The Writer's Journal

40 Contemporary Authors and Their Journals

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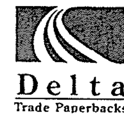

Delta
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The letters sometimes delight, more often confuse and almost always frustrate my friends, who wish, for my sake and theirs, I could get a better grasp on the whole fiction/reality thing. Often by the time I speak to them about the letter I can't remember which things actually happened and which things only happened in my mind. It doesn't matter to me by that point; by then I am wholly in service of the next step—the story—and truth has enlarged itself to mean something else entirely than what happened where and when.

Fenton Johnson

I was engaging the rhetorical . . . style of my Southern, white male upbringing: assigning to my imagined reader opinions counter to my own, then arguing with myself while my reader listened. Writing, after all, is about constructing identity. For me, a journal never provided the necessary reality check—or the sense of an audience before which and for which I'm performing.

7 December 1989

Dear N.,

. . . Today is the memorial service for a good friend of mine . . . he died, of course, of the Big A. We'll all gather in some all-purpose room somewhere and there under the fluorescent lights we'll mark the occasion of his passing, with little ceremony or ritual.

There's something about seeing, actually viewing a corpse that brings home the fact of death, I think; "closure," a Californian would say, which is ironic, since it's been more or less Californians who have eliminated funerals from the cultural scene. . . . It will seem odd, the bunch of us gathered without our friend himself, dead as he might be, as the focus of our gathering. One believes and hopes that his presence will be there, and after all there are plenty (including my friend, from what I knew of him) who would find the presence of a body gruesome. And yet to me this underscores the necessary and vital fact of death in life. One could make the argument that in some measure our lack of respect for the living earth—for its resources, for our place among them, for life itself—has its roots in our lack of respect for the dead, since it is from among the dead that we rise up.

Some time ago, on a late-autumn visit [to Kentucky], I took a car into the hills, looking for the gravestone of one of the men killed in the sporadic wars between the hill families and the state police. I went to Holy Cross Church, where I'd never before set foot, no matter that it is ten miles from where I grew up.

Holy Cross is the loveliest of a series of lovely, early-nineteenth-century churches that Catholic emigrants from Maryland built in this small valley. The church sits on a slight knoll, raising it above the surrounding fields—site of the first Catholic church west of the Appalachians, built in 1787, according to the historical marker; the present church dates from 1825.

Unlike most American churches (but like many European village churches), Holy Cross Church sits in the midst of its graveyard. It's built of red brick, in the simplest of cruciforms, decorated only by curving lines of brick laid into the masonry facade. These curves are echoed in the curving lines of the wooden bell tower, painted white and topped with green shingles. The effect is that of an American primitive architecture, created by people who had no formal architectural training but who were first-rate craftsmen and who, in their simple way, took time and patience to create something beautiful and in harmony with its surroundings—the brick was fired in Kentucky, from the same kind of clay that underlies this churchyard. Looking at the church, it's easy to see how it's of a piece with the land on which it sits.

The churchyard was filled with black walnut trees, which on that early winter afternoon raised bare branching silhouettes against the sky. Spongy black walnut shells were scattered among the tombstones, leaching purple-black stains onto their limestone and granite. From the churchyard I looked down to the hamlet's single intersection (the "holy cross"), where limestone rocks unearthed by the thrifty gravediggers have been used to build retaining walls and a shrine for a plaster statue of the Virgin.

As I stood in the churchyard amid the graves of families whose names I'd never even heard, in the graying winter light, with the black branching limbs of the walnuts and the gray-bleached bones of an abandoned farmhouse silhouetted against the steel blue of the surrounding hills—a sense of sadness, of loss pervaded everything.

Years later, sitting in the Sinai Memorial Chapel in San Francisco, listening to an elderly tenor sing a pure, haunting kaddish, I thought about this: What happens to all that energy of grief when people have no way to give it voice? Where does it go?

12 December 1990

Dear J. & J.,

. . . I was reading through Samuel Pepys' diaries—he lived in London at the time of the plague—the "Black Death" of 1655 . . . What's remarkable about his diaries is his attitude toward death—his supposition that it may come at any time, and is handed out by a capricious and not necessarily merciful God (an attitude much closer to that of the ancient Greeks than to that of contemporary Americans). Pepys is never far from an acknowledgment of the mystery of things, and the ways in which all things, but most especially his health and prosperity, are dependent on the will of God. These days we would mock that as naive at best, and at worst an embodiment of Calvinism's so convenient dictum that material success is the best evidence of God's blessing. But in reading Pepys' diary his forthright and trustworthy voice comes through, and one understands the depth and sincerity of his belief in his absolute dependence on the whims of circumstance.

. . . I keep searching for some letter from [my lover], some piece of writing that says, "I know you'll be reading this after I'm gone, and I want to say to you that I'm still here." I go into his room again and again searching for that letter and it's never there. I know of course that it wouldn't make any difference, I know what I know and I know, or at least suspect, the ways in which he is with me now and will always be with me; and yet, and yet. I write this not by way of being maudlin but of bowing down before the mysterious fates, which allowed us the three-and-one-quarter years together that we needed to say everything that needed to be said, once, and we said it, once, and once it was said that was the end of it all. For virtually the entire relationship, he said to me, "I'm so lucky," again and again. A week before he died, I turned to him in the courtyard of the Picasso Museum, under a dusk-deep sapphire sky and said, "I'm so lucky." And it was as if the time allotted to him to teach this lesson, the time allotted to me to learn it, had been consumed, and there was nothing left but the facts of things to play out. At the risk of being sententious I say: Think on these things, and what they mean to you. All relationships are mortal, it's just that most of the time we're too "well-wadded with stupidity," as George Eliot would have it, or needing a gun pointed to our heads, as Flannery O'Connor would have it, and we avoid thinking about it. And then it happens, and it's over. There's no door more unquestionable, more unanswering than death.

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14 January 1991

Dear B.,

. . . Grief is like any wound—there is some terrible pleasure in it. It's better to need that wound, that terrible pleasure than to have nothing at all. If love fulfills itself in companionship, grief fulfills itself in solitude, for we grieve finally and necessarily less for the dead than for our living selves, our aloneness in our survival, our inescapable invitation to the dance.

Ordinary Acts

Bless me, reader, for I have sinned: I have tried to keep a journal, and I have failed. The reasons for my failure are many and complex; among them may be laziness, but I think not. In my twenties, for something like five years I kept a journal more or less regularly, during which time I witnessed or read about events of great significance (e.g., the murder of San Francisco mayor George Moscone and gay supervisor Harvey Milk; the subsequent trial of the assassin Dan White, and the riots which

followed the verdict). I look back at those journal entries and find them so juvenile and self-conscious as to be unreadable.

In *The House by the Sea,* one of her collections of journal entries, May Sarton writes:

> I find it wonderful to have a receptacle in which to pour vivid momentary insights, and a way of ordering day-to-day experience . . . If there is an art to the keeping of a journal intended for publication yet at the same time a very personal record, it may be in what Elizabeth Bowen said: "One must regard oneself impersonally as an instrument."

My journal entries from the 1970s and 1980s were anything but impersonal—filled with polemic, directed at some imagined, recalcitrant reader whom I hoped to transform, through the alembic of my deathless prose, into someone exactly like myself. Looking back, I see that I was engaging the rhetorical style of my Southern, white male upbringing: assigning to my imagined reader opinions counter to my own, then arguing with myself while my reader listened. Writing, after all, is about constructing identity. For me, a journal never provided the necessary reality check—or the sense of an audience before which and for which I'm performing.

Letters were and are a different matter. Beginning earlier than my twenties—since I was old enough to write—I've used letters to record the passing events and impressions of my life. For me they present the advantage of engaging a known audience (my correspondent). The history my reader and I share lifts me out of myself; it reminds me that what I am about is not just expression but also communication. I write with intimacy because I know I am writing a friend; but I am bound by the discipline of letters to order my thoughts so that my audience may comprehend what I am trying to say.

Excerpts from letters which were written during my lover's illness from AIDS or after his death in Paris in October 1990 later became passages in larger, longer works. The letter of 14 January 1991 became the concluding paragraph of a chapter of my second novel, *Scissors, Paper, Rock.* The other letters became part of a memoir, *Geography of the Heart.*

As I write I am in motion—500 m.p.h. at 35,000 feet, a place and state of being I find conducive to writing; something about the stale, recycled air and the dog biscuit lunch, combined with that ineffable sense of being suspended in between, neither here nor there, the place where anything might happen even if it usually doesn't. I write in a Palmer longhand much deteriorated from the penmanship classes of my Catholic grade school days; letters which, on returning home, I enter into my laptop, print out, and mail to one friend or another, saving a copy for my own files. Passages from those letters frequently form the germ of a story, an essay, even a book.

Returning from the journey to France during which my lover died, I wrote his eulogy, an unbearably hard thing to do, in the form of a letter. In a paroxysm of epistolary love, Barbara Kingsolver and I wrote each other monthly for several years, five- and six-page, single-spaced tomes which covered everything from politics to literature to a mock marriage proposal which I accepted, and which I like to think remains in force in some polygamous, parallel universe. (Beware, however, of epistolary romances. A year later I carried on a similar, almost daily correspondence with a man who lived all of fifteen miles away, only to have the real relationship collapse the moment we had to communicate without cut-and-paste. Even so, at the risk of being thought crass I note that the romance served my writer's ends: It gave me the opportunity to record for a known audience my moment-by-moment experience of the world.)

In this difficult, overcrowded, complicated, troubled time, it seems to me that simply to endure without descending into easy bitterness, to sustain some kind of hope and faith for one's peers and for those who follow—this is an achievement, an ongoing act of courage whose

magnitude we too often take for granted. Journals or letters—these are means (may they endure and multiply) for declaring the significance of the small thing: a record of the ordinary acts of life and love which bind us one to another, and which are our only true source of hope.

Maxine Kumin

. . . dream journals, journals observing seasonal changes on our own farm, journals about my, and other people's, horses.