

MAKING UP STORIES

Let me present you with a chain of associations.

I am delivering the 1979 Hopwood Lecture at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan, near the city of Detroit.

When Detroit is mentioned I think reflexively of my father. I have never before yesterday been in Detroit but my father was stationed there, the last year of World War II. When he came home to California from Detroit he brought me three handkerchiefs of a very heavy silk twill, one brown, one orange, the third a quite brilliant emerald green. He had bought these handkerchiefs at the J.L. Hudson Company and the saleswoman had told him that "all the young girls" were wearing them, knotted around the neck.

I was undone by this present, for several reasons: one was that I was only ten, and overcome that my father should consider me a "young girl," should buy me a grown-up present, a present of something "in fashion." The pieces of silk seemed to me incredibly glamorous and beautiful, and they were rendered even more so by the fact that this was the first time my father had ever had occasion to buy me—all by himself, without my mother—a present.

I remember that we sat down to lunch.

I remember that we had cracked crab, although there remains some question about this. I may have invented the crab, you never know.

I definitely remember that we had iced tea, in a silver pitcher, because I picked up this pitcher to pour myself some tea—more evidence that I was grown up, a "young girl" instead of a little girl—and I spilled it.

This spilling of the tea was a very fraught moment—anyone old enough to wear silk handkerchiefs knotted around her neck

and drink iced tea was too old to drop the pitcher—and I remember bolting from the table, running to my room and locking the door.

We can call that story “Homecoming,” or we can call it “Family Life,” or we can call it “Detroit and Other Sorrows.”

It is not a story I will ever write.

Similarly: When the Hopwood Awards are mentioned I think reflexively of being an undergraduate at Berkeley and wishing that Avery Hopwood had left that famous one-fifth of his estate to the University of California instead of the University of Michigan. I wanted to win a Hopwood Award. I wanted to win one not only because the very word “Hopwood” had a bigtime national sound to it, a kind of certification that the winner was on the right track, but also because the prize was money, cash, and I needed it.

I hear the word “Hopwood” and I think of Corinne Benson, who was my roommate one year at Berkeley. Corinne was from Marin County and she turned on the radio to a certain station every night at midnight in order to hear the sign-off, which was a male tenor singing “The Bluebird of Happiness.” She had blonde hair and blue eyes and many, many powder blue sweaters to match her eyes, many sweaters and many dresses and many different-sized bottles of the particular perfume she always wore.

She lent me one of her dresses one night, to wear on a date to San Francisco.

This date was with someone I had met in a writing class. In other words he was “literary,” as I wanted desperately to be, and had no car. We went from Berkeley to San Francisco on the F train and we ate the inevitable coq au vin at the inevitable French family restaurant and we saw a play, the inevitable Restoration comedy.

I do not now remember the play but I remember the dress and I remember this boy reading Dylan Thomas out loud to me on the F train back to Berkeley. He gave me a gloss on every line he read. For example:

“*It was my thirtieth year to heaven,*” he would read.

And then he would turn to me and say: "It was his thirtieth birthday."

And I would nod.

He liked the dress, and asked why I never wore it, and I was too embarrassed to say that it was not mine. I was so young that I imagined it shameful to let anyone know that you cared enough about him to borrow a dress.

"*Altarwise by owl-light in the half-way house,*" he would read, and then interpret it. I recall thinking that if we only had Hopwood Awards at Berkeley we might each win one, this boy and I, and winning a Hopwood Award would give me enough money to buy a dress exactly like Corinne's, and give him enough certification, enough confidence, to ride across San Francisco Bay without feeling impelled to improve the moment by giving me an interlinear translation of Dylan Thomas. Had he known what I was thinking he would have called me bourgeois. This is another story I will never write.

This kind of associating never stops.

Corinne Benson, the trace of her perfume in the borrowed dress, the particular brilliant colors of those silk handkerchiefs from J.L. Hudson, the flicker of the lights on the F train at night, coq au vin, iced tea and the way the moisture condenses on the outside of a silver pitcher: these are only the skim off the top of all that floods through my mind when I hear the words "Detroit" or "Hopwood Awards".

For example, by a chain of associations too tedious to reconstruct, Corinne Benson leads me directly to watching "Splendor in the Grass" on television, with a drunk psychiatrist from Louisville, in the Faculty Club at Berkeley on the night Saigon fell in 1975. The Faculty Club at Berkeley leads me to the stone tower Robinson Jeffers built at Carmel. Carmel leads me to the ordination of a Jesuit priest, a summer afternoon in Sacramento, and the ordination leads me to Santa Fe and to New Haven and to the murders in Beverly Hills of Sharon Tate Polanski, Jay Sebring, Voitek Frykowski, Steven Parent, and Abigail Folger.

To give you the connections that take me from Detroit to those

five murders in California would be to give you a story of my whole life, and I say "a story" rather than "the story" deliberately.

I say "a story" because only part of that story would be true.

Some of the story would be a trick of memory.

Elizabeth Hardwick has written a novel, *Sleepless Nights*, in which the subject is memory, and in this novel she wrote: "Sometimes I resent the glossary, the concordance of truth, many have about my real life . . . I mean that such fact is to be a hindrance to memory."

Some of what all of us remember is automatic improvisation, a scenario invented to link puzzling and contradictory scenes. When we tell someone a dream we try, in spite of ourselves, for a certain coherence, a dramatic shape: we interpret the dream as we tell it, and filter out those details which seem to lead nowhere. We think of our dreams as stories, but they are not, at least until we tell them.

In fact the way we think in dreams is also the way we think when we are awake, all of these images occurring simultaneously, images opening up new images, charging and recharging, until we have a whole field of image, an electric field pulsing and blazing and taking on the exact character of a migraine aura.

All of us have this going on in our heads, all the time, this incessant clatter, this charging and recharging.

Usually we sedate ourselves to keep the clatter down.

And when I say that we sedate ourselves, I don't necessarily mean with drugs, not at all. Work is a sedative. The love of children can be a sedative. Planting a garden, locking the doors, cooking dinner, arranging the tulips in a certain glass and placing the glass so that the water catches the light: anything that successfully focuses our attention is sedative in effect.

Another way we keep the clatter down is by trying to make it coherent, trying to give it the same dramatic shape we give to our dreams; in other words by making up stories.

All of us make up stories.

Some of us, if we are writers, write these stories down, concentrate on them, worry them, revise them, throw them away and retrieve them and revise them again, focus on them all of

our attention, all of our emotion, render them into objects.

It is very common for writers to think of their work as a collection of objects. A novel, to a writer, is an object. A story or an essay is an object. Every piece of work has its own shape, its own texture, its own specific gravity. This perception of the work as an object is not usually shared by the reader of it, and seems to be one of the principal differences between writers and people in other lines of sedation.

The point of making the object is to give the clatter a shape, to find the figure in the carpet, the order in the disorder.

Robert Penn Warren once described fiction as "an attempt, however modest and limited, to make sense of experience, to understand how things hang meaningfully together."

Joseph Heller described the conception of *Catch-22* this way: "I was lying in bed when suddenly this line came to me: 'It was love at first sight. The first time he saw the chaplain X fell madly in love with him.'" The "X" turned out to be Yossarian, but Heller didn't have the name, didn't even know that this "X" was in the Army. "The chaplain wasn't necessarily an Army chaplain," he said. "He could have been a prison chaplain. I don't understand the process of imagination though I know that I am very much at its mercy. The ideas come to me in the course of a controlled daydream, a directed reverie."

Cocteau described his work as deriving from a "a profound indolence, a somnolence in which we indulge ourselves like invalids who try to prolong dreams."

Saul Bellow said, when someone asked him what he thought about winning the Nobel Prize, "I don't know, I haven't written about it."

There you are. I have never heard a more succinct statement of the way writers think. The act of writing is for a writer the process of thinking, of plugging into that electrical field of image and making an object out of the flash and the clatter.

I don't mean at all that this object comes "naturally", any more than a piece of sculpture comes "naturally". You don't find a novel or a story lying around in your unconscious like a piece of driftwood. You have to hammer it, work it, find the particular grain of it.

Nor do I mean to say that we write out of our "experience",

whatever that means. Someone is always saying to young writers that they should "write from experience". As it happens I get copies of a lot of composition textbooks, and the worst of them feature sample "themes", sample papers written on "The Night Fresno Beat Bakersfield" or "The Day I Learned I Made All-State Tackle".

These textbooks present the sample theme, and then they show ways the theme might be improved, usually by inventing some kind of "action" lead, something along the lines of "The clock was running. The ball was arcing into Fresno territory."

The trouble with this is that it is based on a very limited and literal view of experience. The advice that a writer write from experience is obviously good advice, but it is advice devoid of real meaning, since it does not define experience, or defines it as something that happened, as having actually been on the fifty-yard-line on the night Fresno beat Bakersfield.

Experience is something quite different. Joseph Conrad wrote his great South American novel, *Nostromo*, out of "experience," and yet he had never in his life set foot in South America. He had once, as a very young man, shipped on a freighter that called at a few ports on the west coast of Mexico, had been told a story in one of them, and—out of those few hours ashore in Mexico 20 or 25 years before—he had made that novel that remains today all anyone needs to know in order to apprehend South America.

Henry James addressed himself to this question of experience. He answers a contemporary who advised that "a young lady brought up in a quiet country village should avoid descriptions of garrison life" by saying, in effect, no, not at all, you have it wrong. A young lady brought up in a quiet country village can apprehend everything about garrison life by glancing once through a window of Knightsbridge Barracks in London. If—and this was of course James' famous phrase—she is "one of the people on whom nothing is lost." Let me quote James:

I remember an English novelist . . . telling me that she was much commended for the impression she had managed to give in one of her tales of the nature and way of life of French Protestant youth.

She had been asked where she learned so much about this recondite being, she had been congratulated on her peculiar opportunities. These opportunities consisted of her having once, in Paris, as she ascended a staircase, passed an open door where some of the young Protestants were seated at a table round a finished meal. The glimpse made a picture; it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience.

“That moment was experience.”

We have all had such moments.

We retrieve them from that field of image that assaults us every day we live.

In the spring of 1975 I was teaching at Berkeley, just for a month and just one class, which met two days a week from 4 to 6 in the afternoon. I was in the middle of writing a novel that spring, and all day I would sit in my room at the Faculty Club. This room was just a room: twin beds, a desk, a straight-backed chair and a rented typewriter. I would get up very early and go out for breakfast and then I would come back to this room and sit at the desk and make up the novel. Tell myself the story. Entrance myself, in the literal sense of the word “entrance.”

Then at night a curious thing would happen. I would go out to dinner, or to a lecture, and I would listen to people talk about novels.

Everywhere I went, people were talking about novels.

Finished novels. Famous novels.

Just on the face of it, this was intimidating in the extreme: the main thing a writer wants to keep out of his or her mind is the idea that anybody else has ever written a novel.

But it was intimidating for another reason as well.

Everyone to whom I was listening at Berkeley that spring talked about novels as if the novelist—whether it was Dickens or George Eliot or Scott Fitzgerald—had known precisely what he or she was doing before setting out, as if the novel were schematic, and entirely planned.

If this was true, then I was in bad trouble.

I particularly remember a kind of amiable argument I was having one night with some people from the English Depart-

ment. Someone had mentioned *The Last Tycoon*, and everyone was pointing out ways in which it didn't work, ways in which it seemed to them a flagrantly bad novel.

There was the "imbalance" of it.

There was the rather creaking deus ex machina aspect to the plot.

I didn't disagree with anything they said, but I still thought that *The Last Tycoon* was a brilliant piece of work, and they didn't.

Finally I realized what the argument was about, what the difference in our thinking was, and it was quite a radical difference. They were looking at *The Last Tycoon* not as a fragment of a novel in progress but as the first third of a novel for which we were simply missing the last two-thirds. In other words they saw that first third as completed, frozen, closed—the interrupted execution of a fully articulated plan on Fitzgerald's part—and I saw it as something fluid, something that would change as he discovered where the book was taking him.

They saw a novel as a plan carried out.

I saw a novel as an object discovered.

They saw the process as an act of intelligence.

I saw it as a mystery.

They saw the writer as someone who has a story to tell and writes it down.

I saw the writer as someone who discovers the story only in the act of making it up.

The novel I was working on during that spring in Berkeley had begun in 1971 as a book about a woman who was traveling through Mississippi and Louisiana with her ex-husband, who was dying. The novel was to take place entirely in motel rooms off interstate highways.

In Holiday Inns, in Ramada Inns. In Howard Johnson's.

It was to be a novel without event.

It was to be told in a flat third person.

By the time I was working on this novel in Berkeley in 1975—the novel was *A Book of Common Prayer*—it had taken quite a different shape. It had become a novel which took place largely in a Central American republic named Boca Grande

and—far from being without event—involved bombings, a highjacking, a revolution and a number of other theatrical—not to say melodramatic—events. And it was told not in that “flat third person” but in the first person, by a sixty-year-old woman named Grace Strasser-Mendana, born Grace Tabor in Denver, Colorado. Grace Tabor went down to Latin America as an anthropologist. Grace Tabor retired as an anthropologist and married into the Strasser-Mendana family, which ran Boca Grande. Grace Tabor was dying of pancreatic cancer, and she was to tell us the story of the woman who traveled with her ex-husband through Mississippi and Louisiana.

You could call this telling the story the hard way. I would call it telling myself a story that incorporated all of the images I was getting at the time.

Once in the late Sixties I took a series of psychiatric tests, one of which was the Thematic Apperception Test. The Thematic Apperception Test, or “TAT,” is the one in which the subject is shown a series of drawings and asked to make up a story based on each drawing. I recall resisting this test. I remember telling the doctor that of course I could make up stories, but he would be misguided to think that he knew more about what the stories revealed than I did, because I made up stories for a living.

He persisted, and I took the test.

One of the pictures was of a woman, not smiling, standing on some kind of raised ground—alone—and gazing down to where a group of men were very busy building a bridge or a culvert or maybe just tilling a field, some kind of basic physical work.

I remember that the story I made up to “go” with this drawing had to do with an American woman who had become involved with the revolutionary forces in Cuba during the early days of the revolution, and had since become disillusioned, and isolated in Cuba.

The doctor of course wanted to know “why” she was disillusioned, and I remember saying quite sharply “because that’s the story I’m telling you.”

We didn’t get much further than that—we were proceeding,

after all, from radically different points of view—but in fact I was more interested in this story than in any of the other stories I made up that day, and it occurred to me some years later, when I was making up the story that had begun as a trip through Mississippi and Louisiana and had evolved into a revolution in Central America, that the story had actually been in my mind for all that time.

I am going to read you some of the notes I made during the time that this novel about the trip through the South was in the process of evolving into *A Book of Common Prayer*. These notes were all in certain notebooks I had, and I am going to give them to you in the order in which they were made.

She goes out to the airport and watches the planes take off. Arousing uneasy glances in the Panama airport, out there in the morning when the midnight Avianca from Mexico comes in. Drinking tea in the coffee shop at the Cartagena airport, making them boil the water before she will put the tea bag in.

Arrival of mail, magazines, seed catalogues. Projects to make money and fame. Correspondents. Walking downtown in Cartagena in the midday blaze. Cracks and ruts in the sidewalk. Dinner alone in the Capilla del Mar.

Unfitted for the heat. Frequent fevers, illness, occasional unsatisfactory liaisons with locals, who misapprehend her.

IF THIS IS THE FRAME FOR THE SOUTHERN STORY THEN THE SOUTH MUST HAVE UNHINGED HER IN CERTAIN KEY WAYS.

During the troubles in Boca Grande she dreamwalks her way into danger. Incapable of believing that it can touch her. Una norteamericana. Self-delusion. Herded into the bull ring.

Argument with local druggist or doctor during bout of fever. Paregorina.

The Miami Herald is what she reads.

Official functions, rum and quinine. Whenever the USIS man is invited, so is she.

SOUTH AMERICAN PART IN PRESENT TENSE, SOUTH IN PAST? MAYBE TWO NOVELLAS, PUBLISHED TOGETHER?

Death very casual.

FIRST LINE: HERE IS WHAT HAPPENED.

FIRST CHAPTER HARD THIRD SUMMARY. THEN ALTERNATING CHAPTERS. LAST CHAPTER SOUTH AMERICAN BUT BEGINS: "WHEN IT HAPPENED . . ." VERY HARD LINE THIRD PERSON.

WHO IS THE THIRD PERSON? MAYBE YOU DON'T KNOW WHO IT IS UNTIL 2/3 THROUGH?

"HERE IS WHAT HAPPENED: SHE LEFT THE FIRST MAN, SHE LEFT THE FIRST CHILD, SHE WENT TO THE SECOND MAN, SHE LOST THE SECOND CHILD, SHE DIED. IN SUMMARY. SO YOU KNOW THE STORY. IN FACT THE STORY HAD COMPLICATIONS, BUT ONLY FOR THE LIVING. IF YOU HAVE EVER MADE THEM BOIL THE WATER TWENTY MINUTES BEFORE YOU PUT THE TEABAG IN YOU WILL KNOW WHAT I MEAN. FEVER IS RAMPANT."

Cataloguing the flora and fauna. Writing to the British resident in Honiara, Guadalcanal. Reading the Pacific Islands Monthly. Devising a scheme to ship Christmas trees to Caracas.

When the ice melted in the Thermos bottles in the hotel rooms it left flecks of white in the water. She imagined as she drank it that the flecks were the salmonella typhosa, salmonella paratyphosa, salmonella shigella, but of course she knew that you could not see bacteria with the naked eye. Unless your eyes were very good.

She is always planning to go home. She takes lessons in Spanish, Castilian Spanish, from a very old woman.

Since the inception of the Nobel Prize in science there has been only one given to a South American. This was given to an Argentinian doctor in 1947. Later, under Peronist charges of incompetence, he resigned from the university.

The Argentinian neurosurgeon who cannot practice in New York or Buenos Aires. At the family compounds his wife is stopped at the gate by his brother, with a machine gun. Kidnapping insurance. His brother tries on military helmets all day, and on visits to New York tries to sell vicuna blankets.

The illuminated Christ on the hillside had been the idea, but there was no hillside in Boca Grande, was no hill. The Opera, the Botanical Garden, the race track, the Jockey Club. The sentries with tommy guns patrolling the presidential palace.

Asylum was available in Boca Grande, but no deposed president had ever availed himself of it.

The preference for speaking French among Boca Grande's three or four first families. The money in European banks. American oil, the National City Bank, Brown Brothers Harriman, United Fruit.

American covers. Americans come down to do "research," come in "study groups," to study "behavioral patterns."

There had once been a railroad line built in Boca Grande but the contracts for its construction had been let to two competing companies, and upon completion it was found that they had built track of different gauges, so the track went unused and grew over.

The prescription for depression is "removal to a hill station," but we have no hill stations in Boca Grande.

LA REPUBLICA DE BOCA GRANDE: a Spanish colony from 1525 to 1823. Independent since 1942. 28 constitutions as an independent nation. When Boca Grande was a Spanish colony it was governed from Guatemala City or Colombia by a captaincy general. Brief period as one of the United Provinces of Central America. A member of the United Nations, the OAS, and the Central American Common Market. Myriad aid offices with acronyms, all the American ones plus the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration. In the early nineteenth century Boca Grande resisted an annexation attempt by Mexico. Gastrointestinal infection is the leading

natural cause of death. Rainy season from June to October. There is nothing left of Boca Grande's colonial period because of an earthquake in 1900

Let me describe Charlotte's appearance. Find the character clues here. A woman of medium height, extreme and volatile thinness, a pronounced pallor, and pale red hair which curled in the damp heat and stands out around her face. She has a tendency to drop her head slightly, as if the weight of her hair is more than she can carry. Her body has a tendency to retain water and since adolescence she has taken a diuretic, but has been told not to take it in the tropics, so that when she is tired her ankles seem thick. Her expression startles by its openness, as if she sees someone about to hit her. She is 40 years old but this naked and rather unfinished expression gives the impression of a somewhat younger woman. She wears expensive shoes and the careless observer might take her to be vain about her feet, but this is not so: in fact she believes her feet ugly and tries to hide them when she is seated. She has for 15 years carried the same Hermes handbag, day and evening, now in need of repair but the lifetime guarantee is useless in Boca Grande and she will not spend money to have it repaired, because it is guaranteed. This is the kind of conundrum she frets over. She wears expensive discreet clothes which on her manage to look flamboyant, and there is always something slightly askew: a hem about to come out, a seam with a quarter-inch split, a minute stubborn stain, a trace of powder on the chiffon blouse. What is this woman doing in Boca Grande?

Well, of course, there it was: there was the question I had to answer. There was the "story." What was this woman doing in Boca Grande.

During the time I spent answering that question, making up the story, I lived in Boca Grande. Everything I heard or saw or thought about—all the clatter, all the images—was framed by this imaginary country, by the light there, the weather there.

For a long time after I finished that novel, I continued living in Boca Grande. I couldn't let it go. I knew too much about it. I knew for example how to run a copra plantation, I had taught myself how. I knew that if you try to crowd 200 palms

to the acre you are going to get a low yield, I knew not to plant near salt water, I knew about the particular varieties of scale and fungus that afflict coconut palms.

In other words I had, for a while, made the world hang meaningfully together, made all the images coherent, and it was hard to give that up.

It is still.

So I am making up another story.

And teaching myself the economics of the sugar business.

(Hopwood Lecture, 1979)