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BEGINNINGS

The first time I worked with Todd was over the phone. We talked about the article I was trying to write. The conversation went like this:

What was wrong with the article? I asked.

Well, first of all, he said, and he paused, as if perhaps he was sorry to have to say this. Well, first of all, the first sentence.

I had wanted a spectacular opening. My first sentence read: "In the spring of 1971, someone went mad for blood in the Sacramento Valley." A fellow student at the Iowa Writers' Workshop had praised that sentence. Todd didn't like it?

No, he said, it was melodramatic.

Reminded of this conversation decades later, Todd said with a touch of irony, which I hadn't heard in his voice back then: "Well, I guess I stand by that judgment."

—TK

To write is to talk to strangers. You want them to trust you. You might well begin by trusting them—by imagining for the reader an intelligence at least equal to the intelligence you imagine for yourself. No doubt you know some things that the reader does

not know (why else presume to write?), but it helps to grant that the reader has knowledge unavailable to you. This isn't generosity; it is realism. Good writing creates a dialogue between writer and reader, with the imagined reader at moments questioning, criticizing, and sometimes, you hope, assenting. What you "know" isn't something you can pull from a shelf and deliver. What you know in prose is often what you discover in the course of writing it, as in the best of conversations with a friend—as if you and the reader do the discovering together.

Writers are told that they must "grab" or "hook" or "capture" the reader. But think about these metaphors. Their theme is violence and compulsion. They suggest the relationship you might want to have with a criminal, not a reader. Montaigne writes: "I do not want a man to use his strength to get my attention."

Beginnings are an exercise in limits. You can't make the reader love you in the first sentence or paragraph, but you can lose the reader right away. You don't expect the doctor to cure you at once, but the doctor can surely alienate you at once, with brusqueness or bravado or indifference or confusion. There is a lot to be said for the quiet beginning.

The most memorable first line in American literature is "Call me Ishmael." Three words. The sentence is so well known that sometimes, cited out of context, it is understood as a magisterial command, a booming voice from the pulpit. It is more properly heard as an invitation, almost casual, and, given the complexity that follows, it is marvelously simple. If you try it aloud, you will probably find yourself saying it rather softly, conversationally.

Many memorable essays, memoirs, and narratives reach dra-

matic heights from such calm beginnings. *In Cold Blood* is remembered for its transfixing and frightening account of two murderers and their victims, and it might have started in any number of dramatic ways. In fact, it starts with a measured descriptive passage:

The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call "out there." Some seventy miles east of the Colorado border, the countryside, with its hard blue skies and desert-clear air, has an atmosphere that is rather more Far West than Middle West.

Although a bias toward the quiet beginning is only a bias, a predisposition, it can serve as a useful check on overreaching. Some famous beginnings, of course, have been written as grand propositions ("All happy families are alike . . .") or sweeping overviews ("It was the best of times . . ."). These rhetorical gestures display confidence in the extreme, and more than a century of readers have followed in thrall. Expansiveness is not denied to anyone, but it is always prudent to remember that one is not Tolstoy or Dickens and to remember that modesty can resonate, too. Call me Ishmael.

Meek or bold, a good beginning achieves clarity. A sensible line threads through the prose; things follow one another with literal logic or with the logic of feeling. Clarity isn't an exciting virtue, but it is a virtue always, and especially at the beginning of a piece of prose. Some writers—some academics and bureaucrats and art critics, for instance—seem to resist clarity, even to

write confusingly on purpose. Not many would admit to this. One who did was the wonderful-though-not-to-be-imitated Gertrude Stein: "My writing is clear as mud but mud settles and the clear streams run on and disappear." Oddly, this is one of the clearest sentences she ever wrote.

For many other writers, writers in all genres, clarity simply falls victim to a desire to achieve other things, to dazzle with style or to bombard with information. With good writing the reader enjoys a doubleness of experience, succumbing to the story or the ideas while also enjoying the writer's artfulness. Indeed, one way to know that writing deserves to be called art is the coexistence of these two pleasures in the reader's mind. But it is one thing for the reader to take pleasure in the writer's achievements, another when the writer's own pleasure is apparent. Skill, talent, inventiveness, all can become overbearing and intrusive. And this is especially true at the beginnings of things. The image that calls attention to itself is often the image you can do without. The writer works in service of story and idea, and always in service of the reader.

Sometimes the writer who overloads an opening passage is simply afraid of boring the reader. A respectable anxiety, but nothing is more boring than confusion. In his introduction to *The Elements of Style*, E. B. White suggests that the reader is *always* in danger of confusion. The reader is "a man floundering in a swamp," and it falls to the writer (whose swamp of course it is) to "drain this swamp quickly and get his man up on dry ground, or at least throw him a rope."

Clarity doesn't always mean brevity, or simplicity. Take, for

example, the opening of Vladimir Nabokov's memoir *Speak, Memory*:

The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for (at some forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour). I know, however, of a young chronophobiac who experienced something like panic when looking for the first time at homemade movies that had been taken a few weeks before his birth. He saw a world that was practically unchanged—the same house, the same people—and then realized that he did not exist there at all and that nobody mourned his absence. He caught a glimpse of his mother waving from an upstairs window, and that unfamiliar gesture disturbed him, as if it were some mysterious farewell. But what particularly frightened him was the sight of a brand-new baby carriage standing there on the porch, with the smug, encroaching air of a coffin; even that was empty, as if, in the reverse course of events, his very bones had disintegrated.

There is nothing confusing about this paragraph, but it does invite us to engage with a sinuous idea, and it introduces an author who asks our fullest attention. He expects long thoughts from us. The invitation is clear and frank, and it is delivered with a shrug: accept it if you will.

You can't tell it all at once. A lot of the art of beginnings is deciding what to withhold until later, or never to say at all. Take one thing at a time. Prepare the reader, tell everything the reader needs to know in order to read on, and tell no more. Journalists are instructed not to "bury the lead" (or "lede," in journalistic jargon), that is, to make sure they tell the most important facts of the story first. This translates poorly to longer forms of writing. The heart of the story is usually a place to arrive at, not a place to begin. Of course the reader needs a reason to continue, but the best reason is simply confidence that the writer is going someplace interesting. George Orwell begins *Homage to Catalonia* with a description of a nameless Italian militiaman whose significance is unknown to us, though we are asked to hear about him in some detail. At the end of a long paragraph of description, Orwell writes:

I hoped he liked me as well as I liked him. But I also knew that to retain my first impression of him I must not see him again; and needless to say I never did see him again. One was always making contacts of that kind in Spain.

It seems strange to begin a book with a character who vanishes at once, when the first few sentences suggest that we are meeting the book's hero. In fact, the important character being introduced is the narrator, who seems a man of great particularity and mystery of temperament. We don't know much about him, and we want to know more. We're ready to follow him.

What happens when you begin reading a book or an essay or

a magazine story? If the writing is at all interesting, you are in search of the author. You are imagining the mind behind the prose. Often that imagining takes a direct, even visceral, form: who is this person? No matter how discreet or unforthcoming writers may be, they are present, and readers form judgments about them. Living in an age when authors hid behind the whiskeys of third-person omniscience, Thoreau wrote: "We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking." Readers today do commonly remember that. They may remember it to a fault. The wise writer, while striving to avoid self-consciousness, remains aware of the reader's probing eye.

The contemporary author Francine du Plessix Gray offers a provocative way to imagine encounters between writer and reader: "A good writer, like a good lover, must create a pact of trust with the object of his/her seduction that remains qualified, paradoxically, by a good measure of uncertainty, mystery and surprise." The heart of this advice, the tension between giving and withholding, identifies a narrative decision that faces all writers, though in emphasizing Eros, Gray seems to overlook the true romance of writing. The "mystery and surprise" can be genuine, shared between writer and reader, rather than calculated.

One morning a piece of wisdom comes over National Public Radio, in an interview with a jazz guitarist who remembers working with the great Miles Davis. The guitarist recalls that Davis once advised him how to play a certain song: "Play it like you don't know how to play the guitar." The guitarist admits that he had no idea what Davis meant, but that he then played

the song better than he ever imagined he could. "Play it like you don't know how." Cryptic advice, but a writer can make some sense of it: Don't concentrate on technique, which can be the same as concentrating on yourself. Give yourself to your story, or to your train of ideas, or to your memories. Don't be afraid to explore, even to hesitate. Be willing to surprise yourself.

And so there is trust of another kind at work. At some point you must trust yourself as a writer. You may not know exactly where you are going, but you have to set out, and sometimes, without calculation on your part, the reader will honor the effort itself. In Ghana, once a British colony, where English remains the official but a second language, they have an interesting usage for the verb "try." If a Ghanaian does something particularly well, he is often told, "You tried." What might well be an insult in American English is high praise there, a recognition that purity of intention lies at the core of the achievement. The reader wants to see you trying—not trying to impress, but trying to get somewhere.

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NARRATIVES

STORY

For me, finding a story that I want to tell has always depended less on effort and method than on what my college teacher the poet and great translator Robert Fitzgerald called "the luck of the conception." Luck of this type may begin with a chance encounter, a suggestion from a stranger, a sudden notion that seems like grace descending. I know nothing more thrilling than the arrival of a good idea for a story. The problem is that good ideas seem to arrive on schedules of their own, and are sometimes disguised as bad ones.

I once had an idea for a book that came from my experience of having bought an old house and having tried to fix it up myself. The constructed landscape changed for me; for the first time I looked at buildings and saw craftsmanship or the lack of it. A few years later, I was able to hire a team of carpenters, admirable craftsmen, who straightened out some of the messes I had made. My idea was to write a book largely about them. Home-building in America would be the general subject, and the story would follow the carpenter-builders on some sort of construction project yet to be identified.

I tried this idea on editors, agents, writer friends. No one liked it. So I gave it up and spent nearly two years looking into other possibi-