

The Potholder Model of Literary Ambition

Writing short stories reminds me of my eight-year-old self, in the 1950's, making cotton potholders on a little steel loom and selling them door to door for twenty-five cents each. At night I'd sit in bed and weave those loops and crochet the edges, all the while practicing my spiel, and dreaming of what I'd buy with the quarters. Wax lips and bubble gum. *Archie* comic books. Nail polish – although my father forbade nail polish. I lived in Terre Haute, Indiana, in a neighborhood of muddy playgrounds and ma-and-pa groceries. It had a fallen-down feel, as if the houses were the architectural equivalent of a girl who wouldn't stand up straight and proud. I couldn't wait to get out of there. To places with more shine, more hipness.

I wanted to be a writer.

I try to place myself in that girl's mind to recall what that meant exactly. It would be a life of reading, of slight domestic disorder, books and papers stacked beside a desk, libraries, visits to cities, unpredictability, eccentric people, cataloguing all the rich details of life lived outdoors, for I experienced an intense euphoria outdoors as a child – reinforced by reading *The Secret Garden* over and over. I think of Joan Didion in her essay about becoming a writer. She said that she wasn't a very good student at Berkeley because she was always more interested in the way sunlight moved across her hardwood floor than in her classes. A sensualist. And I felt that in myself at a very early age and wanted to replicate that sensuality in writing.

Ambition was another given of the writer's life. From reading writers' biographies, I understood that ambition might be a bright thread in the fabric of a life or it might be the entire cloth. It appeared necessary; it might keep you going.

Within ambition were the seeds of profound disappointment and delirious acceptance. I probably read *Little Women* four times between the ages of seven and twelve. Jo March was like a big sister to me. "She did not think herself a genius by any means, but when the writing fit came on, she gave herself up to it with entire abandon, and led a blissful life, unconscious of want, care, or bad weather, while she sat safe and happy in an imaginary world, full of friends almost as real and dear to her as any in the flesh. Sleep forsook her eyes, meals stood untasted, day and night were all too short to enjoy the happiness which blessed her only at such times, and made these hours worth living, even if they bore no other fruit. The divine afflatus usually lasted a week or two,

and then she emerged from her `vortex', hungry, sleepy, cross, or despondent.” I have known the bliss of the vortex. Blissful more was the realization of ambition, the moment when Jo March received the check for \$100; she had won the literary prize. She was delighted with the encouragement in the letter, *and* she loved being able to send her mother and sister to the seashore with the money.

I began my adult writing life as a poet. My reasonable ambition was about seeing one or two poems in magazines around Baltimore, where I lived, mostly, from 1970 until 1974. I often say that I couldn't sit still long enough to write fiction, although stories and novels were my first love. In 1979 I became ill and was required to spend almost two months in bed or lounging around. I turned to fiction then to save my sanity. I wrote the beginning of a novel, but that petered out because I had no sense of structure. I had no teacher. I finally settled on stories and wrote the stories in *Friday Night at Silver Star* from 1979 through 1984. I wrote another novel that went in the drawer. And then another. But they weren't tied to ambition; they were like extended short stories; I wrote them because I delighted in the sensual world I was creating.

So much happened on a personal level during that time: I moved three times, from Oregon to British Columbia to Montana; for two years I taught high school in a remote valley in British Columbia; I experienced severe anxiety because my first marriage had ended in a divorce that separated me from my son; my mother died; I got married again; I held several jobs, teaching aerobics, working at an espresso bar in Bozeman, Montana, working for Department of Labor as a counselor. To learn about stories, I went to my public library wherever I lived and borrowed volumes of *Best American Short Stories* going back to the 1940's. I read a story a night for several years. I merely hungered to write a good story, like baking a perfect cake from scratch.

The time of longing in your life is beautiful. All possibilities are ahead of you. You think you want to make something happen, but when it does – you finally publish a story, you publish a book, someone reviews your book favorably – you realize that the bliss lies in the moment you pluck a metaphor from thin air. It lies in the time spent at your desk. This is probably clichéd wisdom. But I have always been hardheaded and needed to learn it for myself.

The publication of *Friday Night at Silver Star* meant that I was able to apply for a teaching job that would give me more time to write. Time to stare out the window, time to read old family letters and steal from

them, time to fall into the writing trance, Jo March's vortex. I applied for a visiting position at Purdue University, was hired, and one thing led to another and I have been there for twenty-one years. Time has been mine. While I wish I'd written more, I'm not unhappy with what I've written. And after moving to Indiana, at first I went on writing stories and I looked to the careers of Alice Munro and Andre Dubus and Raymond Carver as writers worth emulating, writers who wrote stories rather than novels. Grace Paley came to Purdue in 1988 and when a student asked her what she did when she couldn't write, as if this would be a painful situation, Grace Paley said, "I visit my sister." No big deal. As if there was plenty of time for stories to come. I think of that now as I work on new stories in 2008. It took me almost twenty years to return to writing stories.

I started my first novel *Hummingbird House* in 1989. Many interruptions later, many drafts discarded, I finished it in the summer of 1996, while on sabbatical in New Mexico. The sabbatical experience infused my life with literary ambition. I was living as those writers had who went before me, and I was charmed by it: long hours writing every day at the dining room table, a view of the Sangre de Christo mountains out my window, and then, in the afternoon, hikes at Georgia O'Keefe's Ghost Ranch, and then dinner with my husband, a little wine, a little fire in our adobe house, occasional trips to Santa Fe for a movie, living outside of the workaday life, always in the vortex of writing and dreaming about writing, with no teaching to disturb the flow. It was like running a marathon, hard, but sweet in its simplicity. I wanted more of that. Craved it.

Ambition was laced with an irony bred of my subject matter. Rock bottom, it was the story of the lives of women and children in wartime. I felt called on a near-spiritual level to write *Hummingbird House* and knew that I would do it no matter what the outcome. But I'll be frank: I wanted solid reviews, freedom from teaching, cold cash in the bank, and a relationship with a publishing house with resources. If I have been disappointed, it's about that: not having a relationship with a publisher I can count on. My work has been published by Graywolf, McMurray & Beck, Pantheon, and Anchor. I have no contract with any of them now, and only wisps of connection with Anchor and MacAdam/Cage (who bought McMurray & Beck). They keep my books in print. And for that I am grateful.

It took two difficult years to find a publisher for *Hummingbird House*, years in which I felt like a fraud while teaching. I'd spent seven years writing a novel that no one wanted to publish. Then surprisingly good

things began to happen, in quick succession: Fred Ramey at McMurray & Beck in Denver accepted the manuscript and did a superb edit on it in record time; it was a finalist for The National Book Award and The New Yorker Fiction Prize; it was nominated by the Chicago Public Library for the IMPAC-Dublin Prize. I never knew who might be calling when the phone rang. People would ask me, “What’s it like, being a finalist for The National Book Award?” And I’d usually say, “The first thing I thought was ‘What am I going to wear?’” It had nothing to do with writing, but it was a good time, those few months.

My audience had expanded; of course, I wanted to write another novel.

In the River Sweet came much faster. By that time I had a wonderful agent who sold the book based on the first thirty-nine pages of manuscript. More than one publisher wanted to buy it: the stuff of writerly daydreams. Finally. I bought a house in the country, with horses as my nearest neighbors, perfect for writing. I went to Vietnam to research *In the River Sweet*. I had more confidence in whatever ideas took hold in me and I had plenty of ideas. This was around 2000-2001; I was fifty-three years old; my writing career was in the ascendance.

When *In the River Sweet* came out, I traveled for five weeks to nineteen cities, from Seattle to Boston. Some of those events were readings at colleges and universities, events I had arranged. But at least half were book-tour events, arranged by my publisher. They put me up in the most luxurious hotels. Like the Monaco in Chicago, where you may ask to have a goldfish in a bowl brought to your room, if you miss your pets. But in the bookstores, the feeling was not luxurious. The tour went awry. Most writers whose books had been scheduled for publication in September 2002 were shoved into October, which meant we were competing for air time and bookstore time with many more writers than we would have been had we, as a nation, not been commemorating the 9/11 attacks. Barnes and Noble had not “gotten behind the book,” the kiss of death. Border’s had named it an Original Voices pick for the month of October, 2002, but I was not booked into a single Border’s in any of those cities. *The Lovely Bones* had come out in paperback and I would go into a bookstore to find one or two copies of *In the River Sweet* and waist-high stacks of *The Lovely Bones*. I found out that you can write a good book, be published by a New York house, be sent on an expensive tour, and feel like a ghost in those hotels and bookstores. Writers often complain about tours, how disappointing they are. I

had been naïve and thought that surely my publishers, having spent so much money for the book, would see to it that it sold. But they didn't.

John Gardner wrote that writing a novel is a “sustained psychological battle with your self.” Still, I had energy for that battle, for novel-writing. I laid out my plans for another one. Perhaps my inability to find a title that my editor liked should have been a warning sign. I wanted *Tango Season*; she felt that sounded like a mystery novel. In February of 2003 I went to New York City to scope out the possibility of moving there for a summer, doing the down-in-the-street research, setting a novel there and in Buck's County, Pennsylvania, a country mouse-versus-city mouse sort of story. This is how I thought then— I might be an outsider, but I'll just move wherever I want, write about whatever I choose. I was excited. It was a process that had worked for me in the past. I had spent five months in Central America, researching *Hummingbird House*. I had traveled to Vietnam and spent time in New Orleans to get what I needed to write *In the River Sweet*.

Let me digress a bit and say that I had always assumed the writing life would be a life of travel. As a child somehow that had gotten into my head, although the farthest I traveled as a child was Columbus, Ohio. Chicago was nearby. St. Louis was nearby. But our home and our habits were hardscrabble. It was as if the Great Depression had taken up permanent residence. Or the war mentality: make-do. Traveling was something for people of means, which my family decidedly was not. My father was an installer of telephone equipment who traveled for his work. The names of the places seemed romantic – Labrador, Newfoundland, Pennsylvania. He would return on the train to Terre Haute via Chicago, and, at the Federal Bakery on Wabash Avenue, buy pastries in a pale green box tied with string. He'd sweep into our house for occasional weekends, on wings of traveling glories, but by the end of the weekend we would be glad to see him go, for my parents did not get along. I knew the names of places he worked; I knew the smell of him when he came home – his aftershave, and something from the train, perhaps cigar smoke and diesel fuel – but my travel experiences came from books. I was familiar with every cranny of my childhood libraries and at the age of seven pestered my mother to allow me to read adult books and she said yes. I read *Marjorie Morningstar* and *Jane Eyre* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. In third grade I wrote away to the Mexican embassy for travel information. They sent me a map, which I cherished, tracing rivers and roads with my fingertip. I took Spanish in high school. By then we had

moved to Maryland and my brother Michael and I would walk a mile along a country road to buy *The Washington Post* and on that walk we spoke only Spanish. We determined to travel. And travel has been a part of my life as a writer – to Central America, to Vietnam, to Switzerland and France, to the UK, to Mexico, to Alaska and the Bahamas. I have lived for short periods in the Deep South and for many years in the Pacific Northwest and Canada. I have backpacked and skied in much of the Western United States. My favorite cities on our continent are Vancouver, British Columbia, and San Francisco. There are only three states I have not visited: Hawaii, Maine, and Rhode Island, but I'm not done yet. Many of my travel dreams have come true. I have no viable complaints in that regard. My current story cycle is set in a fictional blues mecca in the Mississippi Delta, a place I've visited five times in the last two years. I consider myself a savvy traveler, and love the puzzles I'm presented to solve: unearthing history, interviewing people, and keeping a notebook of the felt life of a place I'm visiting. And discovering a whole – a story – from the disparate parts.

At the end of that long research weekend in New York, that reconnaissance trip, my editor sat me down in a coffee shop in Greenwich Village and told me flat out, "Don't set this book in New York." I was baffled, stunned. Years later I would discover that another writer – a New Yorker – had published a book, set in Manhattan, with a story line similar to mine, with the same publishing house. I will never know if that book deal was made before mine; if so, it would have been helpful to know that. Instead I walked away from that conversation feeling my confidence drain out of me. I was the country mouse – a writer from the hinterlands. She had decided I *couldn't* write a book set in New York. I wasn't a New Yorker; how could I possibly get it right? I had given her enormous power over my writing life.

Thus began a long line of moments of mistrust. I went home to the Midwest, changed the setting to Chicago, wrote draft after draft that she rejected, and, finally, two years later, broke off my relationship with that publishing house. I am in the process of paying back the advance, and hence, every month I write a check to the publishing house and am reminded of my failure. I was never able to realize that story's full potential. The manuscript – *Home Plate* – was rejected by other publishing houses, until it came clear that this was another novel for the drawer. I am cannibalizing it for short story material.

That kind of failure – when there’s so much at stake – erodes confidence. Now, when I have an ambitious novel idea, instead of thinking, “That would be a great thing to explore for a few years,” I think, “What if it doesn’t work out?” What if I engage in that particular psychological battle, put everything else on hold, neglect my students and my family, and in the end, the editor doesn’t want the book, I have to pay back money, the tour goes awry, and so on?

On a practical level, it’s not a life I want, that disappointment. At least not now. I’d rather visit my sister! Perhaps to withstand disappointment, you need to have an equal measure of longing. And that sort of longing is mostly for the young. But I have built into my body and mind, at a cellular level, the practice of writing. I have not set an alarm for decades. I wake up between five and six every morning with stories and language seducing me. I get up, have a cup of strong coffee, and in my red flannel L.L. Bean robe, go to my computer. About a year ago, it seemed natural to start writing stories again.

I can’t remember what writer said, “Writing a novel is like a marriage; writing a short story is like a one-night stand.” When I brought this up with novelist and short story writer Elizabeth Stuckey-French, she said, “Writing a story is like going with your spouse on a romantic vacation to a brand new place. In other words, you’ve still got the same old material you’ve always had, your same old obsessions, but you’re trying to make them new again and that can be fun.” And, just like a vacation, the short-story lifestyle fits nicely into the seasonal demands of being a teacher. It’s easy to ditch a messing-around piece or set a first draft aside and start another. When you do finish, you have the satisfaction of completing a small, neatly made object: a short story. A short story, like a potholder, is a humble piece of work.

If I take to heart Donald Hall’s advice in his essays about poetry and ambition, I might conclude that as a younger writer I was in too big a hurry. He recommends working on a poem for ten years before publishing it. Now, I wouldn’t worry if a story took that long. William Gass once said to me: “It takes about ten years to learn to write a good sentence.” Writers of another generation, I thought, an older generation, believe in this patient approach. And now, I am *of* them, tinkering with my stories for years.

When you finish a short story, you peddle it. And where? To the little magazines, of course, almost like selling potholders to your neighbors. With the demise of short-story publications in major magazines,

magazines like *Glimmer Train* have risen to the top. Of the one hundred distinguished stories listed in the 2007 *Best American Short Stories*, ten were published in *Glimmer Train*.

Occasionally when I wake up and start writing I am seized with a brief and delicious timeless feeling, a gift, as if I have returned to that beautiful longing, almost like muscle-memory, before I had ever published a poem or story. I do not mind this life, with its focus on the small object, given to a small audience of serious readers, who might years from now meet me at a reading and say, “I remember that story. That’s a good story.” I still remember where I was when, with a sense of wonder, I read certain stories: in Stanley Park in Vancouver on a dampish day recovering from rain, I read Alice Munro’s “Red Dress—1946.” Riding out to Old Faithful on Christmas Eve in a snow cat, I read Richard Ford’s “Winterkill.” Both stories marked me as a writer. They are short pieces that forever changed my life. You might even say they were useful.

Now, at the age of sixty, as the floodlights flash on in the barn next door, I have no more ambition than this on a wintry morning: to take my time making the small, memorable story that moves a reader in one sitting. To practice writing as Isak Dinesen suggested we should. “I write a little every day, without hope, without despair.”