention my weekends and far too many nights: Wild Oats’ Wildfire. I called myself a Renaissance man with an underactive thyroid. I followed through on nothing. In those days,

I was continually falling in love, off the wagon, into words. Too inadvertent to be a deliberate dropout, I fell out of school, and back in again.

One warm September afternoon, apparently as part of some chowder-headed search for enlightenment, I sampled a pale green pill, reportedly psilocybin, reputedly oracular. After a while, I had to go for a walk, to try to work through an oncoming fuddle of remorse and dislocated light. Walking down the day, I began to see in the dust of the pavement traces of what seemed to be Gothic print, faint and fading as advertising from the nineteenth century. Later, I lay down in a park to watch the slow boil of clouds, where words smoked and dissolved before they could be deciphered. And in the leaves of trees, words formed a fine and shivery topiary. In the night, circling and circling towards home, I saw letters carved of rare ice scattered through dark grass, and I was *so* glad when they had resolved themselves to dew by morning. In my bed, in the midst of endless tossing never-agains, I considered the result of my vision-quest: alphabet soup. The urge rose to shake a fist at the Tutelary Demon of the Trips: “Well, *I* could have told you *that*.”

The time had come—and somehow I hadn’t turned into a writer yet. It was true that I was writing, in a sense. I remember that I had started furtively (for I had my doubts), by trying out words, phrases, bits of verse in the margins of text books, hardly distinguishable from my doodles. How to begin? I recall beginning a blue spiral notebook with a long rail about my inability to write, about how words were parasitical crystals that sucked the juice out of the world and substituted a spurious pattern. I complained that I was starting with Sisyphean writer’s block, before I was even a writer (hoping I suppose to score in this way through the back door).

I pressed on with novel combination, free association, manifesto, dither, confession, cant, filling one after another in a growing mound of notebooks and legal pads. Rave. Lingo. Patter. Jeremiad.

Metaphor buzzed and flowered, in those notebooks. And it was pleasant indeed to while away time in the Country of the Words, gathering richer wool, tending that fruitful fuzziness, those tenuous dangling tendrils, the loose ends that form the interconnections of creativity.

But I had to admit that not too many messages were making it back to the coast.

For I had my doubts. I could meditate on a single word as I might on a rare mineral . . . but to put words together into something someone else might possibly consider worth reading seemed fine crazed jugglery.

I took measures to correct this. I took Playwriting. I took New Journalism, and Old Journalism. I took Creative Writing of Fiction. And of Poetry, studying under a renowned teacher, the late Richard Hugo. Hugo was a big, balding man, with this massive corrugated forehead. The first time I read one of my poems in class, Hugo studied a copy at his desk, head cocked to my voice. As I recall, this poem was sort of a cross between Marvell and Ferlinghetti, a rant against virginity (a category I was then freshly and just barely delivered from). By the time I delivered my cathartic, bang-up finish (*We fling high our exploding bouquet/Of silver bullets and cherries*), Hugo's head had tilted the other way, as if to get a better angle. A few beats of silence. His head looked like a clenched bullet. Finally, he visibly relaxed, even brightened. He looked up, though not at me, and said to the back of his hand and the rest of the class, "You distract him while I sneak from the room."

In the fall of 1977, I took some time off to learn how to write, once and for all. Of course, I didn't realize that this was what I was doing at first, but I eventually talked myself into believing that it must be so. I was twenty-five years old.

I had been working at a steak house, a stronghold of nickname and nudge, of smirk and smart money, presided over by a fellow who had never quite recovered from the glee of life as a Delta Delta at the University of North Dakota. I had left in a fit that smacked more of low farce than high dudgeon, but somehow I was able to convince myself that I had been presented with an opportunity, a singular meshing of time and desire. This more-or-less unintentional sabbatical needn't be lost down the rabbit hole. I had a thing to do.

I had saved enough money to get by on for a while, if I was careful. My needs were frugal and few: my only real indulgence was Saturday night at the taverns, though at twenty-five in Montana this seemed less luxury than answer to an undeniable call. In any event I could always retune my budget by turning my needs low for a while: once I sustained myself for a week solely on a crate of apples. Writers also needed stimulants, I knew. During my year, I put away innumerable cups of mine, an ersatz mocha of Swiss

Miss and Taster's Choice. Forging a new date on my student ID, I took exercise when I needed it, sometimes violently—hitting the weights, running the railroad tracks, the field house steps, sometimes twice a day. Once after a particularly strenuous workout, I noticed blood in my urine.

And I had my lair, my digs—my low-rent, second floor walk-up, Murphy-bedded, without a telephone, but with a clawfoot tub, where I more than once read the bathwater down to room temperature. Gatherings of little black bugs sporadically took place in the bread box, but I think that may have been my fault. And I had a view, of the alley favored by the kids from Hellgate High for beating each other up during lunch hour.

So now I told myself that I was in earnest, ready at last. I was living alone for the first time in my life. I had the time. I had only to find the words.

I remember sitting down one day quite determined to write a story. Rather than characters or settings or incidents, the first things I thought of as I nibbled on my pen were the words and phrases I would use. *Zingiberraceous*, for example. This was a word I liked, so I had to supply a character with a spark of ginger. It seems I had a theory that if stories are words, and are words about the world, why not eliminate the middleman (the world) and deal directly with words themselves? And then perhaps particular special words could *generate* stories. Could a word do that? Could an irritating grain of word grow a pearl of story? Ring Lardner once claimed to write by placing a random word on successive blank pages, and then going back to connect the words, filling in the gaps with narrative.

Sometimes I made up the words myself. I described a friend's rumpled attitude and careless glide through life as *somnonchalance*. For outpourings, for swirling gorgeous profusion, I coined *cornukaliedocopia*. *Lithopavanic*, now, means a dance of stone, and I'm afraid the reason that such a word was necessary has faded clean from the tablets of my memory. *Colorsmith*. *Voluptuarium*. *Marvelmas*.

Or, I tried out killer first lines. Here's one I liked quite a bit:

*Once upon a time, it's hard to get off.*

Then there was:

*The people of the valley liked to raise hell, in rich glittery fields.*

Here's one of my all-time favorites:

*Hieronymous had won the heart of a lady, and was rather embarrassed by it, that great candy-lacquered heart, dangling about his neck on a brass chain.*

Where to go with such things? One day it occurred to me that perhaps supplying a matching killer *last* line might turn the trick. Then, with so fierce a field of force having been set up by the first and last lines, the story would surely by necessity spring into being. Here's the line I came up with for the story that began, "Once upon a time . . .": *Their joy was to chase after, even if they never caught anything, and thus they lived out their days, happily, ever after.*

I tried shaped writing, imaginary letters. I toyed with the idea of flavored ink on edible paper. (*They say that he peaked with his Marionberry Period, which is precisely why nothing from that time has survived.*)

Discipline. I remember doing an exercise with the word *red*. Utterly common, very old, Indo-European, definitely not one of my neologisms. I told myself that I'd start with red and work my way through the spectrum.

I wrote down *red*, and pondered. After a while, I came up with a flood of reds from raspberry to flamingo to blood. I played with these reds, and somehow, out of this a murder coalesced, a scene "colored red, redolent of red." Note the important three reds in a row. Then I had to choreograph the murder and describe it. How did a murder work? I distinctly remember waltzing around the kitchen with a broomstick for a partner, figuring maneuvers, angles, blocking, and so on, scribbling notes as I went along. After I straightened that out, I decided that foreshadowing the murder would be a good idea. I devised an earlier scene, centering around this sentence: "She walked into the room, red rum murder in her eyes." Oh, red rum murder. The same backwards as forwards. This, too, was important. Then I felt that to be a responsible writer, to head off critical accusations of gratuitousness, I had to *develop* red rum, plot its history, discourse on the home island (St. Bon), the ecology of the unique cane, the tricks of harvest and manufacture, the byproducts (that tawny marl of a sugar, freckled with fiery pink).

But I had a murder scene. I could edit out the red that was the seed, and still have a murder scene. Perhaps red the catalyst could be used again to generate another scene, of another sort, and then having done so, could be plucked out shining and ready to go once more. In this way, one word, with proper care and handling, could last a lifetime.

Exhausted, I never made it to orange. Still, it was a step, a piece of extended writing that made sense of a sort. I felt that I had gained true ground. One word, and then another, another, word after word, in a steady

balanced emission, humming and cruising. Of course, I *still* didn't have a story, a poem, a piece of any particular kind, but I had material. A *mess* of material, to be sure.

During my year, my mound of work piled up, a great, steaming, mouldering compost of scribbled paper. My hope was, I suppose, that a seed or two would take, volunteers that in some way would prove literarily fruitful. In this heap of material so lavish and haphazard didn't there just about have to be a story, a poem, a *piece* in there somewhere? All I had to do was merely hone away everything else and find it.

I had an analogy for this. (Actually, I had a *barn* full of analogies, but I'll just show you the one.) The summer I was twenty-three, I decided that I would at last learn to whistle. I walked around the warehouse I was working in, emitting an untuned breathful hooting that nonetheless contained a strand of cool whistle. I persevered, driving my colleagues nuts, and by the end of the summer I had whittled away whatever wasn't whistle. I expected something like this to happen with writing.

And I suppose it did, after all, but it took years.

Any kind of writing career, no matter how oblique or slight, depends on so much: writerly companions of a congenial pace and temperament. Great slathers and swatches of time. The taming of a voice. The development of a work ethic. Indeed, the slow growth of an attention span. And for me, again and again the hammering lesson that I would learn to write if I could just keep the words from getting in the way.

At least, that was my theory about the way things went, the way I first reconstructed the situation. Given close examination, things turned out to be more mysterious than that. During my research for this essay, I found a yellowing manuscript. Plunk in the middle of a story I had been trying to write way back when was a feast: *zarfs* of iced coffee, flagons of *rosolio* and *shandygaff*, filets of *blackbelly rosefish*, and other odd items, the gleanings of one of my ancient dictionary lists. This feast was quite arbitrary, but apparently I had felt the need to unload these words, to exorcise them. As I read I expected to find that these were indeed words in the way, that they were sterile, inert, that they were just *stuck* in a story like raisins in pudding. To my dismay, I now found the feast the liveliest part of the piece, where the lumbering characters limber down, unstuff their straw, at their best when for no particular reason they drop everything and settle back for *jermoonal* in *jequirity* sauce.