

READING
Like a
WRITER

*A Guide for People Who Love Books and
for Those Who Want to Write Them*



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anything can happen, how much is possible! Our whole lives can change in a moment. Or: Nothing will ever change—especially the fact that the world and the human heart will always be wider and deeper than anything we can fathom.

And this is what I've come to think about what I learned and what I taught and what I should have taught. Wait! I should have said to the class: Come back! I've made a mistake. Forget observation, consciousness, clear-sightedness. Forget about life. Read Chekhov, read the stories straight through. Admit that you understand nothing of life, nothing of what you see. Then go out and look at the world.

ELEVEN

Reading for Courage

WHEN WE THINK ABOUT HOW MANY TERRIFYING THINGS people are called on to do every day as they fight fires, defend their rights, perform brain surgery, give birth, drive on the freeway, and wash skyscraper windows, it seems frivolous, self-indulgent, and self-important to talk about writing as an act that requires courage. What could be safer than sitting at your desk, lightly tapping a few keys, pushing your chair back, and pausing to see what marvelous tidbit of art your brain has brought forth to amuse you?

And yet most people who have tried to write have experienced not only the need for bravery but a failure of nerve as the real or imagined consequences, faults and humiliations, exposures and inadequacies dance before their eyes and across the empty screen or page. The fear of writing badly, of revealing something you would rather keep hidden, of losing the good opinion of the world, of violating your own high standards, or

of discovering something about yourself that you would just as soon not know—those are just a few of the phantoms scary enough to make the writer wonder if there might be a job available washing skyscraper windows.

All of which brings up yet another reason to read. Literature is an endless source of courage and confirmation. The reader and beginning writer can count on being heartened by all the brave and original works that have been written without the slightest regard for how strange or risky they were, or for what the writer's mother might have thought when she read them.

Often, when I teach, I like to draw up a reading list composed entirely of masterpieces that, for one reason or another, might have been thoroughly trashed by the more conventional newspaper review or the writing workshop. Much of the work I've mentioned so far in this book might run afoul of some of today's amateur or professional critics. And actually, many things that we *ourselves* consider indispensable for a work of fiction may turn out, the more we read, to be superfluous. If the culture sets up a series of rules that the writer is instructed to observe, reading will show you how these rules have been ignored in the past, and the happy outcome. So let me repeat, once more: literature not only breaks the rules, but makes us realize that there *are none*.

Let's say we've been struggling to find some subtle way of letting our reader know what a character looks like. Should we have Miss X admire her lovely blond hair in the mirror? Or should Mr. Y's neighbor say, "Why, Mr. Y, how blue your eyes look this morning!" Or should we reread *The Marquise of O*—and decide that hair and eye color may be Too Much Information?

But appearance is, as we know, superficial. What about everything that lies beneath the visible façade, the polished veneer? What happens when we return to our desks after attending the literature seminar in which our fellow students have acted like a team of psychiatrists convened in the asylum staff-room to dis-

cuss the case and the prognosis of a character in a short story? What are we to think after the workshop in which the author has been asked for a character's lifetime employment résumé? Or after the writers' group in which it is pointed out that we cannot hope to understand anything Mrs. Z. does if we don't know the full history of how she was treated by her mom and dad? What good does it do us to protest that, in life, we are constantly being called upon to figure out why people act the way they do before we hear one word about their childhood? None. All we can conclude is that we have failed at one of the most elemental jobs of the fiction writer.

Alternately, we can read Samuel Beckett's "First Love," in which we learn almost no physical details about the narrator, whose background is equally murky and who stubbornly resists any attempts to judge his personality or his behavior by the standards of anything resembling normality. For all the cues we are given about how to visualize our speaker, his voice could be that of a brain in formaldehyde, talking to us from a jar. Indeed, the story consistently refuses to provide any of the information, the consolations, or the surface niceties of structure and form that we are used to expecting from fiction.

The opening paragraph is remarkable for many reasons, one of which is the speed with which it alerts us to the strangeness of the reading experience that lies ahead:

I associate, rightly or wrongly, my marriage with the death of my father, in time. That other links exist, on other planes, between these two affairs, is not impossible. I have enough trouble in trying to say what I think I know.

The fact that we get sex and death in the very first sentence is the least of it, somehow. What's startling is the voice, as unsettling now as it must have been when the story was written in

1950, though it did not appear in English translation until almost twenty-five years later. By now, we've grown used to seeing, on the page, the operations of human consciousness, the interior rat-tat-tat that monitors and responds to the world. But rarely before (one notable exception is Dostoyevsky) have we heard a voice we recognize from our own darkest hours, our own most uncertain, disassociated, and alienated moments, a mind that, from the opening sentence, begins correcting itself and expressing doubt about the most basic facts. So far the narrator has spent more time telling us what he cannot say and doesn't know than saying what he does know.

If narrative authority comes from our sense that the writer is in control, part of what's so mysterious and encouraging about Beckett is how much authority he achieves in the process of telling us about confusion and doubt. And he manages to make it funny, to make us see the comedy in crankiness, misanthropy, solitude, and despair. We feel that the voice comes from a region of the psyche deeper than self-censorship; it never occurs to the narrator not to tell us, in detail, why he enjoys hanging out in graveyards.

The smell of corpses, distinctly perceptible under those of grass and humus mingled, I do not find unpleasant, a trifle on the sweet side perhaps, a trifle heady, but how infinitely preferable to what the living emit. . . . And when my father's remains join in, however modestly, I can almost shed a tear. The living wash in vain, in vain perfume themselves, they stink. Yes, as a place for an outing, when out I must, leave me my graveyards and keep—you—to your public parks and beauty spots. My sandwich, my banana, tastes sweeter when I'm sitting on a tomb, and when the time comes to piss again, as it so often does, I have my pick.

By now we will have noticed that one of the things that's holding our attention—in addition to the outrageousness of what's being said—is precision of language, and language's power to create this weirdly fascinating narrator. Sentence by sentence, his personality emerges in one paradoxically schizoid and astute association after another. Nearly everything we hear contradicts whatever impression we have been forming. At one moment, he seems not to know the difference between constipation and diarrhea, and in the next he tells us that he has read romances in six or seven languages, under the guidance of a tutor. However bizarre his thinking might seem, he is a philosopher and a bit of a writer himself, though he is "revolted" by his own writings. He has even composed his own epitaph:

*Hereunder lies the above who up below
So hourly died that he survived till now.*

The second and last or rather latter line limps a little perhaps, but that is no great matter, I'll be forgiven more than that when I'm forgotten. Then with a little luck you hit on a genuine interment, with real live mourners and the odd relict rearing to throw herself into the pit. And nearly always that charming business with the dust, though in my experience there is nothing less dusty than holes of this type, verging on muck for the most part, nor anything particularly powdery about the deceased, unless he happened to have died, or she, by fire. No matter, their little gimmick with the dust is charming.

By now the reader may be wondering if Beckett worried about what his mum and her friends might think if they read this. Would they decide that Sam was not a nice person? We can assume that Beckett, like his mentor Joyce, either put these de-

mons to rest long enough to write, or that the need to drown out their voices provided one reason for writing.

Which brings up a related matter: Is our narrator *sympathetic*?

On this subject, I imagine, readers will disagree. No doubt, many will wish to shut the book and silence the voice of this fellow who tells us far more than we need to know about his bodily fluids, a man who is capable of having such vile thoughts in the graveyard. So what does it say about me that I so enjoy spending time in his company? One of the things it may mean is that I have read to the end of the story, when this exotic individual with such unpleasant attitudes about sex, women, love, and human connection is shown to be capable of feeling recognizably human heartbreak and grief. Or perhaps I find his humor and intelligence attractive, to say nothing of his goofy honesty and his gift of gab. If I consider him sympathetic perhaps it's ultimately because he so often seems to speak in the voice of that secret part of the self that we would just as soon keep quiet.

Not long ago, I met two young writers who had collaborated on a very successful first novel. In the process of publishing it, and a subsequent novel, they were summoned to editing conferences at which, they said, they were constantly being urged to rewrite their characters for greater *likability*.

It's one of the things that writers are most commonly being told these days: their characters should be *likable* and *sympathetic* so the reader can *care* about them. And what does *care* mean, exactly? Too often, I'm afraid, it's being used as a synonym for *identify*. But what's even more unsettling is the possibility that, in order for us to identify with them, characters in modern fiction are supposed to be nice people, like us, having the exact same experiences that we have had. We want to read about a high school student, maybe with a few problems, one who is going through

precisely what we went through in high school. Consequently, we sympathize. We identify. We care.

In fact, most writers would like you to identify and sympathize with their characters, even if you don't particularly want to. Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* works its terrifying magic by bringing us in steadily closer to its protagonist, luring us from the safe courthouse steps on which the story begins into the airless confines of Ivan Ilyich's sickroom. As the world drops away in stages, as it does for the dying, we move deeper into its hero's psyche. So that when at last he wonders if he has led his whole life wrongly, the clammy chill we feel comes partly from being compelled to imagine ourselves in a similar situation. And our response has nothing to do with how *nice* Ivan Ilyich is.

It's always gratifying to be moved by a character's fate, even if it means being moved to sadness. I remember how long it took me to get through the last hundred pages of Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*; I kept having to put the book down because my eyes kept welling with tears.

To read the literature of the past is to be reminded that, while we have always cared about, and sympathized with, fictional characters, the *insistence* that we do so is a relatively new one. It would seem absurd to dismiss *Moby Dick* because the standoffish Ishmael never tells us one more word about himself than he absolutely has to. And perhaps we don't know enough about Queequeg's background to care about him? Do we identify with the vengeful, monomaniacal Captain Ahab?

What might hearten the beginning writer who feels compelled to create a succession of puppy-dog heroes and heroines is that masterpieces survive in which all that's expected of us is that we be *interested* in the characters, engaged by their fates, intrigued by their complexities, curious about what will happen to them next. Moreover, as you read these novels, you begin to see that writers have often found it a little too *easy* to make the

reader sympathize with characters who are beautiful and true and good, a little too simple to make us care about the innocent and the charitable.

How much more of a challenge it is to attempt what Dostoyevsky accomplished in *Crime and Punishment*. We might not automatically expect to empathize with Raskolnikov, a student who brutally kills two old women. So what an achievement it represents not only to make us care about him but also to find ourselves hoping, just as he does, that he can be redeemed. Reading all of Patricia Highsmith's novels in succession, as I did one summer, provides a sustained, enthralling descent into the dark crannies of the minds of a group of appalling psychopaths. I read one book, and then the next, sorry when I had finished each one. Not for one second did it occur to me to stop reading because so many of her protagonists are not only loners and misfits, but cold-blooded killers. William Trevor is another writer who immerses us in the psyches of the marginal and the demented; the hero of his novel, *The Children of Dymmouth*, is an adolescent voyeur who blackmails his neighbors into helping him fulfill his antisocial desires.

At the same time, reading makes you realize that writers may always have felt that they might be more popular and successful if they stayed away from such unsavory and unpleasantly "real" characters and rewrote for *likability*. Gogol, who himself created a lengthy roll call of eccentrics and oddballs (a man who loses his nose only to see it walking toward him down the street; another whose life is ruined by an overcoat) mused in *Dead Souls* on the very different fates of writers who create angels, and those who describe human beings:

Happy is the writer who omits these dull and repulsive characters that disturb one by being so painfully real. . . . The delicious mist of the incense he burns dims human eyes; the miracle of his flattery masks all the sorrows of life and depicts

only the goodness of man. . . . He is called a great universal poet, soaring high above all other geniuses of the world even as an eagle soars above other high flying creatures. The mere sound of his name sounds a thrill through ardent young hearts; all eyes greet him with radiance and responsive tears . . .

But a different lot and another fate awaits the writer who has dared to evoke all such things that are constantly before one's eyes . . . the shocking morass of trifles that has tied up our lives, and the essence of cold, crumbling, humdrum characters with whom our earthly way, now bitter, now dull, fairly swarms. . . . Not for him will be the applause, no grateful tears will he see . . . not to him will a girl of sixteen come flying, her head all awirl with heroic fervor. Not for him will be that sweet enchantment when a poet hears nothing but the harmonies he has engendered himself; and finally, he will not escape the judgment of his time, the judgment of hypocritical and unfeeling contemporaries who will accuse the creatures his mind has bred of being base and worthless, will allow a contemptible nook for him in the gallery of those authors who insult mankind, will ascribe to him the morals of his own characters, and will deny him everything, heart, soul, and the divine flame of talent.

Flaubert might have concluded something similar when his *Madame Bovary* received the following review from the esteemed literary critic Sainte-Beuve: "There is no goodness in the book. Not a character represents it. In these provincial existences, which abound in bickerings, minor persecutions, mean ambitions, and pinpricks of all kinds are also to be found good and beautiful souls . . . why not indicate them, as well? Son and brother of eminent doctors, M. Gustave Flaubert holds the pen as others hold the scalpel. Anatomists and physiologists, I find you on every page!"

Reading can give you the courage to resist all of the pressures that our culture exerts on you to write in a certain way, or to follow a prescribed form. It can even persuade you that it might not be necessary to give your novel or story a happy ending. In Robert Altman's film, *The Player*, a sleazy producer says that what a film needs to get made in Hollywood is "Stars, laughs, violence, nudity, sex, and happy endings. Especially happy endings." And as publishing gets more like Hollywood, or tries, it may become more important to raise the volume of the background music and show the joyous couple united in a kiss. Probably, the happy ending is taken for granted in an editing conference at which the authors are being told to revise for likability. First you create the likable heroine, and then you throw her under a train?

Every so often a book review or literary magazine will ask several authors to rewrite the endings of famous works of literature. Often, these fanciful revisions involve the sort of wishful thinking that rescues the characters from whatever sad fate they meet in the book and instead lets them live happily ever after. Anna Karenina gets over Vronsky, Romeo and Juliet marry and have a couple of kids. And yet the fact is that these endings—the suicide of Anna Karenina, the deaths of Romeo and Juliet—are the endings we remember, as opposed to the happier solution some clever revisionist has suggested. Which doesn't mean that fiction is *better* if it ends in disaster. We want, we deserve, those satisfying marriages that end the novels of Jane Austen.

Nor, you may discover, is it necessary to have an ending in which every loose thread is neatly tied up, every problem resolved, and the characters tracked into the future as far as the mind's eyes can see. To quote Chekhov one more time, here is the ending of "The Lady with the Dog," an ending which, I have always thought, could serve as the final few lines of every work of modern fiction. As the story concludes, the aging adulterous lovers are contemplating their future.

And it seemed as though in a little while the solution would be found, and then a new and glorious life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that the end was still far off, and that what was to be most complicated and difficult for them was only just beginning.

Reading can show you how capacious and stretchy fiction is, how much it can accommodate, and how far it has expanded beyond the straight and narrow path from point A to point B. Along with the Beckett story, I like teaching Juan Rulfo's short novel *Pedro Páramo*. The atmosphere of the book (to say nothing of its "plot") is as hard to convey as that of a poem, though you may get some idea of what it is like from the novel's startling beginning:

I came to Comala because I was told that my father, a certain Pedro Páramo, was living here. My mother told me so, and I promised her I would come to see him as soon as she died. I pressed her hand so that she'd know I would do it, but she was dying and I was in the mood to promise her anything. "Be sure you go and visit him," she told me. "I know he'll be pleased to see you." So all I could do was to keep telling her I would do it, and I kept on saying it until I had to pry my hand loose from her dead fingers.

Before that she told me, "Don't ask him for anything that isn't ours. Just for what he should have given me and didn't. Make him pay for the way he forgot us."

"All right, Mother."

I didn't intend to keep the promise. But then I began to think about what she told me, until I couldn't stop thinking and even dreaming about it, and building a whole world around that Pedro Páramo. That's why I came to Comala.

It was in the dog-days, when the hot August wind is poi-

soned by the rotten smell of the saponaria, and the road went up and down, up and down. They say a road goes up or down depending on whether you're coming or going. If you're going away it's uphill, but it's downhill if you are coming back.

"What's the name of that village down there?"

"Comala, señor."

"You're sure it's Comala?"

"Yes, señor."

"Why does it look so dead?"

"They've had bad times, señor."

I expected it to look the way it did in my mother's memories. She was always sighing for Comala, she was homesick and wanted to come back, but she never did. Now I was coming back in her place, and I remembered what she told me: "There's a beautiful view when you get to Los Colimotes. You'll see a green plain. . . . It's yellow when the corn is ripe. You can see Comala from there. The houses are all white, and at night it's all lighted up." Her voice was soft and secret, almost a whisper, as if she were talking to herself.

"And why are you going to Comala?" I heard him ask me.

"To see my father."

"Oh," he said.

And we were silent again.

We were walking downhill, hearing the steady trot of the burros. Our eyes were half-closed, we were so tired and sleepy in the August heat.

"They'll give you a fine party," he said. "They'll be glad to see somebody again. It's been years since anybody came here."

Then he added: "It's you, so they'll be glad to see you."

The heat shimmered on the plain like a transparent lake. There was a line of mountains beyond the plain, and beyond that, nothing but the distance.

"What does your father look like?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just know that he's called Pedro Páramo."

"Oh."

But the way he said it, it was almost like a gasp. I said, "At least that's what they told me his name was."

I heard him say, "Oh," again.

I met him in Los Encuentros, where three or four roads come together. I was just waiting there, and finally he came by with his burros.

"Where are you going?" I asked him.

"That way, señor," he said, pointing.

"Do you know where Comala is?"

"That's where I'm going."

So I followed him. I walked along behind, keeping up with his steps, until he understood I was following him and slowed down a little. After that we walked side by side, almost touching shoulders.

He said, "Pedro Páramo is my father too."

A flock of crows flew across the empty sky, crying caw, caw, caw.

After we crossed the ridge we started downhill again. We left the warm air up there and walked down into pure heat without a breath of air in it. Everything looked as if it were waiting for something.

"It's hot here," I said.

"This is nothing. Just wait, you'll be a lot hotter when you get to Comala. That town's the hottest place in the world. They say when somebody dies in Comala, after he arrives in Hell he goes back to get his blanket."

"Do you know Pedro Páramo?" I asked him. I dare to ask him questions because I had an idea I could trust him.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"He's hate. He's just pure hate."

He lashed the burros even though he didn't need to, because they were keeping ahead of us down the slope.

I had my mother's picture in my shirt pocket and I could feel it warming my heart, as if she were sweating too. It was an old picture, all frayed at the edges, but it was the only one I knew about. I found it in the kitchen in a box full of herbs, and I've kept it ever since. My mother hated to have her picture taken. She said pictures were for witchcraft, and maybe she was right, because the picture was full of holes, like needle holes. Near the heart there was a hole so big you could put your middle finger into it.

It's the same picture that I have with me now. I hope it'll help me with *Pedro Páramo* when he recognizes who it is.

"Look," he said, stopping. "See that mountain, the one that looks like a pig's bladder? Good. Now look over there. See that ridge of that mountain? Now look over there. See that mountain way off there? Well, all that's the *Media Luna*, everything you can see. And it all belongs to *Pedro Páramo*. He's our father, but we were born on a petate on the floor. And the real joke is that he took every one of us to be baptized. He took you didn't he?"

"I don't know."

"You go to hell."

"What did you say?"

"I said we are almost there, señor."

"I know. But what about the village? It looks deserted."

"That isn't how it looks. It is. Nobody lives there any more."

"And *Pedro Páramo*?"

"*Pedro Páramo* died a long time ago."

Reading even this brief passage, you may begin to intuit one of the odd things about the novel, which is that you don't exactly know if its characters are living or dead, or if it makes any differ-

ence. Throughout, the twists and turns in the road keep coming as fast as they do in this section, upsetting whatever we thought we knew about the novel's premise or its characters, causing us to rethink such basic questions as whether the inhabitants of Comala are fantasies or real, presences or memories. Saying this risks making the novel sound like a work of science fiction or magical realism, which it is not. It is a work of art, and there is nothing else like it.

But the first chapter of *Pedro Páramo* will not necessarily help you during a bad writing day, or after a few days in which you are constantly fighting what William Burroughs described as the temptation to tear up your work in little pieces and throw it in someone else's wastepaper basket. And reading a masterpiece may be even less of a consolation when you first figure out, or are reminded for the thousandth time, of how much *work* writing is, of how much patience and solitude it demands from the writer who wants to write well, and of how the compulsion to spend long hours writing can deform a "normal" life. And, as awful as they are, these doubts and terrors pale beside the question of whether your writing will be any good, or of whether you will succeed enough to be able to do it in the first place. Those are the moments when it can help to read the lives and letters of great writers.

In the same interview in which he talks about the lightning flash of the paragraph break, Isaac Babel has this to say about the hard labor of revision:

"I work like a pack mule, but it's my own choice. I'm like a galley slave who's chained for life to his oar but who loves the oar. Everything about it . . . I go over each sentence, time and again. I start by cutting all the words it can do without. You have to keep your eye on the job because words are very sly, the rubbishy ones go into hiding and you have to dig them out—repetitions, synonyms, things that simply don't mean

anything . . . I go over every image, metaphor, comparison, to see if they are fresh and accurate. If you can't find the right adjective for a noun, leave it alone. Let the noun stand by itself. A comparison must be as accurate as a slide rule, and as natural as the smell of fennel. . . . I take out all the participles and adverbs I can. . . . Adverbs are lighter. They can even lend you wings in a way. But too many of them make the language spineless. . . . A noun needs only one adjective, the choicest. Only a genius can afford two adjectives to one noun. . . . Line is as important in prose as in an engraving. It has to be clear and hard. . . . But the most important thing of all. . . is not to kill the story by working on it. Or else all your labor has been in vain. It's like walking a tight-rope. Well, there it is. . . . We ought all to take an oath not to mess up our job."

Babel's literary career coincided with the height of Stalin's madness. The attention his work attracted was, by definition, too much, and he may have hastened his own doom by having some kind of writerly research-flirtation with the secret police. Under pressure from the government to be a mouthpiece for party propaganda (in an address to the 1934 Soviet Writers Congress, he praised Stalin's literary style), he wrote less and less. He referred to himself in one speech as a master of the art of silence. In 1939 he was arrested by the secret police and died (it was said) in a labor camp, a few years later. Now we know that Babel was never sent to a labor camp, but was shot in prison after his arrest, a fact that the government hid from his family until decades later.

It does seem like quite a price to pay for the freedom to sit in your room and think about metaphors and paragraph breaks. But Babel's crime and his punishment had something to do with the fact that art implies a kind of freedom, the freedom of choice, of possibility, of the individual imagination. Which is why dictators—and big corporations—tend not to like art and

artists, except those of a highly predictable and malleable sort. If art demanded Babel's life, we can certainly handle whatever inconvenience or effort it seems to require from us.

Isaac Bashevis Singer once said, "If Tolstoy lived across the street, I wouldn't go meet him." And you know what he means. The work is the work, what exists on the page is what matters, and we need not have tea with the writer in order to understand and love the writing. But whether or not we can understand and love Tolstoy's work without meeting him, there is much that is heartening about his life. To read his biography is to watch a writer destroying the printer's plates of *Anna Karenina* because he wanted to make some last-minute revisions, and one who had started out imagining the novel as something more in the manner of a sermon against an adulterous woman. The less admirable parts of his biography—the long, nightmarish marriage, the selfish ideologue he became, the cruel (to his family) way he chose to die—also have a strangely liberating aspect: how orderly and thoughtful our own lives seem, by comparison.

Nor do you have to go meet Flaubert to read his letters and be warmed by the heat of the obsessive mania he expended on every detail of *Madame Bovary*, as he struggled with the feeling that he was "like a man playing the piano with leaden balls attached to his fingers." His correspondence is a litany of suffering and complaint, like the following: "I feel as dreary as a corpse, completely stupefied. My accursed *Bovary* torments and confounds me. . . . There are moments when it all makes me want to die like a dog." In Dostoyevsky's letters, you can hear him realizing that he has just wasted a year of his life on something that was no good. And you can read the Flannery O'Connor letters in which she finally gives in and goes to Lourdes because her mother is hoping for a miracle to cure O'Connor's multiple sclerosis. When she gets there, she winds up praying that her novel will go well. Like the work of these writers, such details

provide little jolts of inspiration, that is, if you are a person who finds the torment of others inspiring.

Reading can even offer the writer courage during those moments when (given how much suffering there is in the world, the dangers looming around us) the very act of writing itself begins to seem suspect. Who can be saved by a terrific sonnet? Whom can we feed with a short story?

At times, questions such as those have sent me straight to Czeslaw Milosz's translation of Zbigniew Herbert's poem "Five Men."

1.

*They take them out in the morning
to the stone courtyard
and put them against the wall*

five men

*two of them very young
the others middle-aged*

nothing more

can be said about them

2.

when the platoon

level their guns

everything suddenly appears

in the garish light

of obviousness

the yellow wall

the cold blue

the black wire on the wall

instead of a horizon

*that is the moment
when the five senses rebel
they would gladly escape
like rats from a sinking ship*

*before the bullet reaches its destination
the eye will perceive the flight of the projectile
the ear record the steely rattle*

*the nostrils will be filled with biting smoke
a petal of blood will brush the palate
the touch will shrink and then slacken
now they lie on the ground
covered up to their eyes with shadow
the platoon walks away
their buttonstraps
and steel helmets
are more alive
than those lying beside the wall*

3.

*I did not learn this today
I knew it before yesterday*

*so why have I been writing
unimportant poems on flowers
what did the five talk of
the night before the execution
of prophetic dreams
of an escapade in a brothel
of automobile parts
of a sea voyage
of how when he had spades*

he ought not to have opened
of how vodka is best
after wine you get a headache
of girls
of fruits
thus one can use in poetry
names of Greek shepherds
one can attempt to catch the colour of morning sky
write of love
and also
once again
in dead earnest
offer to the betrayed world
a rose

Recently, a friend told me that her fears and concerns about the current state of the world were making it hard for her to write. I e-mailed her a copy of Herbert's poem and suggested it might help her problem, perhaps just a little.

A few hours later, she called back. "But that is the problem," she said. "He's talking about a rose. But how do you know if you've created a rose—or just a weed?"

She's right. That is the problem. So one final reason for reading is to confront this problem of roses versus weeds in the company of geniuses, and with the pleasure of looking at the roses that have actually been produced, against all odds. If we want to write, it makes sense to read—and to read like a writer. If we wanted to grow roses, we would want to visit rose gardens and try to see them the way that a rose gardener would.

BOOKS TO BE READ IMMEDIATELY

- Akutagawa, Ryunosuke. *M. Kuwata and Tashaki Kojima* (translators), *Rashomon and Other Stories*
Alcott, Louisa May, *Little Women*
Anonymous. Dorothy L. Sayers (translator), *The Song of Roland*
Austen, Jane, *Pride and Prejudice*
Austen, Jane, *Sense and Sensibility*
Babel, Isaac. Valter Morriison (translator), *The Collected Stories*
Baldwin, James, *Vintage Baldwin*
Balzac, Honoré de. Kathleen Raine (translator), *Cousin Bette*
Barthelme, Donald, *Sixty Stories*
Brodkey, Harold, *Stories in an Almost Classical Mode*
Baxter, Charles, *Believers: A Novella and Stories*
Beckett, Samuel, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*
Bowen, Elizabeth, *The House in Paris*
Bowles, Jane, *Two Serious Ladies*
Bowles, Paul, *Paul Bowles: Collected Stories and Later Writings*
Brontë, Emily, *Wuthering Heights*
Calvino, Italo, *Cosmicomics*
Carver, Raymond, *Where I'm Calling From: Selected Stories*